

○ VOLUME 16 NUMBER 2, 2017

Worming the world

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Worm (noun): ~ A human being likened to a worm or reptile, esp. as an object of contempt, scorn, or pity; an insignificant person; an abject miserable creature.

Oxford English Dictionary

The parasite is an exciter. Far from transforming a system, changing its nature, its form, its elements, its relations and its pathways the parasite makes it change states differentially. It inclines it. It makes the equilibrium of the energetic distribution fluctuate. It dopes it. It irritates it. It inflames it. Often this inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction.

Michel Serres (1982, 191)

We think my father began to affectionately call me 'Worm' because I have a penis. He stopped quite promptly when my mother alerted him to the idea that, to others outside of our immediately family, it might sound like he considered me a mere parasite. I know for a fact that my mother and two older sisters referred to me as 'Noodle', for that very same reason. They stopped only as I entered my teens because, frankly, I let them know that it had got embarrassing. Later, when I was well into my mid-20s, although not long after my father was dead, I became a worm once again. Only this time my nickname was designed to be a sign of contempt, and it had nothing to do with either my family, or my penis.

It begins with a banal message that I received on June 3, 2008, from someone whom I had never met. It ends two years and some three-and-a-half thousand unanswered messages later when a woman—whom I still did not know—pleaded guilty and received a seven-year

suspended prison sentence, expulsion from her university, and a deportation order from Australia.

What happened in between put me at the center of a set of social relations that rippled within my workplace in an IR Department in suburban Melbourne as far as the Vice Chancellor, various Australian and Vietnamese law enforcement agencies, the Victorian legal system, and the office of an Australian federal minister. During that time, my life—and its very security and survival—seemed to me *the world*. I may have been lecturing on International Relations, but I found this experience in fact *un-worlded* my own relations. Looking back, I finally find myself able—and willing—to query what it means to teach and research ‘the world’ when you are seemingly the only one left in it.ⁱ

Following the lifecycle of a worm from birth to death, this essay traces my experience—and ‘internal relations’—as a scholar working on the periphery of IR. Here, in this opening phase, we are protected, as in a *cocoon*, from what I take to be the rather more disturbing description of events that are to follow. In the second phase my life as a worm and a scholar prepares to *hatch*. It does so as we first encounter the nature of the crime—and the harm—that was inflicted upon me. The story of the worm *matures* by way of some reflections on the statement that I issued to the Court that documents how I suffered not only personally and privately, but also professionally and publicly. In the fourth—and final—phase, I attempt to kill-off the moniker of the worm. This *death* is performed by reclaiming the memories that I thought had been erased, and learning to confront the ones that I continue to produce. Such is the residue of trauma, but also the way of the worm.

Although it is often said that the worm’s life is both short-lived and blind to the world that it inhabits, Serres reminds us that the worm is in fact an ‘exciter’ which—in stark contrast to the notion of the Anthropocene—leaves its mark on the Earth by aerating and nourishing it. What’s more, the worm does this without producing any memories. By contrast we humans variously harm the very Earth that we inhabit only on the surface; we humans arguably only live within the folds of our own memories. Thus, I write for me, but I share it for us; to write in the narrative voice is to *relive*, but also to *relieve*. Simply put, I can’t keep my former life as a worm to myself anymore. It makes me miserable and compounds my insignificance, just as the perpetrator—and perhaps my teenage siblings—would have wanted.

June 3, 2009: ‘Hello worm!!! remember me?’

Mind you, I don’t know who is speaking to me and it took some months for me to establish in what sense—and why—I am a worm. The response I received was swift yet not altogether that reassuring. The answer was effectively: ‘no’. This interaction transpired in the earliest days of Facebook, and I had accepted ‘Helena’s’ friend request without a thought. Despite having very briefly established that we indeed had no connection, over the coming eighteen months the messages kept

coming via the contact form on my website, email, voicemail and text message.

However, it took several weeks since that first—and only—interaction that we were ever to have for the messages to take on a rather more aggressive tone:

July 31, 2009: 'Bookworm, you intend to break off 'diplomatic ties' with me, don't you? Bookworm!!!'

Quite apart from the frequency of the messages—which was routinely around five to ten a day—every indication was given to me that this person (or people) would not stop. For instance, many messages said plainly that 'this will not stop'. Yet another via my website refers to me as a 'difficult Aussie guy' who will be made to pay. Because there was no rational explanation for what I was enduring, I could feasibly see no rational way in which the situation would end.

