

Elliot Ackerman: Intellectuals at war and the ethical soldier

“I have always liked men of strong contrasts”, a friend told me once under the frescoed ceiling of a Renaissance villa outside Rome. The place was hosting a contemporary art fair and we were wandering around with our press passes. He had his eyes on a gallery assistant with a sharp face, thick black eyebrows, blue eyes, and skin so white it was almost green. Walking through the unrestored, decadent rooms, I told my friend I liked man of strong contrasts too. Not so much in terms of eye colour and cheekbones, though. What intrigued me the most in a man was the coexistence of vulnerability and toughness. I liked individuals living a conflict of heart, but with the courage to fight like Sisyphus against inevitability. “Oh, so you are the deep one of us two!” I was promptly mocked.

I guess this was the reason I picked up [Green on Blue](#), a novel by American writer and former Marine Corps special operations team leader Elliot Ackerman, in the first place. Former soldiers often write about war, but the peculiarity with this decorated officer — five deployments with the Marines, a veteran of the Second Battle of Fallujah, a recipient of the Silver Star for courage under fire — is that he chose to write from the perspective of a young Afghan orphan called Aziz. This compassionate coming of age story is a great lesson on empathy and the coexistence of multiple narratives. Ackerman shows a deep understanding of the culture and the soul of what for him — serving five tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq — was “the enemy”. You can’t help wondering how in Ackerman the emphatic, existential writer could coexist with the resolute, dutiful soldier.

Raised by a financier father and a novelist mother, Ackerman studied literature and history at Tufts University, graduating summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. He also holds a master’s degree in International Affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Enlistment seems to many like a life-changing decision urged by necessity, nationalism or a love of war. Ackerman disproved all these stereotypes.

Why did an educated, sophisticated son of a good family chose a life in the army over an intellectual or academic career? Or, if war it must be, why fighting it instead of, say, reporting it as a journalist? “I chose to serve,” he wrote in a piece for Vogue, “because I didn’t want to spend my early 20s scouring spreadsheets at a bank or making photocopies at a law firm. For better or worse, I wanted a job with actual responsibility, where my performance really mattered, and it did in the Marines — it mattered in terms of lives.” Ackerman decided to take responsibility for US involvement in the war by putting himself on the line. Avoiding romanticism or narcissistic elegy of courage, this commitment has been key for him.

Bringing ethics to the experience of violence

There is something fascinating about a young man who decides to give up the protected intellectual world that gave him acknowledgments, satisfactions, and honours to go to a place where no one cares about your knowledge of Machiavelli’s political thought. War can be a way to prove yourself (and your Machiavellian precepts). It’s also a lesson in humility and strength. The beliefs of an 18-year-old dreading the ordinary morphed over the years as he reconsidered his personal stance on the human condition. Unlike the majority of left-wing intellectuals in the western world, who often reject violence altogether, Ackerman sees violence and war as an inevitable evil. To him, being against it would be like being against hurricanes (and he knows something about the subject, having led a platoon that aided in relief operations in post-Katrina).

He observed that by protesting against the Vietnam War, intellectuals in his father’s generation categorically refused to participate in it. As a consequence, uneducated people led the war and

unleashed blind violence and cruelty — like the infamous Mỹ Lai massacre, a mass killing of between 347 and 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians, perpetrated by US Army soldiers. Learning from history, Ackerman acknowledges the need of intellectuals and graduates in the army. He wants officials and soldiers capable of developing an ethic and acting accordingly.

If you go to war as a reporter, you are a kind of super partes. If you go to war with the military, you have already picked a side. You are a character within the story. This elicits an important question: Is it possible to follow orders and practice obedience when you are an intellectual?

If you partially numb your empathy and accept the “good against evil” mentality by means of not thinking too much, obedience can be easy. Ackerman reflected on this in a piece on his friend and mentor Douglas Zembiec, the Marine major who ran his special-operations training:

“When he was asked about the intense fighting he’d seen in April, 2004, he replied with characteristic bombast. ‘I’ve told [my troops] that killing is not wrong if it’s for a purpose, if it’s to keep your nation free or to protect your buddy,’ he said. ‘One of the most noble things you can do is kill the enemy.’ Doug often said things like that, and he believed them. I’d anchored myself in his mentorship because of his unshakable faith in being a Marine. Combat made more sense when you held to those kinds of precepts, and when they felt true.”

Faith is what obedience is all about. Faith – as attractive as a concept it might sound in today’s disillusioned world – is not really considered stuff for intellectuals. Not past Saint Augustine anyways. God has been dead from a long time, and most of the ideals too. Ideals look quaint in the west, where every bomb in a first-world country seems even more obscene because we were supposed to have overcome violence.

