

## Sad Presentiments

Brian D. Cohen

*...for there is no folly of the beast of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men*

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

*Here in Goya is the beginning of our modern anarchy*

Bernard Berenson, after a visit to the Prado in 1932

### LOS DESASTRES DE LA GUERRA

Goya completed *Los Desastres de la Guerra* during the Peninsular War (1808 to 1814), soon after Napoleon's brutal occupation of Spain, which sparked a popular uprising among the Spaniards and violent repression by the French. The full title for the series was *Fatales consecuencias de la sangrienta guerra con Buonaparte. Y otros caprichos enfáticos en 85 estampas. Inventadas, dibuxadas, y grabadas por el pintor original D. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes.* (translated: *Fatal consequences of the bloody war with Buonaparte, and other emphatic inventions in 85 prints.* Invented, drawn, and engraved by the original painter Francisco de Goya y Lucientes). The artist may have initially held Bonapartist sympathies, admiring the liberal vision for a more egalitarian world. Goya became thoroughly disillusioned, however, as he observed the depredations, domination, and systematized violence inflicted by the invading French as Napoleon installed his own brother on the Spanish throne.

There are very few precedents for this wrenching level of graphic depiction of war, notably the 18 etchings circa 1633 of *Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre* (*The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*) of Jacques Callot, a set that was widely circulated. Goya echoes the format of Callot's print cycle in placing text beneath graphic depictions of atrocities and executions, but Callot's images seem remote, historic narrative, whereas Goya's grisly scenes are brought to the forefront, producing immediate, visceral reactions. They are impossible to look

at without feeling abhorrence and revulsion, their impact undiminished even now in an era where violent, horrific, uncensored images can be transmitted virtually instantly around the world (and we see the murder of George Floyd in nearly real time).

Over the course of the print cycle, we witness unflinching images of brutality, barbarism, hunger, despair, destruction, retribution, torture, corruption, folly, atrocity, famine, degradation, rape, and death, with a few redemptive glimpses of anonymous, desperate, retaliatory bravery. By the middle of the series Goya has effectively eliminated any moral distinction between the invaders and the defenders of this country.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Francisco Goya, *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer* (*Sad presentiments of what must come to pass*), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

Figure 2: Francisco Goya, *Si resucitará?* (*Will she rise again?*), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

Stripped of uniforms in many of the images, both sides in the conflict, Spanish military and civilian guerillas and French army, are engaged in the most heinous and gratuitous violence and recrimination, indistinguishable in their viciousness. Loyalties and politics are blurred, irrelevant, and forgotten, and transcendent values of justice, morality, propriety, and righteousness are discounted or derided (a specialty of Goya).

Goya recorded in drawings the effects of war and devastation he observed in the capital of Madrid and Zaragoza, the city where he was raised. Most of the first 64 plates, or 'Fatal Consequences of the War', are thought to have been etched while the conflict was still in progress, between 1810 and 1814, and the first proofs of those plates made soon after .

Goya withheld publication of *Los Desastres* during his lifetime, perhaps out of fear of political repercussions, as he had felt compelled to withdraw his earlier print cycle *Los Caprichos* in 1799. He may also have recognized that the images in *Los Desastres* were so horrific and unprecedented as to be unacceptable and unviewable. Before leaving Spain for Bordeaux in 1824, Goya gave a set of working proofs of *Los Desastres* to his friend, the historian Agustín Ceán Bermúdez. The plates were later passed to Goya's son, Javier. The Academia first published *Los Desastres* in 1863, 35 years after the artist's death. The 1863 edition, which was given the title *Los Desastres de la Guerra* contained 80 plates, not including Plates 81 and 82, which were recovered in 1870 by Paul Lefort and donated to the Academia.

## SAD PRESENTIMENTS

Francisco Goya's (1746–1828) suite of prints, collectively known as *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, opens with an image of a wretched man looking upwards, in helpless entreaty, above the caption *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer* (Sad presentiments of what must come to pass). I think often, especially recently, of this etching. This print hints at what we're in for in *Los Desastres*; it is a premonition of the uncertainty, ignorance, fear, horror, and carnage that the series will unfold for us.