For instance, five minutes before my first lecture I received text message. Believing it to be an acquaintance wishing me well, I mistakenly checked my phone as students were entering the room:

August 10, 2009: 'We have access to your staff email, WORM, and we are going to tell your entire class during class that you are a [morally bad man].'

With that, I tried to heed the advice that I provide my most anxious students before they prepare to deliver a class presentation: 'a little-bit of nerves is good' (to ensure preparation), 'although a lot of anxiety is unnecessary' (because very little in life is so important). To be sure, receiving a message such as this minutes before you are to speak certainly agitates and disrupts those crucial few moments in which people generally use to gather their thoughts. Thoughts about what is happening inside you are precisely the thing you are now tasked with remembering to forget.

Because of a significant number of these messages suggesting I should not be respected at La Trobe University where I was embarking on a doctorate and lecturing, in August 2009 I confidentially told my advisor what was happening. Having to do so was very embarrassing and upsetting for me, since I had no answer for why this person (or people) was doing this, who they might be, or what they might be doing it for. Frankly, I was unsure whether my colleague even believed me, and fully understood why they might not.

Produce these anxieties, at home and at work, I did. It seems that there is only so much personal trauma that even your closest and oldest friends and family can endure. Despite what some folks say about constructing community from shared vulnerability and trauma, I came to the paradoxical conclusion that perhaps in this instance it was best endured solitarily; the act of sharing had the unintended effect of further

isolating, let alone comfort and compassion. For this reason, I kept my life as a worm to myself for several months. It is around this time that I began drinking two bottles of cheap red wine a night, to the point where a close friend wholly unfamiliar with what was happening told me something that I already knew: that I 'had a problem'. Publicly, I was a scholar of International Relations evoking ideas such as humanity and hospitality, but privately my world was imploding upon questions about why this was happening to me, and what could be done.

Until one day I received a message that threatened not my own personal safety and security, but that of those around me. I recall mulling over what I was to do when I received the following:

October 21, 2009: 'I saw you with that woman again. We will slit that bitch's throat!!!'

I did not tell the friend in question what was happening. After all, we had only met a handful of times, and I was ashamed that she was now being cast as an actor in my otherwise private world. It is one thing to be sent unwanted messages about being worthless or describing you being physically harmed in some way, but it is quite another to think that, through you, those around you are now in harm's way too. Instead I told a mutual friend that if anything 'happened' to me, as over-wrought and dramatic it then sounded even then, to please look after her.

Another message suggested harm would come to my five nephews and niece, all under 12 years old. Yet another was that they knew my father was dead (I had published an essay on his death in *The Big Issue*), and they knew where my mother lived. Although in both instances I could not bring myself to tell anyone. My father had much earlier told me 'to look after your mother and your sisters' when he knew he was dying, and I felt this was where I must rise to do something that then seemed so straightforward and simple.

I know now that among the handful of people that I did inform of the basic terrain of what I was experiencing, only one or two truly *believed* me. It was not so much that they sensed I was lying, or embellishing, what was happening, but rather that the process of grieving my father and my reports about being a worm had, for them, become entangled. 'You are under a lot of stress', I was often told. 'Perhaps you need time off work ... or a holiday!', it was often reasoned. 'He only died last year', others attempted to reassure me.

One day I decided to stop talking to everyone about what I was experiencing. Believing this activity might be criminally motivated, I reported the situation to the Australian Cyber Crimes Bureau, the Australian Federal Police, and the Victorian State Police in person, over the phone, and in writing. The Victorian State Police effectively told me to, 'man up' about an experience 'that was virtual and not real'. Indeed, I wrote in my victim-impact statement that I was made to feel that lodging an incident 'was a form of voluntarily demasculation'. The

Australian Federal Police flatly refused me entry to their Melbourne headquarters after repeated attempts to make contact by telephone. The Australian Cyber Crimes Bureauⁱⁱ enjoyed no such jurisdiction as the former two agencies but offered me hypothetical advice on what *should* happen.

It was around this time that I noticed that the tone of the email messages became rather aggressive and often very sexually explicit in content. They frequently placed me in the position of being abused, raped or sexually ridiculed. The somewhat friendlier moniker 'bookworm' was replaced with 'worm', and the tenor of the messages became far more aggressive.

