

# “I don’t know about you, but it all goes through my skin”: War Trauma Writing by Lawrence Joseph

ASJ DOI 10.18422/64-03

by Inès Latiri

The Arab American poet and professor of law, Lawrence Joseph (b. 1948 in Detroit), devotes a large part of his poetry to dwell on the pervading violence in Near and Middle East war situations, mainly in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. Large sections of his poetry in *Shouting at No One*, *Curriculum Vitae*, *Before Our Eyes* (collected in the publication *Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos*) as well as *Into It* express the poet’s indignation at and his denunciation of the contemporary savagery. He laments that the “weight of violence/ is unparalleled in the history of species” (*Into It* 4) and that there is “a state of collectively accepted permanent war” (*Game Changed* 127). In his poetry, he declares the urgent need to condemn violence: “What needs to be said -/ why not say it?” (*Into It* 4).

- 1 Joseph has not directly lived the scenes he describes. Since he has no personal history of the Near East, he provides us with press or televised images as well as reported images. It seems that his preoccupation with war images has to do with the fact that, even as a third-generation Lebanese-Syrian immigrant, Joseph cannot possibly detach himself from the Arab world and overlook the ongoing carnage. He is inclined to speak even if “confronted/ by a reduction in [his] powers of action, which reduces/ a voice to an inner voice inclined to speak only/ to those closest to [him]” (*Into It* 12). Joseph’s poetry is contaminated by what Jenny Edkins would depict as the “compelling need to bear witness and overwhelming conviction of the importance of doing so” (2). Not having directly participated in the described events does not hinder the poet from being traumatized and “helpless in [his] enforced encounter with death, violence and brutality” (2). Quoting Naomi Shihab Nye, Gregory Orfalea asserts that Arab Americans are “doomed by [their] blood to care” (200). Arab Americans imperatively need to testify as if they were moved by the constant guilty feeling of being alive. Indeed, why are they still alive when others are dead? In *Unclaimed Experience* Cathy Caruth states that “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (58). If they—that is, Arab Americans—are neither dead nor in danger, then, at least, they must not forget to remember. Even more, they set themselves the task of performing textual acts to transmit their witnessing. Struggling against oblivion, Lawrence Joseph’s ambition is to write history, to chronicle a “History for Another Time” (*Into It* 58). He feverishly undertakes to achieve what Paul Muldoon characterizes as “an adequate reprise to the latest reprisal, a strophe equal to the latest catastrophe’ (qtd. in Roberts 74). Yet, what any poet or writer who tries to exorcise the death demons must acknowledge is that any report of the horrors of war will essentially be limited and imperfect. “How not to betray the past” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 27) in its articulation is a quandary. Any account of the past erases such events and details while it puts the emphasis on others. For Hayden White, events “cannot be simply forgotten [...] but neither can they be adequately remembered” (qtd. in Radstone 21). How to bear testimony without concealing, lying, selecting, underestimating or overestimating what occurred if *that* which occurred took place far away from us? Other limitations are the inaptitudes and

shortcomings of language itself that the poet faces in his need and proclivity to speak. Joseph is aware that there is no “language pure enough to transmit human experience without distortion” (*Game Changed* 80). Edkins understands these language inaptitudes as the “traumatic real,” something that cannot be expressed and “symbolized,” something that has to be missed out and that “has to be hidden, or forgotten, because it is a threat to the imaginary completeness of the subject” (12). She continues: “[T]here is no language in which to express what the survivor wishes to say. The testimony is a witnessing of the void or the impossibility of closure and listening to testimony has to take the form of listening to something that is not there” (18). Language, then, sequesters certain experiential elements, and the one who survives is left with incoherent traumatic traces—if not with a traumatic emptiness. Due to the fact that we have not been able to come to terms with this void makes the void come back to us. The “impossibility of telling” also considered by therapist Dori Laub (qtd. in Edkins 64) entails that the repressed trauma constantly returns. The individual is subjected to the randomness of the unconscious. And the “other within the self that retains the memory of the ‘unwitting’ traumatic events of one’s past” surfaces at moments when least expected and against one’s own will (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). These occurrences seem to be evidence that trauma expression may work itself out through the language of the literary. For Joseph, trauma can only be expressed through the poetic. In *Game Changed*, he asserts that poetry is needed because there is no pure language to voice what needs to be voiced. The poetic medium allows him to have access to a wide range of techniques and innovative thematic, formal, and stylistic devices in order to adequately translate the mayhem of martial situations and to reflect his growing psychic distress. When Theodor W. Adorno posited the assertion that it is inadequate to write poetry in the violent context of the 20th century, he implicitly negated the vision of poetry as a means to express the pleasant, the lyrical, and the beautiful. Yet, can the poet not effectively deal with war atrocities, and can poetry not adequately express trauma? Absolutely. As the two British poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, have convincingly shown when relating the brutality of World War I, trauma and war can be appropriate subjects for the poetic genre. What the poet needs to do, to quote Paul Fussell, is find a “way of compromising between the reader’s expectations that written history ought to be interesting and meaningful and the cruel fact that much of what happens—all of what happens?—is inherently without ‘meaning’” (qtd. in Roberts 67)? Caruth herself is convinced that trauma transmits itself in the “enigmatic language of the literary” (qtd. in Topper 126). She relies on the “rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of [...] figures” (*Unclaimed Experience* 5) to express the void and the absence which are inherent to trauma. Timothy Richardson trusts literary texts as they “may trace the contours of those gaps” (505), as they delineate “what is not spoken but what is nonetheless spoken about” (498), and that which “cannot be written but is always being written about” (506). As Caruth points out, poetry allows the occurrence of remembrance and the reenactments of memories that unbiddingly emerge. It helps reveal trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 91). Forgetting first is the *sine qua non* without which trauma cannot be grasped. In Caruth’s words, “the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (8). Considering trauma as an uncontrolled and

