

Subversions of the Thermopylae Myth in Modern Literature

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Abstract: This essay examines allusions to the Battle of Thermopylae in three literary contexts: first, in several works of postwar German literature; second, in “After Thermopylae” (pub. 2004) by South African poet Douglas Livingstone; and third, in Kieron Gillen, Ryan Kelly, and Jordie Bellaire’s modern graphic novel *Three* (2014). Although quite different from one another, each of these works deploys the “myth” of Thermopylae—that is, the longstanding representation of the Battle of Thermopylae as a heroic defence of the civilized West against the barbaric East—subversively, thereby challenging the xenophobia inherent to this myth and also pervasive in each writer’s immediate sociopolitical context.

Since the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, the last stand of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans against the invading Persian forces has served as an exemplification of heroism, courage, and noble self-sacrifice; of the West versus the East; of the defence of culture and civilization against barbaric, foreign tyranny. Modern literature and popular culture frequently reinforce this representation of Thermopylae: novels such as Steven Pressfield’s *Gates of Fire* (1998) and films such as *The 300 Spartans* (1962) echo Herodotus’s ancient praise of the “valiant” and “worthy” Spartans who died defending Greece (7.224). Often, however, the Thermopylae myth is distorted by what François Ollier terms “*le mirage spartiate*,” an interpretation of Spartan society that emphasizes “discipline, orderliness, social hierarchy, and subordination of the individual endeavour to the overriding good of the state” (qtd. in Cartledge, “What Have the Spartans” 170). Historically, this version of Thermopylae has been used to foster nationalism and xenophobia in

politically conservative nations and even fascist regimes: for instance, Nazi propaganda deployed *le mirage spartiate* to structure German identity and society, while Frank Miller retroactively linked his graphic novel *300* (1998) to the American War on Terror.

In this paper, I will examine how and why writers subvert the traditional Thermopylae myth, considering works of post-World War II German literature such as Theodor Plievier's *Stalingrad* (1948) and Heinrich Böll's "Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We..." (1950); Douglas Livingstone's poem "After Thermopylae" (pub. 2004); and Kieron Gillen, Ryan Kelly, and Jordie Bellaire's graphic novel *Three* (2014). Although these works span diverse time periods and cultural contexts, I will argue that they share a fundamental ethical ideology, which their writers produce by inverting, undermining, or otherwise challenging the values conventionally celebrated by proponents of *le mirage spartiate*. If the Battle of Thermopylae has traditionally represented the heroic last stand of a civilized West against a barbaric East, then the deliberate subversion of this idea functions as a condemnation of racialized violence, oppressive political regimes, and the glorification of self-sacrifice in each of these works of literature.

Subversions of Thermopylae arose in postwar German literature as a result of the battle's prominence in Nazi culture and propaganda. The leaders of the Nazi regime, as Roderick H. Watt observes, "regularly projected themselves as the legitimate heirs to the traditions and values of Graeco-Roman Western civilization and culture," claiming Sparta in particular as both a practical and an ideological model for Nazi Germany (871). Helen Roche notes that this "elective affinity with the Spartans" extended most specifically to "those who had fought and died at Thermopylae," whose courageous self-sacrifice was a recurring theme in the curriculum of the National Political Institutes of Education, or "Napolas" (24). These elite boarding schools, established by the Nazis in 1933, were modelled upon the Spartan education and training system (the *agoge*) and indoctrinated German boys aged eleven to eighteen with the ideology of

the Nazi Party.