For instance, I began to receive a significant number of messages that implicitly threatened me with my life and safety. For instance, some referred to the fear one must feel living in Australia given people can stand outside your bedroom window that are without bars whilst you slept. Others mentioned this person being outside my building or advisor's office, or seeing me walking or working on campus. A number made a more direct threat of 'KILLING the worm' [capitals theirs] in the context of some sexual act or desire to meet me.

All this appears to bear out in the victim-impact statement that I issued to the court. Reading it, I am reminded of the personal and professional toll that this dual process of being isolated by the incessant messages that I was receiving *and* how I internalized the reaction of just about all those I shared my experience with had become. Ultimately, it took a desperate approach to a deferral minister of parliament to get the help I needed. Even this took several weeks, for much the same reason that I had encountered—agencies didn't have jurisdiction, the virtual world is not real, or more troubling still, men can't suffer.

Throughout this, even as at least one person was first arrested by the Australian Federal Police six times before I was informed in writing on April 29, 2010, that 'due to competing operational priorities within this office, the AFP finds itself in a position where all resources are committed to matters of a higher priority'. With the help of the minister of parliament, I received a call from a senior detective within the Victorian Police who had a reputation for taking on cyber cases which were put aside by his colleagues.

I remain of the view that it is only because of a chance encounter with this senior detective within the Victorian Police that I regained control over my world once again. In a deal with the magistrate, some two years after that first message, the accused pleaded guilty and received a 7-year suspended prison sentence, along with a deportation order from Australia.

Through this process we learned that the person charged had entered Australia from Vietnam some six months after first contacting me and had enrolled in the department where I was lecturing, However, to this

day, I still do not know what motivated this person, nor whether she was acting alone. Since our day in Court, I have never been called a worm again; for my father is dead, and my mother and sisters think better of it. But when I think back to my time in graduate school I continue to *feel* like an abject, miserable creature.

The reason for this is decidedly simple. As a scholar of the ecological as well as social and political dimensions of global life, I teach students that their world needs healing. Such a vision of IR demands that it is not only the human mind and body that is central to the discipline, but also Earth's biosphere and the myriad beings and things that comprise our worlds. Indeed, the discipline of IR was born out of the harm and destruction of the First World War, and was transformed by the new horrors of the Second. Arguably, pain, suffering and vulnerability are its business. However, it is arguably insufficient to continue to take this globally—or even at the biospheric, planetary, or cosmic scales—the twin mediums of existence. And it is this that no one can tell me is insignificant, no matter how miserable the content of IR sometimes makes me feel. In the classroom, as in my writing, I try to embody the idea that encountering IR constitutes a journey of discovery of each other and—just as crucially—ourselves. Doing IR is therefore *relational*. How else might one study the world, but continually (re)situate oneself in it?

The process of writing and publishing this article has required reliving faint memories and triggering otherwise dormant trauma. It has, at times, been an agonizing experience. There are reasons for this feeling that simply reflect the way of the worm. Often, for a human to be rendered a 'worm' is a sign of contempt. The source of such judgments is not so much the character or function of the creatures themselves, but a rampant anthropocentrism contained within its host.

So, let us now examine the *internals* of the worm. All worms are blind yet recognize light by photoreceptors. None have limbs. Not every worm is a hermaphrodite, but many are, and so cross-fertilize. Their brains are not really brains but nerves. Instead, worms sense and feel the world with their bodies. These bodies vary from the microscopic to some that grow up to sixty meters in length. The worm either lives inside other beings—as in a parasite—or else either inside soils, or under marine and freshwater environments. Some types of worms cannot move but rather must be carried by external forces such as the wind and tide. None are able to live permanently on the Earth's surface. Thus, the worm bores its way through different textures, or levels of Earth's biosphere. Understood in this way, worms are therefore vital links in the food chain of virtually all ecosystems by way of enriching and aerating the soil. Despite earthworms, for instance, existing as species for over 120 million years, all worms have a very brief life, when viewed in human terms.

