

Louts

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SEVENTEEN YEARS separate these two photographs, and both show groups of what appear to be soldiers away from the battlefield and the barracks, inserted (for want of a better word) into civilian contexts. One group is shown in an interior, in the Palace of Versailles, with a checkered floor that immediately calls to mind a chessboard, that is, a place where battles take place purely symbolically and with no blood spilled, and which, besides, depend more on strategy and intelligence and tactics than on force or fanaticism or hatred. It's a day in June in 1919, and the occasion is the signing of the Treaty that signalled the official end of the First World War, although hostilities had actually ended on November 11 of the previous year. During four years of fierce fighting—one of the most brutal conflicts ever known, still involving a lot of trench warfare and hand-to-hand combat—about fourteen million men died on European soil, and it's odd that on the day when that short-lived peace was being signed into existence, the soldiers witnessing that historic moment of hope and relief should be standing on

that chessboard floor, as if to underline the fact that even though they are still the almost-protagonists—or rather, spectators with front-row seats—they have already been transposed into the territory of the purely symbolic: in fact, they've finally been withdrawn from the game, as they watch the politicians who are presumably sitting on the other side of the glass, signing that treaty on their behalf and on behalf of everyone else.

Those allied officers are very close to that crucial document, but have been left outside, behind the glass. They were simultaneously the first victims of the war (it wasn't like modern-day wars, in which civilian populations are always the ones who suffer most) and their enemies' principal executioners. They're wearing high boots and are in uniform; one is even holding a staff, and most are wearing hats. And yet, in the photo they seem quite inoffensive—more than that, they look as innocent as excited little boys. Despite their unequivocally military garb, they clearly had no qualms about scrambling onto sofas and tables in a way quite inappropriate to their rank and to the

institution they belong to. One man, perched on the lowest of the chairs, is even biting his nails, as if he still can't believe that the signing will really happen and needs to see it with his own eyes to be sure. They don't resemble just any small boys; they're like small boys out of a Dickens novel, poor helpless orphans waiting anxiously for their fate to be decided on the other side of that glass, with no possible intervention on their part, and filled with the unease of knowing that, at any moment, they will be told what lies ahead for them.

The photo is actually very charming, and if we didn't know what those men were gazing at so eagerly—perhaps some colorful parade passing by in the street below—it would lack even one iota of seriousness. On the sofa sit three older officers, veterans, who haven't moved but are sitting chatting, indifferent to the event commanding the rapt attention of their colleagues. And they appear just as unconcerned about the anomalous presence of a civilian carrying a walking stick and standing poised on the arm of the same sofa, or about the three soldiers to their left, all so precariously balanced that the slightest wobble would bring them toppling down, possibly inflicting serious injury on their comrades below. With the exception of those seated veterans, the photo shows the soldiers from behind, so that we see only the backs of their necks, as if they were already leaving, heading off into the distance. The only one who maintains a vaguely martial air is the one on the

right of the image, arms akimbo, but this impression is immediately cancelled out by the crazy, ludicrous fact that he's perched on a small table, like some mischievous lout.

In the second photo, these apparent soldiers are not, on the other hand, soldiers at all, not really or not entirely. Like the soldiers in the first photo, they're not in their usual military environment either, but in the middle of a street, a street in Munich in 1936, making their commemorative march from the restaurant where they'd planned the 1923 *putsch* and their attack on the city to Königsplatz. The setting is, then, a civilian one, but transformed by an artificial-looking smoke effect reminiscent of some childish, dream-like vision of a battlefield. These pseudo-soldiers are shown advancing ominously. Unlike the real soldiers of 1919, these men are not leaving but arriving. More than that, they're taking charge. Their menacing, troubling presence in that civilian context sends a completely different message from that of the first photo: they're invading this space, militarizing and appropriating it. It's odd that, despite being in the open air, they're all bareheaded, unlike the allied soldiers in Versailles. But then they aren't real soldiers, they're "brownshirts," and although they're marching in formation, they're not in step, and look more like a gang of local heavies than a disciplined body of men. The only military things about them are their uniforms, their high boots, and their manner, which they have copied or





usurped: most are middle-aged, flabby or fat, bald or greying, and they resemble nothing so much as circus ringmasters or grumpy puppets.

They belong to the country that emerged defeated from the document signed years before in Versailles, and which they only recall now in order to feed their resentment. For some time, their one party has dominated Germany and they have grown arrogant, despotic, believing themselves to be the masters. They are the masters. They were doubtless applauded as they marched along that invaded street; after all, it's not uncommon for criminals to be cheered when they have grown in strength and influence. In this year of 1936, three years before the beginning of the Second World War, they're still playing at being soldiers. It's ironic that the genuine soldiers in the first photo no longer instill fear, while the impostors who aspire to being soldiers provoke a real sense of panic. You wouldn't have wanted to meet them in that smoke-filled Munich street, and I presume no one tried to get in the way of that triumphant, commemorative march. Not that it mattered, because they went on to march down every street and road and path, and those who refrained from getting in their way would be hunted down in their homes, so there was little point in stepping aside. The tragedy rather than the irony is that the flawed Treaty of Versailles awaited with such cheerful, breathless expectation by men balancing on chairs and tables on a June day in 1919 was the very same treaty that allowed these other men to rise up and don a uniform and swagger around like humorless louts and to advance, spilling fresh blood on Europe's soil. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa).

Daguerreotype of Unidentified Woman

(Matthew Brady, c. 1861)

She grows accustomed to the sound of taffeta,
the way he takes the fabric
between his index finger and thumb,
rubs it like a thought he had
and would have again.

She grows accustomed to the bonnet bow
too snug around her neck,
the cascade of ringlets—are they hers,
or just a dream she dreamed
to be undone?

Her mouth inclined like an experiment,
her lips sensitized with iodine
and exposed, her gaze all but vanished,
yet fixed in vapor, she stares
as if she were real enough to die.

What she sees she does not see.
What he sees, like light in a darkroom,
cannot be trusted.
Surely she knew.
Still, he speaks in ever afters,

he who left his fingerprint on her collar,
all lace and delicate as her white hands
irreverently ungloved,
he who astonished the moment
to own it.

—Georgia Tiffany

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