Having lived with many of these images (quite literally; Plate 39, a print of a savage dismemberment, hung in my dining room until my partner made me take it down), I wondered if there would be an end to the misery. Where would all this horror lead? I also own Plate 80, *Si resucitará?* (Will she live again?), which I believed to be the very last print in the suite. It is part of the last group of etchings in the series, beginning with Plate 65, which make largely symbolical, fantastical, allegorical departures from the graphic brutality of the first group. In *Si resucitará?*, the beauty, serenity, and poise of the figure of Truth, rays emanating from her face, lie in contrast to the darkness, motility, insubstantiality, and bestiality of the motley, shadowed figures surrounding her, including a cowled monk brandishing a club and about to pick up a rock, and a feline monster holding a large book,



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. Francisco Goya, *Murió la verdad*. (Truth has died.), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

Figure 4. Plate 82 — Francisco Goya, *Esto es lo verdadero* (This is the truth), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

perhaps a Bible, overhead. This print, I believed, was the ultimate print of the cycle. What fearful, perfect symmetry; after the unimaginably ruthless and obscene nullity that Goya forces us to see, relentlessly, with no relief, nor redemption, nor justification for the cruelty and suffering he depicts, he ends with a question, as uncertain, helpless, and open-ended as Plate 1, *Tristes presentimientos*, which pointed us down this dark road.

## REVELATION

I set out in this essay to share my admiration for Goya's revelation of the most graphic horror framed by opening and culminating images of utter indeterminacy, a profoundly modern sensibility, when suddenly I learned that perhaps Plate 80 wasn't the final plate after all. *Los Desastres* was not published during Goya's life. As I was well into the writing of this essay, I contacted Janis Tomlinson, author of *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist* (Princeton University Press, 2020), the recent definitive biography of the artist. She informed me that two subsequent plates, 81 and 82, were known as working proofs during Goya's day and had been discovered and acquired by the Calcografía in Madrid in April 1870, and then lost — only to resurface in 1957-8, when a few more proofs were made. How and why those two plates became separated from the rest for nearly 100 years is unknown, a historical question for which we don't have a clear answer, but the last two plates were not available when any of the seven editions of *Los Desastres* were printed. Thus the 1863 first edition and subsequent editions of *Los Desastres* do in fact end with Plate 80, though plates 81 and 82 do most likely represent Goya's intentions and conception of the entire cycle.

My essay then became counterfactual – the plate I had always admired as the last in the series, wasn't in fact the last. I hope to make the case that plate 80 should have been the ultimate print in the series in the following text.

## ALTERNATE ENDINGS

Considering the alternate 'endings', there is either *Si resucitará?*, (Will she live again?), Plate 80 or *Esto es lo verdadero*, (This is the true), Plate 82. These final prints have different implications for the overall meaning of the print cycle. I believe that for Goya the order and sequence of the prints represents intrinsic intent, as he often allows one image to refer to another in the cycle. For example, the initial plate, *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer* (Sad presentiments of what must come to pass), foreshadows all the uncertainty, dread, abandonment, and forsakenness the print cycle will unveil. This etching, though placed first in the cycle, was probably completed later, after the war. In this print, he refers to the iconography of Christ's dark night of the soul in the Garden of Gethsemane. (The pose of the main figure prefigures Goya's own later 1819 painting *La oración en el huerto*, (Prayer in the Garden, Calasancio Museum, Madrid, Spain). In Goya's etching we almost hear Christ's desperate question, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?", "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" and



Figure 5

over the plates that follow, we are dragged through exactly what must come to pass, graphically, unsparingly, explicitly, as consequences of the Napoleonic invasion.

The whole series is usually considered as divided into three broad groups. In fact, the exact sequence of prints Goya intended is not known definitively, as there are two different numbering systems, and changes in the titles and numbering may have occurred between Goya's 1824 inscribed set of proofs and the first published edition in 1863. The first 47 prints, completed during the war, reflect incidents from the war and show the carnage, atrocities, and brutality of soldiers and a little later in the series, civilians. The middle group (plates 48 to 64) depict the devastation of the famine that overtook Madrid in 1811 – 12, during the siege by the French. In the final 17 plates (65 to 82) Goya employs fantastical and allegorical figures (what Goya termed *caprichos enfáticos* in his 1823 set of inscribed proofs), to satirize both the Church and government. Figures in these later plates can be bestial, chimerical, or transcendental, occasionally all within the same image. In these prints, Church and State are equally skewered and written off. In Plate 67, *Esta no lo es menos*, (This is not less curious), referring to the previous print, a statue of a saint is carried off, dethroned and robbed (literally) of her power.

The allegorical figure of Truth first appears in Plate 79 *Murió la Verdad* (Truth has Died). She is dead though radiant, her breasts exposed, laid out before a crowd of observers including a monk digging her grave, a benighted bishop gesturing in benediction, and various other ecclesiasts ready to bury Truth. Plate 80, *Si resucitará?* (Will she live again?), described above, concludes the series right there, on that question — will Truth live again?

