

You Cannot Take War Out of the Soldier

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Abstract

This article is an experimentation in poetry on the topic of combat and killing derived from interview data. Such writing is called many things, but I named it documentary poetry which, regardless of its origins, is a manifestation of the indeterminacy and autonomy of art. I have taken the words of Finnish military cadets, poetic in themselves, and exhausted the possibilities of translation by abandoning accuracy for the sake of sensual precision. The zealous yet unsettling depictions of combat are reassembled in poems troubling the mystique and exceptionalism of the military while pointing to the fragility of the military itself.

Keywords

military, investigative poetry, methods of inquiry, killing, combat, arts-based inquiry

Explanations

As we have seen, the vast majority of soldiers cannot kill in cold blood and need to kill in a de-subjectified state, e.g., in reflexes, rages, and panics. But who does the killing when reflexes, rages, and panics are activated? [. . .] Even when a sense of agency is absent during the rage-induced or reflex-controlled act of killing, however, a sense of moral responsibility can be produced by a retrospective identification of action and ownership, a retrospective production of the moral sense of agency, even when the practical agent at the time of action was a non-subjective rage or reflex: “Oh my God, look what I’ve done!” (Protevi, 2013, pp. 130, 132)

This is documentary poetry.

This is poetry based on interviews with first-year cadets of the National Defence University in Finland in 2018 (Hast, 2020a).

Cadet is the military rank of those studying for a bachelor’s degree in Military Sciences. After graduation, the cadet becomes lieutenant. The degree is academic but includes practical training in operational skills designed to foster the desire and ability to win battles.

A question was asked. What is the soldier’s body like?

A second question was asked. What is combat?

A third question was asked. Is combat about killing?

It was not asked, but it came up, that soldiers can die in combat.

The conversation about killing in combat made time slow down. Words got stuck in the throat and, I imagine, saliva dried in the mouth. Fingers became restless

and pitch of voice changed, bodies tensed, and the euphemisms spoke of “erasures” (Belkin & Carver, 2012) of the language of violence.

This poetry is imagination.

This poetry tries to capture how soldiers imagine war when war is distant to them.

This poetry speaks of soldiers who want to be soldiers of peace and how, perhaps as consequence, ideas about combat, war, and soldiering are dangerously improvised.

Improvised silence.

Cracking open the mystical box of militarism—the upholding and nurturing of military values, beliefs, and practices which rely on violence as the solution to insecurity.

This poetry is the struggle to articulate that war really does mean killing life.

This poetry has exhausted the possibility of translation.

Slang, dialects, gaps, sighs, blurts.

Finnish to English, oh, I could not.

The voice of this poetry is a body against which words bounce.

The poet is all body.

Body attentive to language while transmuting.

Channeling because the reader cannot hear the original sound and has to trust the poet's intention even when the poet does not write as *I*.

This poetry is a use of power, but it is certainly nothing compared to military power.

These poems are camouflaged.

How many speakers, even the poet has forgotten but can check if needed.

These poems are made with love and respect.

The meaning of love took another text spoken (Hast, 2020b).

Poetry exists for its own sake, even in a context like this.

Elizabeth Grosz (2008) saying, yes, art intensifies sensations.

Art not a representation. Art not explained, aesthetically evaluated, meanings un-uncovered.

Art of chaos, independent from the creator and perceiver (Grosz, 2008).

These poems are a risk.

"Militaries are a lot more fragile and contingent than elites will admit" (Enloe, 2015, p. 8).

Poems could romanticize and fetishize military bodies, but here we are.

Are You Able to Say It?

[Soldier body, what could it mean for you?]

My own body
but my body is more than a soldier

A soldier body *(your soldier body?)*
is not only ready to fight and commit violent acts
it is more than that

A soldier body
is more capable
is systematically and consciously prepared
Our capacity to perform –
it is preparing the soldier body

specifically for . . .

[Capacity for what?]

Capacity to endure
to help
but also . . .

I would not like to

. . . to kill
It feels so . . .
so black and white

[Are you able to say it?]

Well, if I think about it

Yes, I can say it

I just saw this talk show

It made me think about this more

[This feels like a difficult topic to talk about. I can see:

Bodies change when I ask about killing
they change . . .

Is the idea of killing too abstract

Or what do you really think about it?

Answer what you think, not what you are supposed to say

You can speak freely now]

In the conditions where soldiers end up in
they have to kill

Who would be better at that than a soldier

Who has the perspective on how and when

I think

we should all think about this more,
what killing means for us, to us
why I would kill

(to protect and defend myself, my family and
friends, my country)

When it is necessary

Fear of Death

Is it about killing?

No . . .

