

Lilliput

Author(s): Zizhu Wang

Email: [zw282@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:zw282@sussex.ac.uk)Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (September 2025), pp. 1–8.URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/229>DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v9i1.229>

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This is a flash fiction piece written in dialogue style, exploring themes of war, memory, trauma, and human solidarity. It is followed by a critical commentary on the origin of war in the History of International Thought. From the massacre of WWI and WWII, to the era of nuclear phobia, we increasingly find that we are living in a world of crisis, suspense, and uncertainty. In the face of the current political landscape—persistent, inflamed conflicts—it seeks to rekindle a sense of solidarity within our hearts.

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In association with

# Lilliput

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Zizhu Wang

[Background of the story:

There is a woman  
from human society.

There is a man  
from Lilliput.<sup>1</sup>

They meet each other  
on her hand  
for a while,  
not so long,  
not so short.]

"He beholdeth everything that is high: He is king over all the sons of pride..." Lately, he had been absorbed in reading about the story of Leviathan. Not because he had suddenly become enchanted by Christianity, but because the ancient tales of colossal creatures resonated with him. After all, that was how the natural world appeared to him: vast, unfathomable, and intimidating. Now, gazing at London's steel forests, he felt much the same—a strange sense of *déjà vu*.

"Don't you find human imagination fabulous?" he asked her, gently jumping off the book in her hand.

"Is that such a big deal? Isn't it just enlarging something that already exists in nature? What's so remarkable about that?"

"No, it's not like that at all...It's about the way humans perceive the world.

"Think of a whale. No matter how large, a whale still fits within a human's field of vision. You see it and therefore you think, 'There's a whale.' But what if the whale were so immense, so boundless, that it filled your entire view? Then you might think, 'Hey, there's a vast grey wall in the sea, an unbreachable barrier!'

"Now imagine you're an ant, living at the base of a wall. For you, that monumental structure would just seem like a natural part of the world, something that's always been there, not the creation of any other being..."

"...Huh?" Her right eyebrow arched upward as her lips quivered, releasing a slow, drawn-out syllable. "...except for god?" – she mumbled.

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<sup>1</sup> Lilliput is a fictional island in Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). It is inhabited by the Lilliputians, a race of tiny people, approximately six inches tall.

"Likewise," the man continued, "there are countless things humans can't yet explain—like the cosmos, or quantum phenomena... Have you ever wondered: If you were magnified a hundred thousand times, perhaps the universe would just become like the sky, and galaxies would drift around you like clouds..."

"So, for us Lilliputians, and for you 'giants,' the way we understand the world differs completely, depending on the scale at which we observe it..."

"Scales...!" Her eyes glimmered, as if a tiny spark had unlocked answers to questions she had long pondered but never resolved.

"But..." she began hesitantly, "if we 'giants' are supposed to see the same world, why are there still so many conflicts among us?"

Her thoughts wandered to the homeland she had been forced to flee, the home she might never return to. She remembered her father, who had taken his own life in despair, and her childhood friend—a man perpetually silent, his brows weighed down with sorrow.

She began to think slowly of many other people—women, the elderly, children... Their images gradually blurred in her mind, melting into one another. It was as though each of them had lost their faces, merging into a larger, unfamiliar organism—something that felt utterly alien to her.

He lowered his head too.

After a moment, he murmured, "Have you...heard the story of the Tower of Babel?"

"Of course I have," she softly replied with emphatic certainty.

"So even among you humans, the same species, minds can be poisoned by malignant thoughts, twisting the way they interpret what they see..."

Their eyes lowered, the silence between them growing dense. It was a silence born of their shared feeling—one neither could yet escape nor resolve. Yet as their hands, tentative at first, drew closer and clasped together, that silence was gently fractured.

Forget it all, she told herself, striving to soothe the ache within. Tonight, may we dream well.

## **Wars, Humanity, and Solidarity: A Critical Commentary on *Lilliput***

For political Realists, war is an eternal constant in human society, while peace remains but a rare interlude among wars.<sup>2</sup> From the massacres of World War I and World War II to the

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<sup>2</sup> See Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace (1st Edition)*, 1st edn (A. A. Knopf, 1948).

era of nuclear paranoia, humans increasingly find themselves living in a world of inflamed conflicts. Entering the second decade of the 21st century, two enduring conflicts on the Eurasian continent—between Russia and Ukraine war, Israel and Palestine—have once again awakened humanity's longing for common values. *Lilliput* serves as a response to such sentiments. In this critical commentary, I reflect on the origins of war presented in this fiction, explore why war persists in human society, and contemplate the course humanity should take in its face.

The fiction is imbued with the protagonist's trauma of war, yet it ultimately aspires to rediscover the future of society through human solidarity. The brief dialogues touch upon various themes concerning the origins of war: race, religion, the clash of civilizations... More significantly, these themes are expressed through a series of political-philosophical metaphors. The following analysis focuses on the key metaphors and their relationship to war and solidarity, though I hope readers may uncover more through their own interpretations.

Like Plato's works, the dialogue form is one of the classic genres for expounding political philosophy. The protagonists of this dialogue are a female human and a male "Lilliputian"—a reference to Jonathan Swift's satirical novel *Gulliver's Travels*.<sup>3</sup> Lilliput is a fictional island, inhabited by the Lilliputians, a race of tiny people approximately six inches tall. In contrast to Lilliput, Gulliver also visits Brobdingnag, the land of giants. The juxtaposition of the small and big metaphorically represents a fundamental dichotomy: sophistication versus simplicity. Yet, extreme sophistication leads to self-interest and the erosion of human nature, whereas simplicity frequently aspires toward a utopian ideal—a satire of early 18th-century British political institutions.

*Lilliput* begins with the Lilliputian reading the Bible. He comes across Job 41:34, which describes a sea serpent demon, Leviathan. In 1651, the English political writer Thomas Hobbes titled his seminal work *Leviathan*, where he proposed his famous theory of sovereignty and the state. Hobbes argued that the state of nature that human beings originally lived in is one of war. People live in mutual suspicion, thus the only reasonable action is to conquer the other: "that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him."<sup>4</sup> In this state of war of all against all, the only way for humanity to ensure survival is to establish a social contract and form a state, thereby surrendering individual security rights to the sovereign power, that is, a colossus Leviathan.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Collector's Library, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan Ed. 5th*, ed. by Henry Morley (George Routledge and Sons, Limited, 1921), pp. 63–64.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan Ed. 5th*, p. 84.

Hobbes' doctrine established him as one of the most significant founders of Realism in International Relations (IR) Theory. For him, war culminates in hellish fear. Yet, European intellectual history is replete with classical texts that rationalise or glorify war. Thomas Aquinas formulated the renowned Just War Theory in *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>6</sup> which was later expanded upon by other famous theorists such as the Dutch international lawyer Hugo Grotius.<sup>7</sup> The Italian political writer Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527) once mentioned that bellicosity was a sign of European vigour and refusal to the “sloth.”<sup>8</sup> Even William Shakespeare penned the famous lines in the play *Henry IV*:

A peace is of the nature of a conquest;  
for then both parties nobly are subdued,  
and neither party loser.<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary international politics, we continue to witness the practice of a Hobbesian preemptive strike. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush introduced his “Bush Doctrine” of preemptive war, targeting “rogue states and terrorists” with “weapons of mass destruction against us, make today’s security environment more complex and dangerous.”<sup>10</sup> This is not merely a military strategy, but also a Freudian neurotic complex: one that assumes the inborn scarcity of security, hence necessitating its acquisition at any cost. Nevertheless, who can guarantee that a global hegemony will faithfully fulfil its duty to combat terrorism rather than allow the flames of war to ravage civilian homes? It is indeed as the Latin satirical adage warns: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* (Who watches the watchmen)?

When the protagonists discuss why human society is riddled with conflicts, they suggest that it stems from differing scales of observing the world. The material world is objective, yet human perception is subjective. As Hobbes argued, human judges, not only men, but all other things, based on their own measures.<sup>11</sup> Hobbes viewed war as arising from mutual misunderstandings among humans—much like the Tower of Babel metaphor in the Bible, where God punished humankind by confounding their languages,

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Part II-II (Secunda Secundae)* Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2006 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18755>> [accessed 31 March 2025].

<sup>7</sup> See Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Liberty Fund, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Stella Ghervas, *Conquering Peace: From the Enlightenment to the European Union* (Harvard University Press, 2021), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy 2002* (2002), p. 13 <<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>> [accessed 31 March 2025].

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan Ed. 5th*, p. 16.

rendering them incapable of understanding one another and leading to division and strife.