But there is also a reason for this feeling that has to do with the way that I was made a worm in the first place. Something that has to do with

the crime that was committed against me that I have only very recently found myself ready and willing to reveal. What startled me most about this experience was not so much that it happened—as unfortunate and unimaginable as it was—but the reaction by colleagues who profess to be ‘experts’ or else ‘specialists’ in grand notions such as justice, ethics and care but whom systemically failed to respond either individually or collectively to a violation of those treasured ideals within their midst. I do not blame my colleagues, but do wallow sometimes in wonderment how so many instances of pain, suffering and vulnerability go unnoticed or get overlooked.

Perhaps then, when we take these two sorts of reasons together, the worm provides us with a useful metaphor for the individual in International Relations. So often dismissed as insignificant and pitiful against global flows and forms of power, the individual is largely absent or else crowded-out in IR. IR offers no lens into the micro of global life, as it has not yet satisfactorily taken a cosmic-point-of-view and considered the macro. Individuals shape their world, but also *the* world. Yet the international—or global—can also be situated in the individual. That is to say, does the worm think about the world it inhabits? Can it comprehend its totality? Does the worm have a sense of place within the vast emptiness of matter at the scales of the micro (i.e. matter) and the macro (i.e. the cosmos)? Does, for that matter, the individual human being?

To be sure, my life as a worm also produced personal wounds—and some scars—that must be tended to privately. The seemingly most irreparable and debilitating of which is my fear of large groups of people. For instance, to avoid triggering past traumas I have largely withdrawn from academic conferences, or participate almost exclusively by Skype, if at all. I know these people are very unlikely to be lurking in the shadows, but the reality remains that they might be. At this stage in my academic career—if you can call it that—the value that can be reaped from attending large professional settings does not appear worth the potential price. In the absence of any real closure as to why such a crime was committed against me, perhaps these wounds will always weep and remain agape. Surely, because of the actions of others, there are also professional ones that continue to draw pain too. Th bringing the story—as with the worm’s movement from life to death—full circle. Back where I started: doing IR as a man.

There are, therefore, *politics* to the narrative voice. If mine disrupts and unsettles without being expressly stated or appropriately analyzed for an IR scholar, then so be it.ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of publication, I continue to teach and write on the margins of IR. However, I have come to appreciate that, like a worm, rather than enter IR through its dominant conferences and publications, I have attempted to burrow under the discipline’s surface. Understood from the perspective of the worm then, I tell myself that perhaps this is in fact the task for the IR scholar: to break through barriers to connect and surface in new fields and conversations, only to retreat again and hope to remain hidden from

view. Forever evading death at the hands of another. In this way, perhaps doing IR as a worm *is* how it is meant to be?

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Acknowledgement: This essay is dedicated to the late-Andrew Goddard, who had a heart and thirst for life so large it was only ever going to falter. Over many years, he relayed to me a desire to write and direct his first feature film—titled, *The Package*—based on elements of the story I have now shared in this journal. In lieu of having Goddard realize his creative vision, I can only hope he would have approved of mine. It would be remiss not to also thank countless others who variously helped me through both the lived and remembered experience, including most notably the Hon. Lindsay Tanner and Senior Constable Steve Boskovski, as well as Gwenda Tavan, Jasmine Westerdorf, Joseph A. Camilleri, Julian Hewitt, Andrew Evans, Sarah Nolan, Janet Taylor, Stefanie Fishel, and Francis Beer.

Notes

ⁱ By 'centre' I do not mean relationally, but causally. For instance, I had, at one time, titled this essay 'Leaving IR'. Although this seemed to fall short of reflecting how I was never a part of—or else disciplined by—IR in the first place. Instead I merely *served* it. Whilst I actively continue to do things like convene IR seminars and conferences, and help edit an IR journal, I have done so not to enter the core of the discipline, but to—like the worm—in some way nourish the discipline. However, such forms of professional service are arguably only requisite for a discipline you have obtained or are seeking acceptance *into*, or are in some way *recognised by*.

ⁱⁱ This agency is now known as the Australian Cybercrime Online Reporting Network. On my reading, the changed name appears to be reflective of its evolution from a somewhat benign organisation to an active reporting and support platform. If you need help yourself, I strongly suggest that you consult their website: www.acorn.gov.au

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, several readers of earlier drafts of this article—Elizabeth Dauphinee, Laura Shephard, and Narendran Kumarakulasingam—variously felt this way towards an earlier, much longer draft. To some extent, I came to agree with them. And I certainly remain thankful for their interventions to remove large sections of text for the published version.

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