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Ruminations on War, Culture War

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I

To descry that this generation of artists has been in the midst of a war, a cultural war, sounds so obvious. After all, what generation in deeply reactionary times could not claim the same? However, who is struggling with whom and over what can often prove far more open than the popular polarities which pitch government, business, bureaucracy on one side and artists, performers, intellectuals on the other.

But what is it to say we on the one side are at war with the other? Is the war, culturally as much as militarily, limited or unconditional, intermittent or continuous, external or internal, declared or undeclared, defensive or aggressive? Is it a warfare aiming to annihilate or to annex, to conquer or to cleanse, to dominate or to displace, to eliminate or to expel, to impregnate or to enslave. In brief, warfare is waged in diverse ways with diverse goals as the brutally concise words of Thoudydides reveal when brooding upon *stasis*—the strife from 427 B.C. convulsing city after city in the great war between Athens and Sparta—as

the cause of many calamities—as happens and will always happen while human nature is what it is, though there may be different degrees of savagery, and, as different circumstances arise, the general rules will admit of some variety [Bk 3.82; 1972: 242].

The same realisation that certain generalities apply to our understanding of war brought Carl von Clauswitz, when reflecting upon the Napoleonic Wars, the XVIIIth century's second world war, to a conclusion arguably closer to cultural war as the artist all too often experiences it. He concluded that war 'is a mere continuation of policy by other means...not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument' (Bk 1, Ch. 1; 1832: 119). In other words, it is 'nothing but a continuation of political intercourse' (Bk 5, Ch. 6; 1832: 402). Nor, according to von Clauswitz, should war, whatever its machinery and strategy, be regarded as belonging to the realm of the arts and the sciences. Instead, it belongs to 'the province of social life,' so

[i]t would be better, instead of comparing it with any Art, to liken it to business competition, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and it is still more like State policy, which again, on its part, may be looked upon as a kind of business competition on a great scale (Bk 2, Ch. 3; 1832: 202-203).

Von Clauswitz's alignment, not of war and politics, but of war as politics provides much of the intellectual armoury deployed in culture wars since. One need only cite the continuing case, as much in the XIXth as in the XXth century according to Helen Horowitz (2002), of a re-conceptualisation of sexuality which not only spilt into bitter disputes about, say, relationships, contraception, and abortion, but also permeated those over human freedoms with personal and artistic expression at the forefront.

Notwithstanding his influence, what, then, does culture war imply that von Clauswitz's conception of the political nature of war omits? It omits at least two characteristics, two transformations, to do with language and consciousness. The manipulation of language, especially in its evaluative aspects, is the more obvious if not traditional of the two and constitutes the first target of Thoudydides himself. Witness, for example, the beginning of the passage immediately following our previous citation:

To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as

that used to be associated with the original act of aggression. In this regard, the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect. To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence... (Bk 3.82; 1972: 242).

In a war of all against all, where 'most people are prepared to call villainy cleverness than simple-mindedness honesty,' Thucydides diagnoses the cause as '[l]ove of power, operating through greed and personal ambition' to which he adds 'violent fanaticism' once strife and 'the hatreds of the hour' surface (3.82.; 1982: 243 & 244).

Closer to our own times and forms of government, the second characteristic of culture war, consciousness, has been variously depicted. For example, Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2001), when highlighting the patronage of Giuseppe Bottai of Italian corporations, arts, and youth during the 'twenties, observes

clients who wished to improve their positions were expected to make statements that confirmed their outward acceptance of the worldview of those who exercised power, regardless of their private beliefs (2001: 23).

Although artists and intellectuals contributing to the press of the day 'constituted linguistic performances designed to demonstrate fidelity and a willingness to stay in a game that all...knew was fixed,' Benito Mussolini himself, in his October 1928 speech to press interests, encouraged 'a diversity of artists and temperaments' so that the community at large were not 'put in the position of having to choose between looking like antifascists for booing or looking stupid and vile for applauding literary failures, poetic babblings, and housepainters' art' (in Ben-Ghiat, 2001: 23). The lure of 'creative autonomy' found many artists, performers, and intellectuals gravitating towards particular discursive strategies in their discussions of cultural affairs which

came to favor an elliptical linguistic style that discouraged open political references and supported the comforting collective myth that the world of ideas ran on a strictly parallel course with that of the dictatorship (2001: 23).

For those running foul of the regime, reinterpreting works in conformity with the political climate produced the distinctive XXth century genre of self-criticism—the more skilful, the more *double entendre*.

The doubleness if not duplicity of language seems to have echoed that of consciousness. For instance, contributions to a somewhat aberrant debate about the relationship between Italian literature and politics in September/October 1932 found the literary censor, Gherardo Casini, denying any intention that the call for a 'literature of the present' was a covert demand for 'a State art enslaved to political ends' (in Ben-Ghiat 2003: 62-63). Six months later, Mussolini himself also disavowed the same intention, urging writers to intensify their efforts to 'immerse themselves in life' and to become 'interpreters of their own time' (in Ben-Ghiat, 2001: 63). However, the life and the times specified here was not an open, unconditional invitation to artistic exploration; poet, painter, politician, all knew that the life and times meant referred to the very fascist revolution Mussolini had inaugurated.

For those enduring even more tyrannical regimes—typically under the single tyrant who, as Aristoteles in the *Politikon* (Bk 5.11, 1314a15-16; 1905: 227-228) first understood, enforces mistrust, helplessness, and humiliation amongst the ruled—the use of silent, random terror against individuals is paramount. In such extremities, artists are never immune: the secret police files on Isaac Babel and Mikhail Bulgakov, Osip Mandelstam and Andrey Platonov are testimony enough (see Shentalinsky (1995)). The artist, like any other, in the face of unknown informers produces what Alan Bullock (1993: 503) calls the 'atomization of society':

For anyone living in such a situation will convince themselves that the best way to avoid trouble is to know nothing about what happens next door, to hear none of the cries in the middle of the night, to avert one's eyes at the railway station, not to ask why a colleague suddenly fails to appear at work (1993: 502-503).

In the secret world of imprisonment and torture freed from the prying of an independent press, in the party political world of acquiescence to the ideology of the day where the shifting 'rules of the game' could be turned against adherents themselves now bereft of any 'independent moral principles' (Bullock, 1993: 504), there was

created, as [Leszek] Kolakowski says, "a dual consciousness...[which] made people

In other words, the double consciousness wrought by war, culturally as much as militarily, is not simply a case of adjusting to a public face with a private conscience. The public face of compliance and non-involvement may well hide a private face, a private face of diminished responsibility and care.

II

Thus far, this essay has briefly sounded out a number of general themes: that culture war is not conducted uniformly; that it is intensely political; that its conflicts can be fought in governmental, bureaucratic, and economic terms; and that it not only distorts the ordinary use of language, but also promotes a dual consciousness. In the papers that follow, readers are invited to pursue some of the specific ways in which practitioners in the main have experienced, and reflected upon, their struggles in the confrontations with industry and government whilst, in some cases, exploring their respective media by way of the very technologies associated with industry.

The latter is clearly seen in the case of two contributors from the performing arts, dancers and choreographers Susan Jordan and Dianne Reid. Reid recounts the processes by which the videotape is not simply a mechanism for recording dance, but shapes its very structure to the point where she explicitly sees herself as a dance videographer. Jordan, by contrast, in a near parody of motorcar racing, deploys vehicles, drivers, and dancers in a short balletic display for an open-air mass audience. Yet, coursing through her reflections on and evaluation of the event are the tensions generated by securing support monetarily and materially from industry and government. For all the attempt by government to assimilate itself to industry, Jordan, whilst questioning whether she ended by compromising her artform, succinctly distinguishes the tasks of government funding agencies as a set of values, not costs.

The complex role of the literary arts and its subtle relationship to technological trends forms the subject of papers by John Gunders and Scott Rawlings. Gunders critically examines the nature of the mathematical theory of communication first formulated in the 'forties which has erroneously been identified with literary, or, more precisely, narrative, communication. Much of his argument rests not only upon demonstrating the subversion of temporality in the work of the contemporary American writer, Richard Powers, but also upon pinpointing the interpretive pitfalls of a slavish adherence to one of modern technology's most influential models. Rawlings, however, takes a different tack in a scathing denunciation of current environmental policies towards sustainability. Here, in order to disclose the shortcomings of business and government alike, he returns readers to the Nietzschean project, namely, the four errors of knowledge enunciated in *The Gay Science*, and how it informs the work of the contemporary Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami. Both contributors attest to the potential for the *avant-garde* in the arts to be far more than an experiment in matters of style or the medium of expression. It enlarges our experiential and conceptual repertoire beyond the cultural prescriptions of business and government.

The sheer gulf in the language of the maker and that of the manager, with all the attendant absurdities in the latter, are pointedly satirised in the script of the *agitprop* performance by Yoni Prior and John Cumming. Although readers are deprived of the simple props—desk, ladder, and black-rimmed glasses—the rapid shifts between deadpan and hysterical delivery are mockingly evident. The contortions of language are similarly exposed in Paul Monaghan's account of the governmental demands involved in securing subsidies for small theatres which begins with an initially unattributed quotation from 'our contemporary' Benito Mussolini. However, rather than becoming entrapped by a diatribe against the literal vice of 'performance management structure,' Monaghan begins to speculate upon the role of theatre and civic order and disorder in ancient Athens, not to uphold it as an ideal state of affairs, but as a reminder that alternatives do exist to the measurable, the observable, the controllable.

The contribution by Ivar Kvistad is a telling reminder that culture war is not simply the product of highly urbanised, industrialised, and centralised communities of the one historical epoch. Furthermore, his critique demonstrates the manner in which a cultural war, unlike a military one, can be fought both retrospectively and prospectively. Hence, what superficially appears to be little more than quaint folklore about the location of the Homeric Skylla is rapidly uncovered as a contest amongst modern nation-states for exclusive control over the construction of the 'classical tradition,' the acclaimed source of occidental culture. In Monaghan's second contribution about his 1999 documentary theatre, *Art War '44*, based on an Antipodean culture war and the concurrent re-assembly of conservative interests, we are drawn into events within living memory. Readers are immediately exposed to the raw material of the work itself, principally in the form of court transcripts and newspaper reports of October/November 1944, which reveals the prevarications and

prejudices endemic to the struggle for suzerainty over what the conservative leader, R.G. Menzies (1942: 1), termed 'the forgotten class.' It comprises 'the nameless and unadvertised,' the 'frugal people' who make financial sacrifices to 'buy a picture [they] love,' 'the strivers, the planners, the ambitious ones' whose 'new world' will see 'more law, not less; more control, not less' (1942: 2, 3 & 4).

Monaghan's same paper explicitly addresses the 'dramaturgy' of his documentary theatre. In it, he is mindful of the contested nature of dramaturgy, but none the less provides us with a forerunner of his most recent investigation elsewhere that the dramaturg 'combines aesthetics and ideology, form and content, ideas and execution, the intellectual and the practical...' (2005: 3). Quite pointedly, therefore, the role of the dramaturg lies in the intersection of culture and politics. Not only is that intersection captured by Alison Richards' closing 'rap' on culture wars, it is also viewed from a comparative rural perspective by Robyn Eversole. The latter perspective, as it shifts from Latin America to North America, from Indo-China to Australasia, adopts a noticeably anthropological approach to the plight of regional arts and crafts.

Finally, Goodrich attempts to probe the relationship between arts practice and government management of its funding over the decade leading to the poisonous present. In it, he traces four factors centred upon the so-called pragmatic definitions of culture and the arts; the implications of the neo-liberal or 'economic rationalist' ideology extolled by government and industry alike; the emergence and repercussions of systematic sponsorship of the arts by business; and, the linguistic if not conceptual division between management and artists. Amongst the corpses littering the present cultural war are heaps of artists starved of patronage and audiences as well as, no doubt, some of the successful few who once entertained the soporific crowds gorged upon a staple of fear and consumption.

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