## TRUTH

It is far from obvious who Goya's Truth is and what she represents. Is Truth represented by Goya's own eyewitness renditions of scenes and situations? Or is Truth created through Goya's own testimony, the veracity of lived experience which Goya demonstrates through making these prints? The caption of Plate 44: *Yo Lo Vi* (I Saw This) gives us a clue: this really happened; this is what people do to each other – emphasizing the veracity of what is depicted. Is Goya's Truth a liberal political position the artist may have secretly held in opposition to the government, or does it perhaps indicate his support for the liberal Constitution of 1812, which Ferdinand had rejected in 1814, signifying to Goya the death of Truth for Spain? Could Truth stand in for the opposite of all the irrationality, violence, superstition, and stupidity Goya had observed? Truth's uncertain and indecipherable identity stands in contrast to the horribly personal, though anonymous, vividly depicted atrocities throughout the series. Those graphic, irreducible images beg no interpretation.

With the addition of the lost and rediscovered plates, skipping the harrowing Plate 81, *Fiero Monstruo* (Proud Monster), an image of a dog

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vomiting human bodies (and a fitting summation of the entire cycle), *Los Desastres* concludes with Plate 82, *Esto es lo verdadero* (This is the true). Here we are magically transported to an Edenic bucolic setting of abundance and profusion. The same Truth of Plates 79 and 80, alive now, is on her feet, breasts still exposed, blessing an old peasant, looking awfully like one of the brutes who had dug her grave and surrounded her lifeless body in Plates 79 and 80. Goya's own choice of the word *verdadero* for the caption of Truth in this plate, as opposed to *verdad* for the Truth of Plates 79 and 80, may be telling. The translation of *verdadero* is closer to "truly," an adverb. I can't help but think of Stephen Colbert's coinage of the word "truthiness," implying a willful and vague quality to what we believe — the aura of Truth, aspirational but not actual. This image of the Truth as what we desire and believe, rather than what we see and know, echoes in our time.

Reva Wolf (Wolf, 1990, p. 49) suggests that Plate 82 may be an ironic mockery of the notion that there is even such a thing as Truth. Goya's world view may have lightened with the improved political climate at the restoration of the Constitution and agrarian reforms after 1820, as Eleanor Sayre suggests (Sayre, 1974, p. 295), allowing him a brief spell of optimism during which he created this idyll, as a kind of affirmative political cartoon. Perhaps Goya simply couldn't leave things so fatalistically open-ended by concluding with *Si resucitará?*

## CONCLUSION

I am tempted to believe (though without evidence, I must add, in an age when truth is constantly redefined) that Goya himself later changed his mind, finding his own definitively optimistic ending of *Los Desastres* with Plate 82 implausible. Though this plate is unquestionably by Goya's hand, to me, it seems in every way a disjointed afterthought, an appendage, a *deus ex machina* weakly hoping to dispel the unrelieved horror of the cycle. I say this not as an art historian, which I am not, but as an observer who, given the harrowing weight of *Los Desastres*, finds that the plate's pat optimism rings hollow. What reason has Goya given us to believe that Truth will live again in Plate 82? Over the previous 81 plates, Goya's answer is emphatically, nihilistically, absolutely, none. The weight of the prints in *Los Desastres* is not simply in their explicit graphic horror but also the unimaginable, unrelieved ruthlessness, obscenity, and nullity he forces us to see, repeatedly and relentlessly, without relief, redemption, redress, or justification for the cruelty and suffering he depicts.

New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl, in a review of a recent biography of Goya by Janis Tomlinson (The New Yorker, September 14, 2020), reflects as follows, '[Goya's] legacy (is)... a homing beacon for worried people in worlds that are subject to unpredictable changes, perhaps suddenly and soon. Goya knew the problem and let slip the solution, which is to keep in mind that there is no solution, only an immemorial question: Now what?'

I feel that the inconclusive question of Plate 80 *Si resucitará?* (Will she

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live again?) is a fitting bookend to the uncertainty and anguish of the opening plate *Tristes presentimientos* (Sad presentiments). Goya knows we will continue to anguish in the dark over whether we will see Truth rise again, and that we will never know. That is what we do. But the hapless figure opening *Los Desastres* knows and foresees the horror that will inevitably and truly come to pass. This is who we really are. Now what?

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**Brian D. Cohen** is a printmaker, painter, educator, and writer. In 1989 he founded Bridge Press to further the association and integration of visual image, original text, and book structure. Artist's books and prints by Cohen have been shown in over forty individual exhibitions and in over 200 group shows. Cohen's books and etchings are held by major private and public collections throughout the country. He was winner of major international print competitions in San Diego, Philadelphia, Mexico City, and Washington, DC. His essays on the arts and education have been featured in Art in Print magazine and the Arts and Culture section of the Huffington Post.