unwitting apparition, the theory advanced by Caruth brings to the fore the belated repetition of the event causing the trauma. In the introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, she asserts that the “pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (4; emphasis in original). Latency as well as the belated appearance of trauma and its repetitiveness are parameters that also characterize Joseph’s poetry. Lee Upton is deeply aware of this connection when she writes about Joseph’s poetry that “[the] perpetration of violence and the perpetrators themselves burrow within the poems’ structures and the speakers’ psyches. Poetry exists here as a collection of fragments recast in ultimately nightmarish terms, as violence to the flesh is internalized but not inactive” (802). The poetic space is shaped by the delayed self-assertion of events as reported by a disturbed mind. In Joseph’s poem “Rubaiyat” (*Codes* 93), the persona bears witness to “Beirut’s dust and the Shouf’s sun repressed/ [...] fourteen years” after the Lebanese Civil War began. It is not unusual to have the inadvertent and unremitting surfacing of sudden violent flashes disrupt the narrative logic of poetic pieces. The result is an off-kilter narration of events. Artillery—ranging from little weapons used for homicides to bigger ones implemented for mass destruction—pervades the entire scene. The persona alludes to bullets, guns, shrapnel, and Kalashnikovs in the middle of memories about family or meta-poetic considerations. According to Caruth, “the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated to be integrated into one’s own, and others’ knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (*Trauma* 153). Thematic unity would actually destroy the authenticity of trauma which has to be spelled out in a disconnected and unexpected manner. Chronological and logical narrative order that would explain events and fill gaps would not adequately render trauma. Conversely, already processed and repressed images of corpses or weapons repetitively structure the text through techniques of accumulation and layering. To Upton, these techniques prove that “Joseph writes poems that embed evidence of the accumulated trauma of generations and the condensed experience of contemporary reality as it is experienced on multiple levels” (800). Many mental pictures which inhabit the persona’s anguished psyche are triggered by the recurrent reports of journalistic and criminal records. Some passages recall these realistic accounts with their plethora of concise descriptive details pouring out over the page through nominal sentences. They enumerate numerous appalling facts without any explicit, personally-sustained criticism or moral commentary. The non-provision of personal reactions indicates a growing possession by the visual representations the persona projects in his mind along with an increasing self-dispossession. In the introduction to *Trauma*, Caruth states that to be traumatized is to be “possessed by an image or an event” and that “[the] traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Thus, the traumatized persona does not own or possess memories of the past in as much as he is irreducibly haunted by intruding hallucinations of ghostly apparitions:

A report, according to the government official, forty-two forced into the church and hacked to death with axes on the altar, accounts confirmed by government officials, a five-year old boy discovered nailed to a doorway in the form of a cross. (*Codes 93*)

- 9 Different ways of showing the self-imposition of images are the dense accumulation of objective data not emotionally connoted (the poet mentions the bare facts of hacking to death and nailing to a doorway) and the specification of figures. The poet extensively and numbingly reports the number of casualties: "A massacre of eight hundred thousand/ During the last hundred days is reported [...] the dead/ Number over ten thousand" (*Into It 59*), "At least twelve massacred/ one hundred forty-seven houses and the church destroyed" (*Codes 94*), and "the suicide car bombing killing twelve,/ wounding thirteen" (*Into It 54*). The plain integration of information and numbers as well as the detached statement of facts are related to us by the voice of the other which has previously and incomprehensibly registered them. The following, almost scientific, lines employ seemingly real-life data and thus almost echo a criminal investigation. It is an account which methodically examines the very particulars of the damage caused by the slicing of the eye:

An inch-long piece of steel,  
part of the artillery's shell's  
casing, sliced through the right eye  
into his brain, severely damaging  
the optic nerve of his left eye,  
spraying bone splinters  
into the brain. (*Into It 44*)

No poetry collection by Joseph waives the insistent and frequent appearance of raw violence. Instead, intolerable accounts of tortured and maimed bodies are supplied. The poet evokes the "shrapnel [he] saw in his cousin's stomach" (*Codes 28*) or "the niece's head severed with bullets" (91). Dead bodies "left in a ditch to die" (28), crushed bones, "skulls, and jawbones and pelvises of children" (95), "the stump of a leg" (*Into It 41*), "the baby photographed with half a head" (38) are all pieces of evidence for the horrors of war. The victims' disembodiment is completed by the picture of the "the dust of a dust storm;/ yellow, black, brown, haze, smoke" (38) and the description of the smell "of burned human flesh" (38). What Joseph's verse actually does is arrange and conflate the various limbs of corpses into dreadful paintings powerfully forcing themselves upon the mind.

- 11 At other times, trauma is not rendered by the self-imposition of events and images from which it originates but by the composition taking the shape of a continuous elegiac monologue. Assailed by both the rising number of losses and the cruelty of the killings, the persona is engrossed in a delirious talk. He assumes a conversational tone, observing and pondering over the situation:

I saw that. One woman, her personality  
 And appearance described as lovely,  
 While performing her predawn prayers,  
 Watched the attackers shoot to death her husband,  
 Her seven-year old son, three of her brothers,  
 as they grabbed her four-year-old from her arms  
 and cut his throat, taking her and her two sisters  
 away on horses and raping. Of course it's genocide. (*Into It* 12)

This passage stands in sharp contrast to the previous journalistic reports and provides us with “responses to facts” (*Game Changed* 7). Joseph, who claims to be a disciple of Wallace Stevens, insists on the retort that a poet inevitably makes to the circumstances of his existence. Stevens himself declared that poems are “the speeches from the drama of the time in which he is living” (qtd. in *Game Changed* 122). And Joseph responds in such an extensive way that sometimes “the facts can scarcely get into the poems at all” (*Game Changed* 7). Some of the speaker’s musings are not connected to the facts that have fostered them, and the absence of correlation makes the reader wonder about the orientation that will be taken by the reflexive monologue and the original events that caused traumatic damage.

- 12 The meanderings of the erratic talk that the persona is lost to are disclosed through a particular poetic form. Indeed, the external pressure provoked by war situations permeates the condensed blocks of lines which marginalize the conventional stanza in a majority of poems to express the mourning and the wailing over the victims. “In the Beginning Was Lebanon” (*Codes* 95) takes such liberties. It covers Lebanon’s history and extends over its Muslim and Christian massacres in a single poem-long stanza. In Joseph’s poetry, these blocks often combine with short lines to visually configure the horrors of war. In the following extract, the lines collapse, speeding up the rhythm to articulate the tragic outcome:

An infant  
 in Haifa suffocated  
 resisting her parents’  
 efforts to fasten  
 her gas mask. I waited  
 up all night for it. (*Codes* 167)

The alternation of longer and indented lines may express the fastening and unfastening of the gas mask or the efforts of the parents to fasten it in light of the child’s persistent resistance. What is equally interesting is the injection in the poem of the final infant’s suffocation through the consonance of the [f] sound (“efforts to fasten”).

- 14 Even when couplets and quatrains make up a poem, the untamed lines weigh on us by their intensity and velocity. Upton characterizes Joseph’s verse as “pressurized narratives” (799), with poems “structured so that they arrive with something close to physical weight for some readers” (800) as well as a pressure that is “never released or dispersed but contained and in circulation” (812) so that “the mind is imprinted with the felt pressure of psychic trauma” (809). “Rubaiyat” (*Codes* 93) is invested with such a brewing tension. It

runs on from one line to another and affects us with a pressure which reflects the speaker's internal turmoil in sight of the wracked and torn societies:

All the stories about killing, burned bones, the smoke  
from burning bones, a body tied by a rope fastened to a Mercedes  
flying above the ground, cut-up body in a nylon bag,  
black hoods, hallucinations, stylized hair and pure gold chains.

Once again, sound effects serve meaning, and the bloody massacres resonate through the alliteration of the [b] sound. "Burned bones," "burning bones," and "body" convey in unison the compelling image of the blood spilled, eliciting in the reader a horrified response.