In a traumatic flashback, the heroine recalls how different men and women in war “melt into one another,” evoking two images. One is the horrific destructiveness of nuclear weapons, which annihilate the human body in an unimaginably inhumane manner. The other is that human value is erased in war—an ultimate state of exception. Every individual with a vibrant personality is reduced to mere “bare life.”<sup>12</sup> They are atomised into faceless entities, assembled into a colossal “organism”—much like the *Leviathan*’s depiction on its famous cover image: “a crowned man whose body is made of numerous human bodies.”<sup>13</sup>

In 2021, a female historian Stella Ghervas published a study on the intellectual history of war in Europe, entitled *Conquering Peace*. She analyses the dialectic between war and the establishment of lasting peace: “In the engineering of peace, the first step to building any new and durable status quo has always been to raze the hostile empire threatening the preexisting political edifice”; yet “defensive wars were evidently necessary preliminary steps.”<sup>14</sup> Given the relentless conflicts unfolding on our continent in recent years—not only wars in Ukraine and Palestine but also continued turbulence in Crimea, Azerbaijan, Syria and Kurdistan, Iraq and Iran<sup>15</sup>—Ghervas poses a question in the Conclusion: *Quo vadis, Europe* (Europe, where to go)?<sup>16</sup>

Jürgen Habermas attempts to answer this question in the latest Guest Article *Für Europa* (For Europe) published on March 21, 2025. He suggests that in this world of geopolitical turbulence and fragmentation, Europe must act politically as a unified entity to uphold its normative convictions and common interests.<sup>17</sup> Yet, does this not return us to a Hobbesian logic? Hobbes claimed that an *internal* social contract could achieve security for all by conceding individual rights; and by doing so, he left the possibility of war *external* to the state, namely, the international society that contains “permanent tragedies to remain fragmented while longing for reconciliation and integration.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Bosse, *Title-Page to Hobbes’s ‘Leviathan’*, 1651 <[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1858-0417-283](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1858-0417-283)> [accessed 31 March 2025].

<sup>14</sup> Ghervas, *Conquering Peace*, p. 350.

<sup>15</sup> Perry Anderson, review of *Peace without Empire*, by Stella Ghervas, *London Review of Books*, December 2021 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n23/perry-anderson/peace-without-empire>> [accessed 1 April 2025].

<sup>16</sup> Ghervas, *Conquering Peace*, p. 348.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, ‘Für Europa’, *Süddeutsche.de*, 2025 <<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/kultur/juergen-habermas-gastbeitrag-europa-e943825/>> [accessed 31 March 2025].

<sup>18</sup> R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 16–7.

To what extent is the collective action of the Western world supposed to make the outside world feel secure?

At the end of the fiction, the stream of consciousness on conflict and human nature is abruptly interrupted, shifting instead to the most direct form of human contact—the touch of hands. The warmth transmitted through physical connection draws us away from abstract political-philosophical musings and back to the tangible reality of human existence. The real belief in the end of the war lies in the interconnectedness of human beings. Political greatness has repeatedly been found in the social bonds of togetherness that only lasting peace can afford; it would be a sign of weakness for anyone to place their faith in an offensive army, as the chief guarantor of national security.<sup>19</sup> In the face of the current political landscape—crisis, suspense, and uncertainty—we ought to forsake the so-called ‘grand narratives’ and turn our attention to those who exist and live around us. That is the only way to rekindle a sense of solidarity within our hearts. It should be aware that “we”—we, as a species—can do better than to resign ourselves to reality as political Realism defines it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ghervas, *Conquering Peace*, p. 374.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew G. Specter, Wang Zizhu trans., “Introduction to Chinese Readers,” in *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought between Germany and the United States* (Orient Publishing Center, 2025).

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## Acknowledgement

For training in classical literacy, I specifically appreciate Dr. Yudan Chen and Prof. Tao Hong who guided me to the gate of intellectual history. Working on the undergraduate module "Classical Thinkers and Current Events" with Faiz Sheikh in 2024 inspired my thinking on Just War as well. I am also grateful to three brilliant writers whose books



I have translated into Chinese: Stella Ghervas, Matthew Specter, and Perry Anderson. Finally, I always thank my friend and colleague Phil Xing, who is always willing to be my first audience.

### **Academic bio**

Zizhu (Judy) Wang is a PhD candidate in International Relations at University of Sussex. Her research focuses on History of International Thought and translingual practice. Currently, she is exploring the conceptual history of the term 'international' as it evolved from Western Europe to East Asia, and the Jesuit translation of international law into the Sinosphere. She is also a freelance translator [Eng-Sino] and has translated works including *Conquering Peace* (2025), *The Atlantic Realists* (2025), *Even Closer Union?* (forthcoming), etc. She writes in English, simplified Chinese, and Japanese.