

What Would Be Worse

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WHILE I WAS belatedly watching, on DVD, Martin Scorsese's extraordinary movie *Gangs of New York*, what came into my mind (one of the pleasures and perils of being a translator) were the words of the seventeenth-century English writer, Sir Thomas Browne: "much more is buried in silence than recorded, and the largest volumes are but epitomes of what hath been... Some things never come to light; many have been delivered; but more hath been swallowed in obscurity and the caverns of oblivion."

For all its inventiveness, the movie—which, incomprehensibly to me, many deemed "boring" when it first opened—is based on historical fact. Towards the end, the complicated lives of the characters become caught up in events apparently known only to New Yorkers, until Scorsese turned them into a movie: in July 1863, right in the middle of the War of Secession, 300,000 men were forcibly drafted into the army, having been made to draw lots. President Lincoln's government, however, included an unfair get-out clause—not uncommon at the time in any country—one that favored the rich. Wealthier recruits could pay \$300 to avoid being drafted and hire a poorer man to go in their place. On July 13, two days after the drawing of lots, a large number of New Yorkers—they reckon about 70,000—mutinied. They marched from the poorest areas in the south of the city to the more affluent areas in the north, and for several days they took control of the city, sowing panic and devastation. They burned down official buildings and private houses, even an orphanage; they built barricades in the streets and posted snipers on rooftops. The poorly prepared authorities were unable to stop them, even with their firearms, and the policemen who tried hardest were lynched and tortured by the furious mob, which also set about enthusiastically hunting down black men (who by then were free), in part because they saw them as the "cause" of the Civil War, and in part because many ex-slaves had worked as scabs during recent strikes by workers. These rebels—from the north, not the south, mind—hanged ex-slaves from the nearest lamppost, or burned them alive, or mutilated their corpses and dragged them through the streets. The wealthy did not escape this popular anger either, and many not only had their houses attacked, plundered and burned, but were killed when they resisted. July 15 saw the return to New York of army troops who had just taken part in the Battle of Gettysburg (one of the bloodiest ever, with 7,000 dead and 19,000 missing on both sides), only to find themselves embroiled in another battle against the mutineers, on whom they fired at close range for twenty-four hours, finally bringing the revolt to a brutal end. It isn't known exactly how many people died during those disturbances, but Herbert Asbury, the author

of the book on which Scorsese based his movie, compared the loss of life with the numbers lost during the Battle of Shiloh, in April 1862, when there were 3,500 casualties, equally shared between Unionists and Confederates—about the same as the number of lives lost in the Twin Towers on 9/11.

The fact that, for 140 years, only a few local historians knew about such an episode, which took place in the most famous city in the world, is both terrifying and understandable. The government abusing its powers, 70,000 people behaving like madmen, the army opening fire on the populace, a whole week of uncontrolled barbarism...it all must have felt then like an apocalypse. Between 2,000 and 4,000 people dead, *in one city*. And yet now it's a minor episode in the history of New York, or should we call it a "microhistory," to use the fashionable term. It might be considered an event entirely devoid of heroism, one of which all parties should be ashamed: the government for their unfair draft laws and their brutal repression of the uprising; the soldiers because they fired on their fellow citizens; the latter because they became utter barbarians, even lynching their neighbors. After a nightmare scenario like that, it's not hard to imagine that the people involved would be filled with a mixture of horror and shame, and that their greatest wish would be to forget all about it, to behave as if it had never happened. The human capacity for burying or denying the unbearable is as immense as it is surprising. And yet it is understandable, too. You can't help wondering how many grave events, experienced at the time as ineradicable tragedies, lie forgotten in the past of any place, town or city. And you can't be sure what would be worse, to forget or know nothing about such ignominies (until, that is, an Asbury or a Scorsese decides to resurrect them), or to remember and hear the echo of the victims' ghostly laments resounding in our ears for ever and ever. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

A Preface to Noir

"I sat there and drank bourbon and closed my eyes,
but I wasn't thinking of a joint on 56th Street."

—*Out of the Past*

A man is hired to find someone, even
If it's just himself. A lady double-
Crosses him, and looking in the mirror
Of his conscience, he tells his story.
The crisis of mirrors passes, multiple
Reflections unfolding, straightening out
To reveal a complicated but not
Impossible scenario. A voice
Begins to tell us of New York, Mexico,
Or just some invisible suburb
Where he landed one day. The femme fatale
Is only aware of herself, seeming
To listen but merely cultivating
A beautiful inscrutability
That shields the truth, for which she cares nothing.
Her heart is a sensible desert.
Punctuation is a match striking
In a dark room. The cab-driver is a one-man
Chorus speaking over his shoulder;
Old telephones and watch chains pull us up
Short, although everything else is modern
If faintly old as we listen, waiting for
Radios the size of tombstones to come
To life. Doors open and close as they do
Nowhere else, pauses pushing away the last
Scene like the past, which it was.
There is an invisible line creating
The face of a young person who is ill,
And seeing one, in her twenties, lighting
Candles in church, you recollect those films,
Their stairways, the look of the characters,
If puzzled by despair, how they resist,
Valiant even as they strike a match.

—Lawrence Dugan