- 15 The different poetic forms coexist with a noteworthy usage of punctuation and syntax to represent war violence and to voice the tension which haunts the speaker: syntactic fragmentation suspends the reader's attention at the level of individual sentences and prompts him to ponder over the different fragments of his delirium. In "Rubaiyat" (*Codes* 93), the string of indirect questions violates the common use of punctuation and defies grammatical rules to attempt at delineating the unspeakable and the inaccessible of war and war trauma:

And what do you think you're doing when you want the names  
and the years of history, who begot whom and who made  
which flesh which words that hate for which particular reasons  
that compel the pride of horrors of the oppressed?

- 16 Many independent questions such as: Why would one want names and numbers? Who induced people to hate and whom? What are the original reasons for the hostilities? jostle in this quatrain. It is the function of this confusing amalgamation to suggest that it is complicated, if not hopeless, to reach a meaningful answer. Another pertinent example is the following set of lines in which the body's disintegration is inscribed in the text through the syntactic fracture and the broken rhythm:

At dinner, a cousin  
describes his niece's head  
severed in bullets, in Beirut,  
in civil war. (*Codes* 91)

A few passages dismiss punctuation altogether. The one below taken from "Lines Imagined Translated into a Foreign Language" (*Codes* 164) does without comma altogether, thereby uninterruptedly sketching the rough traits and colors of a hallucinated war-scape:

And then the logic of war  
succeeded the night  
the day bright lemon  
winter sky thinned  
to cold peach  
no visible polestar  
at the horizon's end  
the Sea of Samarra  
outlined before us  
a breach of Asia Minor  
incandescent before us.

Trauma impregnates the poem through hallucinatory visions. The voice unpredictably and subversively transubstantiates the traumatic, the violent, and the barbarous into the stunning and the magnificent. It may at first be complicated for the reader to visualize and realize the full scope of either the metaphoric and antithetic “blossoming fire-bombs” (*Codes 22*) or the apocalyptic vision of a war scene in Iraq supplied in “Lines Imagined Translated into a Foreign Language” (164):

No  
tears, we hear  
no sense of terribleness  
or sorrow, nothing  
only immense excitement  
when the attack  
begins, blocks of light  
suddenly flattening  
arc of laser-guided  
purple-tinged halos  
around the open night.  
every bomb seems to be  
hitting. Explosions  
weirdly traced  
lapis lazuli.

Both aforementioned passages focus on stage lights and colors to aestheticize the bomb explosions. The transfiguration of the brutal scene into a colorful and luminous image is one process through which trauma reappears. Sorrow and melancholy, which are proper to the elegiac form, are replaced by the “excitement/ when the attack/ begins,” leaving the reader with what seems to be a spectacular show.

- 17 Of course, poetry cannot be the perfect therapy for psychic wounds—especially not in a world where the modern self is assailed by an everyday violence. Yet, poetry is perhaps one of the ideal forms to help indicate trauma. Joseph sets himself the challenge to both depict phenomena which are likely to resist representation and to grapple with subject matters whose nature is fundamentally inexpressible and inassimilable. Poetry endeavors to say the unsaid, the concealed, and the repressed, hereby combatting the silencing. It gives a voice to ghosts. It summons and retrieves forgotten people. It partially compensates for

lost lives. It struggles against death and nothingness. It exhumes the corpses which were not decently buried and to whom no tribute was paid. It ritually exposes, celebrates, and erects epitaphs for them to be commemorated. Poetry attempts to acknowledge the “traceless traces” (Radstone 20) of trauma and is one of the “modes of representation better suited to the “unrepresentability” of trauma (21). Poetic threnodies—such as Joseph’s—need to be read because, on the one hand, they proficiently capture pictures of people torn and worn by warfare and because, on the other hand, they fiercely argue for peace. The poet’s response to death and destruction is instantiated by the creation of life and the experimentation with verse. He sets himself the mission to write because “what [he does not] write/ will not exist” (*Into It* 52). He writes because not writing war and trauma poetry would be a crime against humanity. “[What] is in us is remembered [...] in thoughts and in images,/ to give expression to.” (52)

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## Author

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**Inès Latiri** is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Humanities at Sousse University, Tunisia. She is literally passionate about Arab American Writing, and dedicated her MA thesis to the poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye. At the Sorbonne, she completed her PhD



dissertation on Arab American poetry, using a psychoanalytic approach. Inès has published articles on Khaled Mattawa's and Lawrence Joseph's poetry.

### Suggested Citation

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Latiri, Inès. "I don't know about you, but it all goes through my skin': War Trauma Writing by Lawrence Joseph." *American Studies Journal* 64 (2018). Web. 14 Dec. 2018.

DOI 10.18422/64-03.



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