The myth of Thermopylae became especially prominent in Nazi propaganda, however, after the defeat of the German Sixth Army at the Battle of Stalingrad in 1943. This event marked a turning point in the war and, consequently, lent “a new and desperate urgency” to the notional connection between Germany and Sparta (Watt 872). On 30 January 1943, two days before the surrender of Stalingrad, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring delivered a speech in which he described Stalingrad as Germany’s Thermopylae, thereby representing the Germans’ catastrophic defeat as a strategic sacrifice that would uphold “the last line of defence protecting Western Europe from the Russian barbarian hordes from the East” (Watt 872). Watt includes an excerpt of the original speech in his article: “*Wanderer, kommst du nach Sparta, so berichte, du habest uns hier liegen sehen, wie das Gesetz es befahl. Und es wird noch einmal in der Geschichte unserer Tage heißen: Kommst du nach Deutschland, so berichte, du habest uns in Stalingrad kämpfen sehen, wie das Gesetz, das Gesetz für die Sicherheit unseres Volkes es befohlen hat*” (qtd. in Watt 874). An English translation of the speech is quoted from Plievier’s *Stalingrad* below. Göring also quoted an epitaph composed by the Greek poet Simonides and inscribed upon a memorial at Thermopylae: the epitaph reads, “Stranger, bear this message to the Spartans, that we lie here obedient to their laws” (qtd. in Paton 139) and became, in Nazi Germany, an evocation of heroic sacrifice and deference to the state. From the defeat at Stalingrad until the war’s end, Nazi propaganda cultivated this glorification of self-sacrifice and dehumanization of the enemy through Thermopylae: one Napola student recalls in Roche’s *Sparta’s German Children*, “the longer the war went on, the more often the Battle of Thermopylae was presented as an act of heroic self-sacrifice” (qtd. in Roche 219). Fittingly, then, in postwar German literature, references to Thermopylae—and particularly to the Simonides epitaph that Göring cites—are often subversive, expressing disillusionment with the ideology of Nazi Germany, exposing the hollow rhetoric and exploitative nature of Nazi propaganda,

criticizing the education system of the German Napolas, and satirizing the hypocrisy of the Nazi Party leaders.

Plievier's novel *Stalingrad* accomplishes such subversions in its use of the Thermopylae myth. In one passage, the narrator describes a "village of the wounded" in the basement of a theatre, which serves as a hospital for the German soldiers trapped in Stalingrad (294). The scene is one of weariness, frustration, and despair: soldiers are wounded and ill, rations have stopped arriving, and the doctor (through whom the passage is focalized) realizes that he can no longer save lives, only "[prolong] the process of dying" (294). Into this dismal scene, the radio broadcasts Göring's speech:

My soldiers, thousands of years have passed, and thousands of years ago in a tiny pass in Greece stood a tremendously brave and bold man with three hundred soldiers, Leonidas with his three hundred Spartans ... and now only the inscription stands: Wanderer, if you should come to Sparta, go tell the Spartans you found us lying here as the law bade us.... Some day men will read: If you come to Germany, go tell the Germans you saw us lying in Stalingrad, as the law bade us.... (Plievier 298; italics in original)

Watt records that, historically, "this speech represented the final confirmation of what [the German soldiers at Stalingrad] had long felt, namely, that they had been abandoned, betrayed, and finally sacrificed by their leaders" (874), and Plievier's novel captures these sentiments in the soldiers' bitter reactions to the broadcast: "So we're written off already!" proclaims one man (298). Another soldier's cry of "Help!" soon becomes "the appeal of the entire cellar" as they realize that "all of Stalingrad [has] been given up for lost" (298, 299). However, their outrage and despair is prompted not only by this confirmation of their abandonment but also by the understanding that they are being "exploited in the very moment of their betrayal," their deaths propagandized by Göring instead of mourned (Watt 875). Plievier's novel also highlights a crucial difference between Stalingrad and Thermopylae: while Leonidas died with his

troops, Hitler—“that fake fat Leonidas in Berlin” (Plievier 308)—sacrifices his soldiers to preserve himself. By thus contrasting Göring’s mythologized vision of Stalingrad with the reality of the soldiers’ experience, Plievier undermines the glorification of self-sacrifice promoted by Nazi propaganda and exhibits the hypocrisy of the party’s so-called leaders.

