

Translator, Transtraitor, Bare Life – Conflicting Ethics in War Situations in George Packer’s *Betrayed*

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*Artiklar om krig fyller medierna varje dag. Det krigas överallt, i Afghanistan, Irak och Libyen, och krigandet verkar bara sprida sig. De europeiska länderna och USA tar del i dem, och i Irak var USA den som startade ett krig som inte verkar ta slut. Vi hör och läser om dödsoffer nästan varje dag, särskilt om européer eller amerikaner har dödats. Ibland nämns också översättare och tolkar som krigsoffer. Etiska regler som vi annars följer förändras i krig vilket möjliggör dödande. I nedanstående artikel analyseras etiska konflikter i pjäsen *Betrayed* av George Packer. Händelserna i pjäsen är förlagda till Irak och huvudpersonerna är två iranska översättare/tolkar. I pjäsen förekommer konflikter som gäller etik oftast i situationer där militär och översättare/tolkar arbetar tillsammans och där de egentligen borde vara på samma sida. Konflikter uppstår trots att deras motivation att delta i kriget ofta är likadan (att hitta ett arbete med bra lön) och trots att också deras etiska koder är mycket lika. Soldaterna lär sig sin etik i militären, och översättare/tolkar, som inte har någon professionell identitet i krig, följer ofta samma etiska principer. Analysen av konflikterna visar att problem förekommer i situationer där parterna har oriktiga uppfattningar om jämlikhet eller vänskap och olika förväntningar på varandras identitetsroller. Konflikter förekommer också om någons etiska uppfattning har förändrats.*

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1 Introduction

Not a single day passes without the media reporting on conflicts in different parts of the world. Unfortunately, it seems, they are increasing in number, and countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have become very familiar to us. In these relatively distant war zones, Europeans and Americans are actively involved in warfare, either as aggressors or “trying to protect civilians” (and their own interests), which partly explains the wide media coverage of the wars in the West. The reports describe fighting, roadside bomb explosions, rocket attacks, snipers threatening to kill everything that moves, tanks rolling down deserted streets – all resulting in combatants and the innocent getting killed. In war reports, it is not uncommon, either, to have among the dead an interpreter/translator, a victim, a villain, a friend or a foe, as Baker (2010: 204) has described the roles that the media tends to give to them, depending on the source of information.

The military involved in the war have their ethical code which they have been taught as part of their military training. According to Inghilleri (2010: 179–180, 186), the combatants are expected to internalise a stable set of moral norms to guide them in understanding the purpose of the war, their role in it, and their behaviour towards their enemies and allies in combat. They are not encouraged to reflect on their actions as it is felt that the role of individual character and personal values would form a risk which might distance them from their role identity as soldiers. Often interpreters/translators are hired from amongst locals, and they have no autonomous professional identity. They are positioned within the social/institutional frame of the military/political field and, hence, tend to adopt the same or similar moral and ethical principles as those whom they serve. Embedded in combat units, they will be inclined to exercise ethical judgement with respect to the war within the framework of the military field itself, to “think in ways that only soldiers usually have to do” (Junger in Inghilleri 2010: 180).

Although there are considerable overlaps between the ethical practice of combatants and interpreters/translators, not infrequently their understanding of proper conduct clashes. In what follows, I will explore these clashes between different participants in the Iraqi war as portrayed in George Packer’s play *Betrayed*. The clashes occur between the military and translators/interpreters but also between them and their own Iraqi compatriots. I argue that the clashes result from three misconceptions; firstly, from a misconception on the part of the interpreters concerning equality and friendship, secondly, from a clash of role identities, and, last, from an ethical turn. The analysis of the clashes is mainly based on two recent studies; one on the media coverage of individual ethics imposed on translators/interpreters by the media and the other on the decision and the consequences of that decision to interpret in Iraq.

The article will be structured as follows: first I will give a brief introduction to the play and its background and then discuss the theoretical framework for the study of clashes of ethics in conflict situations. After this, I will explore the findings and, finally, draw conclusions on them.

2 The Betrayed – “The Iraqis Who Trusted America the Most”

The play *Betrayed* was written by the American journalist George Packer based on his article, “The Betrayed – ‘The Iraqis Who Trusted America the Most’” which appeared in *The New Yorker* in March 2007. The article was a detailed report on Iraqi translator- interpreters Packer had interviewed in location. The play, which appeared a year later, has so far been staged both in New York and London, in the two countries that spear-headed the invasion of Iraq. In the play, two translators/interpreters, Adnan and Laith, are telling their story of the war in Iraq to an American reporter who is, thus, getting it straight “from the horse’s mouth” (Packer 2008: 9), as Laith expresses it. The play is divided into 23 scenes: six are narratives by the two interpreters/translators, sixteen are flashbacks taking the place of the narrative, and one consists of four letters by Iraqi interpreters/translators sent after his return to America to the Foreign Service Officer Bill Prescott (a character in the play), who was based at the US embassy in Baghdad.

Betrayed derives from the conversations with the translators/interpreters Packer recorded for his article. Both in the article and the play, he makes his stance on the betrayal clear. In his view, the Americans betrayed the translators/interpreters whose help was, and still is, essential for the American “mission” in Iraq:

My idea was to write an article for *The New Yorker* about Iraqis who had worked with the Americans in their country – that tiny majority of mostly young men and women who had embraced the American project in Iraq so enthusiastically that they were willing to risk their lives for it. (vii) [. . .]. They had pinned their hopes, irrationally it turned out, on the Americans, until those Americans proved to be not just incompetent occupiers but also unreliable allies and in-different friends. (Packer 2008: ix)

Packer is, thus, one of the reporters who regards the translators/interpreters not only as friends but, above all, as victims (see reference to Baker 2010 above).

A play can never be a documentary, and it also differs from a magazine article. Still, the authentic conversations and the article together form the backbone of the play, as Packer has explained it in the Introduction to *Betrayed*:

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I sketched out the structure of a plot, basing it on a couple of incidents described in the magazine article, while allowing myself wide latitude to invent. The story needed to be intimate – a tale told by two men in a hotel room – and yet encompass the arc of the whole war. [. . .] At least half of the dialogue comes from life; it would have been foolish to try to improve on how the Iraqis spoke and what they said. (Packer 2008: xi)

As the title suggests, the theme of the play is betrayal, and the attitude of the American military and politicians is regarded, in most cases, as unethical. The translators/interpreters are mostly seen by them as potential transtraitors, according to Beebee’s (2010: 296, 302, 310) coinage, who claims that in situations of violent conflict, translators, whose professional ethics assume that they act as mediators, are shadowed by their image as traitors. The ethical standards to which translators are held create an inverted or “shadow” image, the transtraitor, a *homo sacer*. They have committed a severe transgression, and, as a consequence, they are seen as outlaws who are neither punished nor protected by the laws of any state. They have been reduced to being scapegoats, *bare lives* to be killed at will. This absolves the two parties in the war, the American military and their Iraqi compatriots, of any responsibility. Beebee’s claim could easily be seen as an expansion of the theme of *Betrayed*: the ethical codes of the participants are at issue at least as much as the actual betrayal.

3 Ethical Codes in Situations of Violent Conflict: Two Recent Studies

The analysis in this study of the clash in ethics between participants in the Iraqi war as portrayed in *Betrayed* relies mainly on two previous studies, published in a special issue of *The Translator*, titled *Translator and Violent Conflict* (2010). The first one is Baker’s (2010) study of recent media reports on contemporary conflicts, in particular the part of her account of how translators/interpreters are narrated by war correspondents, mainstream media, alternative media and the local population. Her findings have many overlaps with Packer’s representation of the perception and treatment of the interpreters/translators in Iraq. According to Baker (2010: 210–211), locally hired translators/interpreters are seen to belong to the enemy group, and they are generally not regarded by the military as reliable partners. They may be accused of passing information about the American military and state officials to the insurgents, and, as a consequence, American combatants have been injured or killed in the attacks. This also

happens in the play, and it has serious consequences for the translators/interpreters (cf. Packer 2008: 38, 83–85). When on duty, they are not provided a safe entry to or departure from the Green Zone (the American base); they need to queue to be admitted in and also go through various checks before they get to their workplace. This also becomes one of the sources of conflicting ethics also in *Betrayed* (Packer 2008: 37–38 & Scene 13). Moreover, their activities need to be closely monitored: they need to take a polygraph test at least once a year, and they are taken to raids in their own neighbourhood (Packer 2008: 35). In the eyes of the military, they are potential villains and foes.

Another study important for the analysis is by Inghilleri, who has explored the potential for discrepancies or overlaps between interpreters' everyday moral intuitions and the demands of their role within a particular institutional context. Inghilleri (2010: 175, 188) claims that translators/interpreters are likely to exercise ethical judgment in war situations similar to the military ethics of the US combatants. The difference between the two lies in the fact that civilian interpreters in war zones are not commanded by any institution but are contracted to interpret, motivated by their ties to their nation, a social or political cause or by economic necessity. Inghilleri (2010: 188) has identified in her analysis of translator/interpreter interviews and the study of ethical training in the U.S. military considerable overlaps between the combatants and translators/interpreters. Firstly, both groups tend to enlist in the war on the basis of earning a livelihood rather than patriotism. Secondly, in a violent conflict situation, there is little time or space to consider the meta-ethical issues associated with their actions. Thirdly, both operate as active agents in military action and also as embodied conduits for political decisions over which they have little or no influence. Finally, both can appeal to role morality in order to justify their actions which would be presumed to be morally dubious if undertaken outside their role.

In *Betrayed*, earning a livelihood is the main reason why the two protagonists, Laith and Adnan, have become translators/interpreters. Both are, however, also participating in the war because they feel that Saddam Hussein needs to be overthrown to save Iraq. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq it is difficult to find employment, and also there are severe infringements of human rights. Laith, who starts as an interpreter, is taken along to raids

and attacks, while Adnan begins his work as a mediator between Iraqi and US officials, preparing memos and translating/writing overviews of newspaper reports for the Americans. Both participants in the war, the combatants and the interpreters/translators, behave, on occasion, in a way which would not be acceptable in any other circumstances: the combatants ignoring the safety of their allies (translators/interpreters) and practically throwing them to the wolves, and the interpreters/translators ignoring the views of their own compatriots and even risking the safety of their families. Such behaviour, although often ascribed to individuals, derives from political and governmental issues which are entirely ignored in the criticism of the behaviour of the combatants and translators/interpreters.

Both studies, Baker’s account of how translators/interpreters are narrated in the war zone by various participants (the military personnel, local populations, the correspondents, and both the mainstream and alternative media) and Inghilleri’s study of the moral paradoxes of war form the backbone of the analysis that follows. It seeks to identify and analyse the reasons for the clashes of ethics in the war zone in Iraq as portrayed in *Betrayed*.

4 Origins of Clashes in Ethics in *Betrayed*

As can be expected, clashes in ethics underlie the theme of betrayal in *Betrayed*. They are identifiable in interactional situations between the military/politicians and the translators/interpreters. They also occur between the translators/interpreters and their own Iraqi compatriots as well as between the American military and political agents. I argue that the clashes result from three misconceptions; firstly, from the misconception on the part of the interpreters concerning equality and friendship; secondly, a clash of role identities, and thirdly, the ethical turn. In what follows, these will be discussed in the above order.

4.1 Misconception of Equality and Kinship

In *Betrayed*, Laith gets his first job as an interpreter in the Alpha Company, where he is invited by a U.S. combatant at the gate of the Green Zone. He was primarily looking for work at the embassy, but the soldier whom he helped in finding out why a crowd of Iraqis were queuing to see the Ambassador, suggested the Alpha Company, the Assassins. Many individual incidents suggest to Laith that the soldiers would accept him as an equal: an invitation to join the same group as the soldier (Ex 1), agreement on equal terms of how they would address each other (Ex 2), and finally, the saving of Laith's life when his identity is recognised (Ex 3). The following extracts from *Betrayed* illustrate the above situations:

- (1) The palace is for pussies and bureaucrats, dude. Come work with my unit, Alpha Company, the Assassins. It'd be awesome. We do patrols, raids, checkpoints. We definitely could use some Interpreters [. . .] (Packer 2008: 17)

The conversation continues in a friendly tone which implies equality, maybe even future friendship.

- (2) **Soldier** What's your name?
Laith Abdel-Aziz.
Soldier Whoa! Way too hard. Okay if I call you Al?
Laith Sure. What's your name?
Soldier Jason.
Laith Okay if I call you Jassim.
(They laugh and after a moment, shake hands. [. . .].) (Packer 2008: 17)

Adnan and Laith are standing in a line of Iraqis to get into the Green Zone. One of the warnings in both Arabic and English forbids the use of mobile phones. Laith is using the embassy phone, answering in Arabic to an anonymous call. The Soldier comes along and shouts:

- (3) **Soldier** Hey, dickhead! What does it say right there in two languages? (he grabs Laith's phone and begins to disassemble it)
Laith Sir that's an embassy phone! I'm an FSS! I have a yellow badge! [. . .]
(they recognize each other and the soldier closes the conversation by exclaiming)
Soldier I didn't recognize you. Don't do that again, okay? I was about to bust your head open.
(Packer 2008: 45–46)

The above encounters suggest to Laith that he is seen as an equal by the Soldiers. He also believes that he will receive the same protection as everyone else. He has, however,

misunderstood the relationship: equality and kinship between the combatants and Laith are fake, which leads to an ethical clash. When leaving the Green Zone, the translators/interpreters have to walk a long way in a bright spotlight, which makes them an easy target for their compatriots. Knowing the risk of being recognised, Laith turns to "Jassim":

- (4) **Laith** Sir, there is a problem maybe you can fix. This light [a spotlight on top of the Assassins’ Gate] – when I walk home my shadow shows from a very far distance. It’s dangerous. Can you turn it off until I go one hundred meters?
Soldier Don’t worry about it, dude, you are on our team. A sniper’s got you covered the whole way. Guy could shoot an apple off that blast wall. (Packer 2008: 23)

This turns out to be a lie as Laith finds out:

Laith: A few nights later I met one of the snipers, I said, “Thanks for covering me.” “What are you talking about?” “When I go out.” He started laughing. It was just a story to trick me. (. . .) I believed the Americans wouldn’t lie to us. That was my first shock – nobody’s looking out for you. (Packer 2008: 24)

Laith comments his feeling of disappointment to his friend Adnan:

Laith [. . .] What could I do? Quit? There were hundreds more behind me. I was naïve, I believed the Americans wouldn’t lie to us. We were friends, yeah, but they didn’t trust us. That was my first shock – nobody’s looking out for you. You’re on your own. (Packer 2008: 24)

The above dialogue is very much in line with Inghilleri’s findings. According to her (2010: 179–180), the bond that develops between interpreters and their units is equivalent in many cases to the affective bond which develops among soldiers of a platoon where safety and survival depend on mutual trust. However, since local interpreters are not legitimate members of the military, they are not afforded the same institutional protection as the combatants.

The above examples present only a few incidents where the translators/interpreters discover that any friendship or equality with those for whom they work is only an illusion. This applies to their treatment both on duty and after.

4.2 Clashes in Role Identities

In *Betrayed*, there are two different contexts where the perceptions of proper conduct in a war situation cause an ethical clash. These are related to the expectations that one of

the parties have concerning the behaviour of the other. A series of interactions between the translators/interpreters and the Regional Security Officer in the Green Zone as well as between the translators/interpreters and their compatriots cause conflicts which both end tragically.

An example of the differing views of proper conduct involves Laith and the Regional Security Officer (RSO), who sees an enemy in every Iraqi. His attitude is that Iraqi translators/interpreters cannot be trusted as one can never be sure what side there are taking in the conflict: that of the insurgents or that of the Americans. The following incidence (Ex 5) describes the clash between the ethical code of the RSO and Laith. Both expect from each other proper conduct as a member of the U.S. military, but their views of what would be proper differ. Laith has been asked by the Foreign Service Officer Prescott to keep the channels open to the insurgent groups (“a soldier must do what a soldier must do”) but has failed to inform the RSO about this. Laith is taken to an extra polygraph test, and the RSO has obviously decided in advance that Laith is a traitor. In this, the RSO acts as an embodied conduit of politicians and the former President Bush, who after 9/11 saw Arabs (read Muslims) as a threat and, for example, gave their blessing to questionable interrogation methods in Quantanamo, permission to kill some leaders of Al-Qaida at sight, and ascribed improper and brutal behaviour of combatants in Abu Ghraib to individuals rather than to their role as soldiers. The RSO insists on “yes”/”no” answers to questions which would need a longer explanation, while simultaneously accusing Laith of lying.

- (5) [. . .]
RSO So you’re using your official position to do favours for friends? Enemies, friends, doesn’t matter just so long as they’re Iraqi?
Laith My friend was going to tell some people about my job.
RSO Your friend was?
Laith Someone I know. He began to guess where I work [. . .]
RSO You know what? The simpler the answer, the happier the machine. It doesn’t like complicated answers. It doesn’t trust them. Complicated answers means you aren’t cooperating. It means you are fucking lying to me.
Laith Every day, every day I’m risking my life for this embassy.
RSO You are trying to fuck with the United States. (Packer 2008: 85–86)

Despite the protests of both Prescott and Adnan, Laith is handcuffed and, finally, fired and sent out of the Green Zone. To Laith this means more than just losing his job.

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Outside, his own community has rejected him for having taken the side of the invaders; in their eyes, he has become a traitor who is no longer one of them:

- (6) **Laith** I went home and didn’t see anybody. It was like somebody died and I was attending the funeral, but the body in the casket was mine. It was like my girlfriend threw me out of her life. Without my job I didn’t know what to do. I fell between heaven and hell. The Americans didn’t want me and the Iraqis didn’t want me. (Packer 2008: 90)

Another example (7) illustrates the clash of expectations with regard to proper ethical behaviour between a woman interpreter Intisar and her neighbourhood and Iraqi compatriots. Intisar, the only female translator in the play, has a double yoke in the eyes of her fellow Iraqis. A woman working with American males equals a prostitute, and the work itself makes her a traitor. In the following examples, Intisar is explaining her situation to Prescott:

- (7) **Intisar** [. . .] And there are people on my street who look at me with hate in their eyes. One of them said, “This is our area and our rules must be followed.” [. . .] (Packer 2008: 33)
[. . .]
Intisar [. . .] If you are a girl coming at the checkpoint, you have many things to fear. The general idea that other Iraqi people have about women who work in the Green Zone is, I’m sorry for the word, she’s bitch. She’s there to entertain Americans. [. . .] when I’m waiting in line – you know, those lines can take one hour or more, it’s very dangerous – I hear men say nasty things about me. And these men are waiting in the same line! [. . .] [she shows her ID badges to Prescott] To Americans I am nobody without them, but to Iraqis they are like a target on my neck. [. . .]. (Packer 2008: 42)

It is clear that the role expectations of the Americans and the Iraqis are different. For the Americans, Intisar should behave like an ally, whereas her Iraqi compatriots see her as failing in two respects: she does not follow the morality rules of either Iraqi women or Iraqi patriots. Without proper protection and help to conceal her employer, she comes to a brutal end, as Prescott explains to the others when she fails to come to work one day:

- (8) Intisar was picked up on her way home last night. They drove her around Mansour and shaved off her hair and then they shot her on the street. We believe she was still alive, because a taxi driver came and got her. It appears he was working with them because he drove all over Khark until she bled to death in his backseat. (Packer 2008: 53)

The stories never have a happy end when the expectations concerning the proper conduct of translators/interpreters clash with those of the U.S. military or their own Iraqi compatriots.

4.3 The Ethical Turn

A true friendship can change the ethical pattern as has also been suggested by Baker (2010: 205). In the play this happens gradually as The Foreign Service Officer Bill Prescott begins to take an interest in the country of the interpreters/translators and also expresses his wish to see some of it outside the Green Zone. Adnan and Laith take him to the restaurant owned by Laith's uncle without informing the RSO about it. He also supports the request by Adnan and Laith to upgrade their clearances to enter the Green Zone and change their badges to green (the Iraqis have yellow badges and the Americans, at the other extreme carry blue badges). Prescott is gradually beginning to understand the plight of the translators/interpreters. The partnership that has emerged between them has generated an ethical turn for both (see Baker 2010: 176).

The following example illustrates the clashes of ethics between Prescott and the regional Security Officer. When Prescott asks Laith to keep the channels open, he fails to report this to the RSO. Later explanations do not help, and Laith gets fired for treason despite Prescott's protests. Prescott and the RSO end up in a disagreement concerning proper behaviour:

- (9) **Prescott** You have no authority to do this. I'm telling you to release him.
RSO You do your job and I'll do mine.
Prescott You are making my job impossible.
RSO You should keep better track of your staff.
[. . .]
Prescott I'm going to have you investigated for this. [. . .] You have no idea what this office does. You have no fucking idea what these men do for us. You're driving out the best.
RSO My advice? You're way overstressed. Take some R & R. A week in Dubai. (Packer 2008: 87–88)

Prescott has stepped outside his role as a politician in charge of the Iraqi staff who works in his office. His ethics change when he befriends the two interpreters/translators. He has changed his role as an agent and an embodied conduit for the political/military institution he has agreed to serve (see Inghilleri 2010: 176). Later on in the play, similar clashes occur between Prescott and the Ambassador, who refuses to help the interpreters/translators get a visa to the U.S. (Packer 2008: Scene 13 & Scene 22).

5 Conclusions

War situations unavoidably affect the ethical code that the military has internalised in their training. Their training does not encourage them to reflect on the decisions they take as that is seen as a possible threat to their identity as soldiers. The translators/interpreters lack a professional identity due to conflict situations and they may enlist in the service of a foreign military because they are seen as representatives of a culture they regard as representing an ideal. For these reasons they tend to adopt the ethical code of the military. Clashes in ethics are, however, unavoidable. The translators/interpreters become transtraitors, or bare lives, who have to face threats from both sides: the invaders see them as possible villains and enemies, for their own compatriots they are traitors. In *Betrayed*, ethical clashes in conflict situations result from the misconception on the part of the translators/interpreters concerning equality and kinship as well as mistaken expectations concerning the role identities of translators/interpreters, the military and their own compatriots. An ethical turn can also cause a clash. Such clashes point an accusing finger at the failure of ethics training in the military as well as invasions disguised as “just wars”. Packer’s play forces viewers to revise their stance towards the position of translators/interpreters not as potential threats to security but as people who are trying to make a living, serving a country they have looked up to as an ideal.

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