*you do not have to shoot a single bullet to be in combat
to be a combatant*

No one knows what combat would be like
You can try to simulate it
but you can't simulate fear of death
I saw some situations,
what-the-fuck situations,
when someone attacked,
they did not really do anything but
I realized my brain processed it for a while before I did
anything
In a real combat situation
I don't know how long the processing time would be
if would I run away, or what I would do
Here you can laugh about it—"Haha, did you get your
ass kicked?" –
but fear of death makes it very different

Something that Will Haunt You

terminal things
final decisions
terminal things take place
there is no undo button, no retake

right and wrong
wrong to take life
right to defend the fatherland

hard to give an answer
when I have not been in that situation
depends on what you have actually done
if it is something that will haunt you
if you fail to act
and as result
end up losing half of your group

if you have *murder-*
taken the life of
an innocent person
I hope I never encounter such a situation

The Inevitable

Combat,
Seven seconds of silence

it is a situation no one wants to end up in . . .

That is why it is military combat . . .
No civilians would be involved
Someone has to make the sacrifice for others
Because it would not be fair
if *women and children* and old people had to suffer
so it's become "men's work"

Anyone can be made a soldier
But what does it take?
Most do their military service, and then they are sup-
posedly soldiers

I cough, and apologise

But some decide to let themselves crash after their
conscription
and think they don't have to do anything like that
again
But the inevitable fact is that
One day war will come

I cough, and cover my mouth, cough some more

Okay, how could I say this elegantly
the
inevitable
fact
war will come one day . . .
It is some kind of a duty
No, not "some kind"

It is all of ours—a duty

to be able to make sure that
those who do not have to suffer
will not suffer
Well they can still suffer, second-hand
but military force doesn't target them

[Well, all wars include civilian victims. What do
you think about being involved in a war with civilian
casualties?]

It is inevitable
I am not saying it is right . . . it is not right . . . but it is
inevitable . . . it is not justified . . . let's say
it might be necessary

[Have you considered . . . that military work
might include killing?]

[War time]

War time

You have to make a choice, my life or the other's
the other will think the same
you don't necessarily want to be in that position
to take a life
but you just have to think
if I don't shoot
the other will –
that is for sure

There is no situation where
one or other thinks "I won't shoot"
and the other also thinks "I won't shoot"
because then there would be no war

I Would Kill a Terrorist

[Combat]

It has a mental and physical side.

Tough, really tough

[On the march,
I threw another word to go with combat: killing
What do you think of that?]

Sounds a bit fierce

If necessary, if demanded

[You are sold-]

In extreme conditions,
it can be done

For sure

Has to be done

True

I value life that much
I'd rather fire first than be shot

Kill or be killed

Hah

But we are talking about war
otherwise I would not kill—
under no circumstances
and even in

war you think about it for a long time

[Well, do you ever think about it?

<My voice gets tense and louder

Isn't that why you are here?]

Has crossed my mind

I don't even know what my task would be

In one group

Killing would be quite unlikely for me

I would likely witness a bombing from above

I have thought about what war would be like

If I think about the terrorist acts

I would not hesitate one moment
about killing a terrorist

That is for sure

For the common good

I would too.

I would sacrifice myself.

Sounds a bit heroic now, hah

We are trained to think with our brains

We are not here for our own benefit

this is altruistic

Killing has a lot to do with-

It is not personal

I don't know the person

It is not personal

It is not the same as stabbing on the street

I would run in that situation

but in war it is different

In an extreme situation

99 percent of us can do it

I cannot say everyone can

But I am quite sure we can all do it

if it is kill or be killed

I do not know about my future

But I have thought about it

[I wonder if this topic is not really dealt with here]
No, it is not bypassed
when we go shooting at the rifle range
we are thinking about the war context
We are not trained as shooters on a range
but soldiers
We are simulating real situations,
we use battle gear
There is always some reference to the real situation
It is in the background

We don't associate killing with torture
or anything like that
It is stopping aggression
Avoiding casualties
It is about stopping

We are talking about the Defence Forces
But remembering we are facing other
human beings,
and we are human beings too
We have not forgotten this
We all know what we are here for

Someone Always Dies

It has to be done (it is an assignment)
Sometimes you need to
destroy the enemy
Then you do it
This is what I think
as a soldier

[Does it mean killing?]

It has to mean someone dies
I have never heard of combat where no one dies

When Your Flesh is Torn

a soldier's body is injured
the self with bullet holes
occupational hazard but i rarely think about it
enemies die, but not me

"my wishes"
i have thought a lot about war, about death, about
friends dying, enemies dying,
even my family dying, but not me
it was sobering
we are all vulnerable
in the end, it matters very little how determined you are
mentally
when your flesh is torn
for even a regular person
what do i leave behind?

His Body Tenses and He Massages His Fingers

it was confusing
that i had not thought about it
dying,
if i have thought about it,
Dying
i have not imagined my wishes
the words i want to leave to my closest ones
to my closest one
about myself

it was moving, the entire atmosphere
i think for most of us
for me it was the first time to write such a letter
it was moving

[okay, so thank y-]
and then
[yes?]

those words were difficult to write
even if it was not real
how they still were
m-y-y own
it was just an exercise collectively
but individually
it came from my heart, really
not words on a paper for the sake of putting words on
paper
it moved something inside me

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