As Ackerman explained, when you’re in the Marine Corps, the first thing that’s drilled into your head is: “The mission comes first. Mission before the men.” To enter the military put him in the position to obey orders to do things he might question. Things he knew would end up hurting or killing his friends. To a faithless intellectual, the conceptual and emotional consequences of his actions could have been paralyzing.

Struggling between empathy and duty

While there are sides in every particular war, in his experience of the Middle East these were more relative than ever: “If you look at the American experience right now we are fighting in Iraq with the Iranians as our ostensible allies, whereas if you look at Syria, we are engaged in Syria and Iranians are our enemies.”

Realizing that the good guys versus bad guys narrative doesn’t belong to contemporary times, Ackerman ended up thinking about politics more as an emotive force. In a war, you are offered profound insights into the human condition, in an extreme way you won’t be able to see in time of peace. Any group of people transplanted into a serious life-or-death situation will see their moral values bending, “Not necessarily in an evil way,” as Ackerman said in an interview. The author believes that novels are able to tell the truth better than essays, an exploration of emotional truth versus factual truth.

Emotional truth is a connection between the writer, the character and the reader. It’s present, felt and understood every time you read a story. Factual truth has to be backed up by facts and examined by reason. Facts pretend to be true to support a thesis, though the way facts are selected and put together is highly subjective. Essays are to novels what photographs are to drawings. Novels and drawings have a personal interpretation at the forefront. Unlike essays and photographs, they don’t pretend to be an accurate representation of the truth.

By putting himself in the shoes of an Afghan kid for *Green on Blue*, Ackerman developed empathy by observing the values and life of Afghans. He could see why Afghan people hated Americans and didn't want them in their land. His insight on the Afghan perspective clashed against the mandate of the military. It was already hard enough to send troops on dangerous missions. If you extend compassion to your enemy and accept their narrative, how can you still fight, risk your life for your own cause, and kill?

"I know why I was there" Ackerman usually replies when asked this question in interviews. Which is fine, but still sounds idealistic to me. My housemate, a nurse, and extremely sensitive person full of empathy for all the living things, including mosquitoes, articulated this concept for me. Once, we were sitting in our small, sun-drenched kitchen. While chopping cabbage, she was telling me about a little patient with blond braids they had just dismissed from the hospital. The girl had a tube connected to her jugular vein that had to be routinely changed.

One time the tube got accidentally stuck in my housemate's sleeve and was pulled away from the little girl's neck. Blood started spilling. The other nurse started screaming. My housemate didn't utter a word and quickly put a hand next to the neck of the girl, partially stopping the blood. She calmly looked at the other nurse who was freaking out and said with an assertive tone: "Please stop screaming right now. The girl is tranquil and you are making her agitated". Under her instruction, she and the other nurse saved the day.

I asked my housemate how she could keep herself cold-blooded in such an awful situation. "I guess it was all the ambulance training I went through," she said throwing the cabbage in the boiling water. "I learned to detach myself emotionally and think logically in emergencies".

A powerful example of how to engage with the world

Selective attention. You don't ask about the meaning of life when someone is just about to lose theirs and you are the only one who can do something about it.

As writers and intellectuals, we experience these kinds of scenarios less often. We have the luxury to question everything and we take pride in exercising doubt. We try to sharpen our sensitivity, to be constantly aware of another person's point of view, and while we might be forced into systems, it's hard for us to accept them at face value. If we accept some assumptions, we know that all conclusions are open-ended. This willingness to change our mind drives us to seldom engage with the world in first person, to make it no more than an object of our ongoing reflections. The consequence is that many of us are not really willing to walk the talk and stand behind our opinions.

In this regard, both the writing and life of Elliot Ackerman are a powerful example of how to engage with the world. It's about play by the book to a certain degree, while knowing deep down that the rules we are following are not absolute, but man-made. It's about testing the validity of these rules and picking a role to play in life.

Just like Ackerman did, we should learn Scott Fitzgerald's lesson: "The real indicator of intelligence is the capacity to sustain two opposite opinions without going crazy". In order to not go crazy, you just don't have to sustain both at the same time, though you should let one opinion somehow inform the other when taking a decision, just like my nurse housemate did. Sensitivity and toughness can coexist — in today's post-modern world they must. We can't avoid acknowledging multiple narratives.

Pinning my press pass on my blouse, I kept walking slowly among the contemporary, minimalist art that contrasted so sharply with the villa's luxurious interiors, an exemplification of the "strong contrasts" so typical of us humans. It will always be a struggle, but in order to take action in the world, you have to build your own set of ideals and values, deeply understanding the validity of the opposite viewpoint. Most of all, you have to be able to go all the way down with your moral code and take responsibility.

If this attitude won't be able to make war disappear, it can at least try to make it less cruel. And if it fails, the simple account of this conflict of the heart would create another very good story.

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