Similarly, Böll’s short story “Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We...” uses Simonides’s epitaph in order to subvert the conventional Thermopylae myth. The narrator, a teenage German soldier, has been wounded in combat and brought to a school now serving as a makeshift hospital. Although he recognizes many objects as the stretcher-bearers transport him through the hallway—including Anselm Feuerbach’s *Medea* (1870); a photograph of the Hellenistic sculpture *Boy with a Thorn*; “a beautiful plaster reproduction of the Parthenon frieze” (Böll 31); and busts of Julius Caesar, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius—the young soldier cannot definitively identify the school as his own because he knows that all the Napolas contain classical artwork, an observation that illustrates the Nazi fixation on Greco-Roman antiquity. What finally convinces him that he has indeed returned to his old school is a quotation written on the blackboard of the old art room (now an operating room) in his own handwriting: “Stranger, bear word to the Spartans we...” (38); he recalls how he had to write out the epitaph seven times in various calligraphy styles, and how his teacher “had bawled [him] out for not spacing properly,” resulting in the “slightly truncated” quotation (38). As he makes this discovery, a doctor removes his bandages and the young soldier realizes that he has lost both his arms and his right leg, whereupon the narrative concludes with the soldier’s feeble request for milk, a symbol of his childhood.

The subversiveness of Böll’s story hinges upon the Simonides epitaph in several crucial ways. First, its use as a calligraphic exercise “trivialize[s]” the values commemorated at Thermopylae “and simultaneously abuse[s] them as propaganda” (Watt 878). The list of calligraphy styles that the soldier expounds, “Antique, Gothic, Cursive, Roman,

Italic, Script, and Round” (Böll 38), also demonstrates how the repetitive nature of Nazi rhetoric reduces Simonides’s powerful epitaph to a meaningless cliché. Second, by situating the epitaph in an educational context, Böll criticizes the Nazi Party for using the classics “to inculcate upon their youth a mindless acceptance of military virtue” (Ziolkowski 551). The young soldier’s schooling evidently instilled in him the notion of heroic self-sacrifice through the myth of Thermopylae; however, having experienced the reality of war, he expresses his disillusionment with this ideal:

I thought of how many names there would be on the war memorial when they reconsecrated it and put an even bigger gilded Iron Cross on the top and an even bigger stone laurel wreath, and suddenly I realized that if I really was in my old school, my name would be on it too, engraved in stone, and in the school yearbook my name would be followed by “Went to the front straight from school and fell for...”

But I didn’t know what for. (35)

When he realizes the extent of his injuries, the soldier “trie[s] to look at the blackboard again,” searching desperately for the sense of honour and purpose that he once recognized in Simonides’s epitaph (39). However, the words are “obscure[d]” from his view, and the soldier fails to find any comfort or glory in his sacrifice (39). This passage therefore demonstrates how the values propagated by the Nazi education system are distorted, exploitative, and ultimately meaningless. Finally, as Watt observes, the “truncated” epitaph serves as “a grim symbol” of the young soldier’s “appalling mutilation” (878), which Russell A. Berman further interprets as an image of the supposedly civilized West “discovering its own barbaric character” (28). Notably, the German text severs Simonides’s inscription more abruptly than the English translation, ending mid-word (“*Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...*”) rather than mid-phrase (“Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We...”), and thereby underscores even more powerfully the significance of its fragmentation. In these ways, Böll deploys the myth of Thermopylae in or-

der to underscore the emptiness of propagandized rhetoric, to express disillusionment with Nazi ideology, and to condemn the education system for representing mindless self-sacrifice as heroism.

This last idea emerges as well in Wolfgang Borchert's "Lesebuchgeschichten" (1949) and Günter Grass's *Cat and Mouse* (1961), both of which depict a German educator citing Simonides's epitaph "unthinkingly and uncritically" (Ziolkowski 551). In Borchert's short story, a teacher spews a string of "prevalent clichés and formulaic catchphrases" of the Nazi regime, including the phrase "*Sparta erinnert,*" or *Sparta remembers* (Watt 878). Similarly, Grass's novel features a nationalistic speech by a school headmaster that references Simonides's epitaph:

Thosewhocomeafterus—Andinthishour—whenthe travelerreturns—butthistimethehomeland—
andletusnever—pureofheart—asIsaidbefore—
pureofheart—andifanyonedisagreeslet—andin-
thishour—keepclean—toconcludewiththeword-
sofSchiller—ifyourlifeyoudonotstake—thelaurel-
neverwillyoutake—Andnowbacktowork! (69)