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Francisco Goya, *Tristes presentimientos de lo que ha de acontecer* (Sad presentiments of what must come to pass), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence





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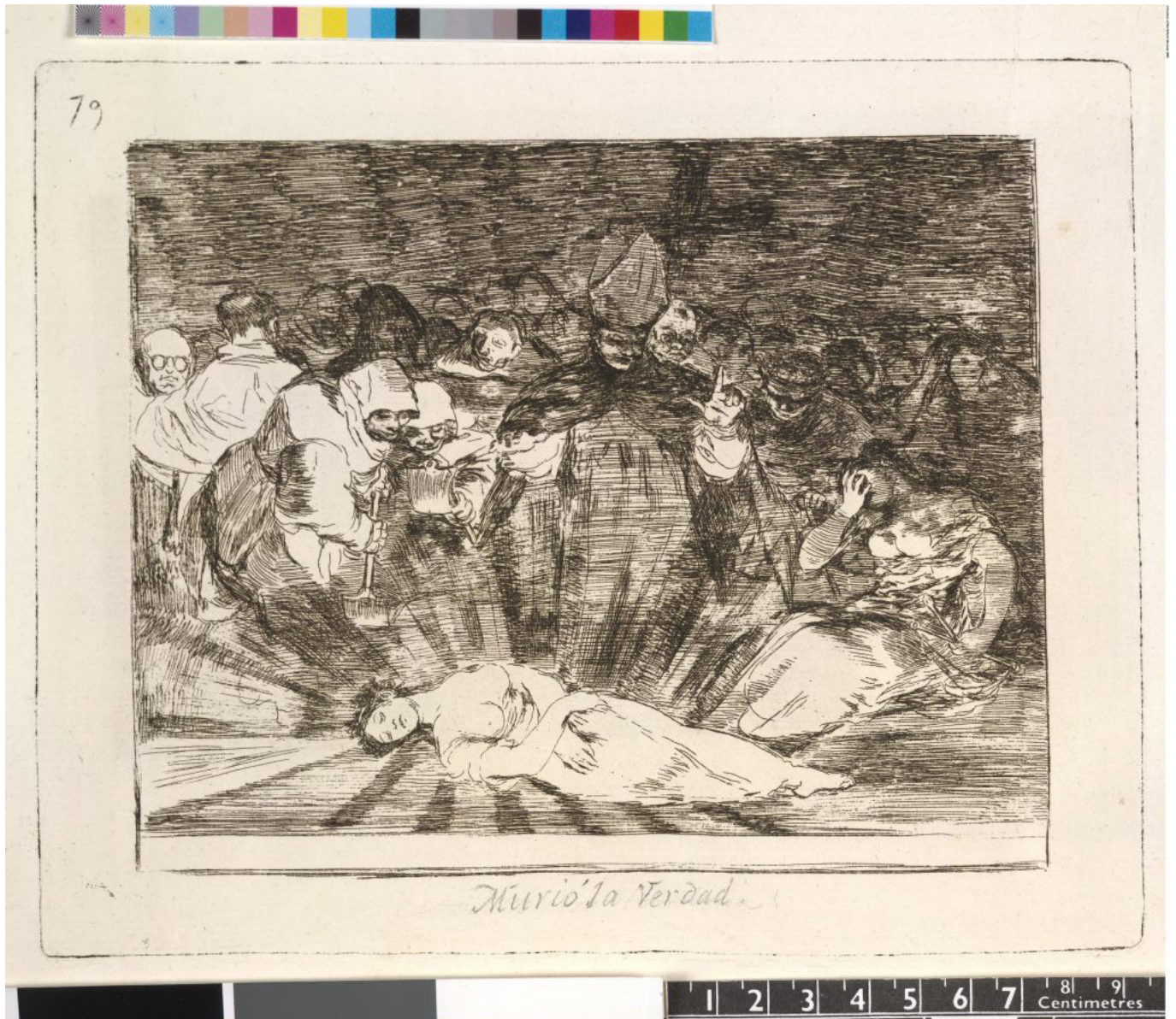


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Figure 4. Plate 82 — Francisco Goya, *Esto es lo verdadero* (This is the truth), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence



Figure 5. Plate 81 -- Francisco Goya, Fiero monstruo! (Fierce monster!), etching, circa 1810-20, 17 x 22 cm (plate). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence