

Nearly forty years ago now, I published a prose poem titled “Concert in the Park of Culture” in [The Xavier Review](#), a small literary journal published by Xavier University. Later, the poem became the title piece of my collection of prose poems from the University of Notre Dame Press: [In the Park of Culture](#). Lately, it’s been impossible for me not to rethink and critique the title piece, which takes its title from what the Soviets called The Park of Culture in the city of Vinnitsa, in Ukraine. The Soviets built the park over a mass grave where they had murdered nearly ten thousand Ukrainians. Often the victims were taken from their homes and their loved ones were told some story other than the truth, that they were being summarily executed. I imagined the people of Vinnitsa visiting the park for a concert, not knowing some of their loved ones were buried there. I saw the park then as a symbol for cultures built on violence, really for every culture, since every culture, somewhere in its murky history, is built on violence. Now, watching the daily horrors coming out of Ukraine, I question having treated such cruelty as if it were symbolic. What’s happening in Ukraine now, in 2022, is not symbolic: it’s a very real and immediate outrage against our shared humanity, just as what happened in Vinnitsa in 1939 was not symbolic. It was a great, unforgivable crime.

“Concert in the Park of Culture” poses a question about the portrayal of violence in poetry and fiction. What are the ethics of writing about the suffering of others? How should such subject matter be treated: graphically, to make the reader feel the revulsion such violence should evoke? Or with distance, more analytically—or symbolically. Or should writer simply stay away from such subject matter, especially if the suffering is far removed from their own immediate lives?

These are literary questions, unimportant in relation to the immediate political questions raised by the current war against Ukraine, but important to writers who have only their voices to raise against violence and injustice, and to readers who want to hear those voices.

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