As Watt observes, "the typological presentation of the headmaster's words is obviously designed to emphasize that he is simply stringing together and parroting the currently circulating propaganda clichés" (880); "whenthe travelerreturns" is only one in a series of near-meaningless phrases. Grass's and Borchert's allusions to Simonides's epitaph thus demonstrate how, under Nazi leadership, German schools become centres of indoctrination wherein both students and teachers learn to echo the hollow and predictable rhetoric of Nazi propaganda. By satirizing this process, however, Grass and Borchert each subvert the distorted ideology to which the myth of Thermopylae is here applied, and their works thus contribute to the broader "leitmotif" of subversion (Watt 877) that develops in postwar German literature.

Interestingly, this leitmotif achieves a similar effect in other cultural and literary contexts: for instance, Livingstone's poem "After Thermopylae" situates the myth of Thermopylae in twentieth-century South Africa, subverting

its traditional significance in order, perhaps, to criticize the institution of apartheid. Although Livingstone's lyrical poetry can appear somewhat "detache[d] from South African human affairs" (Heywood 156) when compared to the more explicitly political work of his contemporaries (such as Dennis Brutus, James Matthews, and Arthur Nortje), I would argue that "After Thermopylae" produces a vision of peace and reconciliation that functions as an anti-apartheid statement. Indeed, Livingstone's poem exhibits the values conventionally associated with Thermopylae: the speaker conveys the courage and heroic self-sacrifice of the three hundred Spartans by describing their "stone- / set expressions of concentration" as the Persians, "an ocean of helmeted beards," approach (lines 11–12, 18). The poem also displays the antitheses of these ideals: cowardice and self-preservation are embodied by the sergeant who flees the battle like "a crab / with bloodied nails clawing backwards" (14–15). However, Livingstone neither glorifies the speaker of the poem for fighting nor castigates the sergeant for deserting (although the speaker himself expresses a sense of survivor's guilt by identifying as "a not-dead man / under dead men," listing his primary wound as his "manhood," and referring to the "complicity of survival" [20–21, 23, 30]). Rather, Livingstone dismantles the categories of hero and coward generated by the Thermopylae myth: when the two veterans meet by chance years after the battle, they reunite over a drink, both "having forgotten" until then the incident at Thermopylae, and both "having also forsaken war" (19, 34, 42). By thus undermining the significance of the battle and, indeed, the entire ideology of the Thermopylae myth, Livingstone instead promotes an ethic of reconciliation, compassion, and pacifism.

Kathleen M. Coleman suggests that, because Livingstone deeply admired the Alexandrian poet Constantine P. Cavafy, Cavafy's "Thermopylae" (1901; 1903; appendix A) may represent "a powerful intertext for Livingstone's poem" (433), an observation that enhances Livingstone's subversive use of the Thermopylae myth. Cavafy's poem transforms the Battle of Thermopylae into a philosophical allegory that il-

lustrates a good and meaningful way of living. Parodying Simonides, his poem opens with a tribute to “all of those who in their lives / have settled on, and guard a Thermopylae,” meaning a set of ethics or a guiding principle (lines 1–2). Cavafy then describes the qualities of such heroes: justice, compassion, generosity, and an adherence to truth (4–6, 9). The poem concludes with the suggestion that “more honour still is due” to those who live an ethical life even though “they foresee ... / that Ephialtes will make his appearance in the end” (11, 12–13). As Paul Cartledge notes, *ephialtis* “is the modern Greek word for ‘nightmare,’” and so the historical betrayer of the Spartans here becomes an allegorical force of immorality and misfortune (“Spartan Traditions” 47). Coleman argues that the title of Livingstone’s poem, “while ostensibly chronological, may also convey a subtle tribute to Cavafy” (433), and indeed, “After Thermopylae” adopts several of Cavafy’s themes: just as Cavafy’s allegorical heroes are “without any hatred for those who lie” (10), so too does Livingstone’s poem refrain from condemning the deserting sergeant. Additionally, both poems deploy the Battle of Thermopylae to promote a philosophy of pacifism and forgiveness, exchanging honourable deeds of warfare for honourable moral principles. This idea in particular reinforces Livingstone’s subversion of the conventional Thermopylae myth and lends “After Thermopylae” a kind of “universality” (Coleman 442), which, I would argue, allows the poem to transcend its classical subject matter and engage with discourses surrounding apartheid in South Africa.

Finally, using the most explicitly subversive framework of the texts I have examined, Gillen, Kelly, and Bellaire’s graphic novel *Three* systematically dismantles the myth of Thermopylae that underlies Spartan identity and culture. Additionally, as its title indicates, *Three* was conceived of by Gillen as a response to Frank Miller’s *300*, and as such the graphic novel also challenges the use of Thermopylae “to indulge *violent, amoral fantasy*,” to foster nationalism, and to glorify (and even fetishize) self-sacrifice (Basu et al. 31; italics in original). The narrative immediately inverts the idea that Sparta embodies the “Western ideals of freedom” and

civilization by exposing its violence and brutality (Basu et al. 28): in the opening scene, members of the Krypteia, the Spartan secret police, attack a group of helots as they work in the field, a red-tinted panel emphasizing the frenzied and vicious nature of the slaughter (Gillen et al. 5). *Three* also redefines the notion of noble self-sacrifice so often distorted in representations of Thermopylae. Instead of defending the Spartan state, Terpander's death challenges its oppressive structure; he sacrifices himself to preserve the lives and freedom of his helot companions, an act that he conceives as "noble" and that ironically parallels the sacrifice of Leonidas and the three hundred (94.2). This ironic parallel also extends to Miller's *300*, as Terpander's threat to "any who would dine in Hades" echoes Leonidas's infamous declaration, "tonight we dine in Hell" (Gillen et al. 107.5; Miller and Varley 65.5).

This pattern of inversion culminates in Terpander's appropriation of the Thermopylae myth for the helot class. As he guards the canyon entrance, Terpander declares to the three hundred Spartans, "You dream of Thermopylae ... but we helots are just as familiar with that day. Three hundred of you died there ... but each had a helot beside them" (Gillen et al. 107.1-2). His speech (re)claims the glory of Thermopylae for the helot class and thereby destabilizes the Spartans' national identity, which hinges upon the Thermopylae ideal. Indeed, having thus dismantled the Thermopylae myth, *Three* illustrates Sparta's degradation in the "unSpartan" murder of Klaros and in the closing depiction of King Agesilaos, feeble and aged, proclaiming "Here lies Sparta" (117.2, 126). This conclusion likewise subverts the vision of Sparta presented in Miller's *300*, for while Miller's Spartans die but achieve what Cartledge terms a "morale [*sic*] victory" ("What Have the Spartans" 171), the Spartan force in *Three* conquers its enemy yet suffers a moral defeat. Thus, *Three's* systematic inversion of the Thermopylae myth criticizes nationalistic deployments of the battle from classical Sparta through to modern America, and instead uses Thermopylae to promote resistance to such oppressive and violent political structures.

Although the selection of works that I have considered here spans a broad range of cultural contexts, I have attempted to demonstrate how postwar German fiction writers, a twentieth-century South African poet, and modern graphic novel artists achieve the same fundamental ethical vision in their writing by subverting the values conventionally associated with the myth of Thermopylae. The many nationalistic and xenophobic interpretations of Thermopylae informed by *le mirage spartiate* are balanced by works such as these, which condemn racialized violence, the glorification of self-sacrifice, and authoritarian regimes through their subversive treatment of the Thermopylae myth.

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Appendix A: “Thermopylae,” by Constantine P. Cavafy

Honor to all of those who in their lives
have settled on, and guard, a Thermopylae.
Never stirring from their obligations;
just and equitable in all of their affairs,
but full of pity, nonetheless, and of compassion;
generous whenever they’re rich, and again
when they’re poor; generous in small things,
and helping out, again, as much as they are able;
always speaking nothing but the truth,
yet without any hatred for those who lie.

And more honor still is due to them
when they foresee (and many do foresee)
that Ephialtes will make his appearance in the end,
and that the Medes will eventually break through.