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On Art and War and Terror

Alex Danchev. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2008; 242 pages; £60.00 hbk; ISBN 0-7486-3915-2.

On Art and War and Terror is comprised of 10 essays. Danchev arranges them as “miniature models” of recounting World War II as the template of the War on Terror with art positioned as the exonerating “moral witness.” This descriptive design, also proposed as an “experiment in thinking and of being other-wise” (p.4), is carried out by synthesising artistic works and narratives about war and terror into a genre notable for its minimal use of words: poetry. The arts, like war and terror, cling to and let go of words. Terror gave birth to language and language is a dread defying act, Kristeva (1982) declares. For Danchev ‘wars are word wars’ deployed as ‘code-words’ like ‘Overlord’ or ‘Infinite Justice.’ A poem/art, however, neither imposes nor condemns. What poetry does is to make conceivable a human order able to ‘equilibrate’ matters because a ‘moral witness’ can testify that the ‘us’ and ‘them’ attitude only inspires retribution and thwarts reconciliation; it makes the vanquished seek revenge, the victors indifferent to brutalities they had inflicted.

The appeasement offered by poetry is to absolve every one of the lurking cruelties they are capable of, instigated as it were by the pleasure of watching the enemy suffer. For Danchev, this is the moral integrity of one’s ‘artistic conscience,’ which is also his purpose: ‘not to judge or to reconcile but to steer a ‘traffic’ scheme that would allow art and war and terror to pass through each other and unchecked by the ‘us’ against ‘them’ mind-set. Danchev smoothly and steadily inter-mingles poetry, film, painting, novel, diaries, photographs, fact and fiction, dread and courage, allies and enemies and arrives at a qualitative junction: that all factions involved are equally capable of being good and evil, that the peacemakers of yesterday are now the troublemakers, that the suppliers of peace are now the dealers of terror.

The opening artwork of this volume is the cover image ‘Gold Beach’ by Simon Norfolk. Like Danchev, one would have to ‘tame one’s imagination by research’ in order to make tangible the idea of art as a moral witness. To the unfamiliar, a quick check is required in order to know what Gold Beach is all about and in order to attach its umbilical link to the closing essay. The virtue of the image is its bleak and abandoned atmosphere, which is accented by a matte finish. It sternly washes out the Gold Beach’s significance as the site of the Allies’ triumph over Hitler. Coded D-Day, Britain and the United States liberated France and finally defeated Nazi Germany. By 2003, the historic liberation of 1944 had mutated: the Global War on Terror was being perpetrated by the liberated and liberators right in their own Auschwitz called Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay and with the same proscription and secrecy.

Danchev flouts the policy of proscription by flaunting to the readers the harrowing sorrow of the enemies of the state who were tortured, and whose culpability was hardly evident in or out of their mutilated bodies. Hitler was a confirmed menace but not the detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. They were initially tagged as ‘terror suspect,’ making them qualified for a doglike treatment so that intelligence information could be extracted. Nothing was forthcoming because “they were mostly just dirt farmers in Afghanistan” (p.179). Despite photographic evidence taken, no less, by the torturers, there remains the unanswered question of “who should be held accountable” (p.214) for allowing prohibited measures against enemies so classified by the exigency of homeland security coded as ‘us’ against ‘him’ (with Saddam dead, only bin Laden is left) on a global ‘them’ scale.

Those in step with the march of time can imaginatively plot their own route by halting the mind’s ‘excoriating’ tendency lest they start pitying the sufferers then denouncing the perpetrators, or equating American soldiers’ cultural vacuity as viciousness or re-opening the why-file of war. After all, poets and novelists of the past had already mused on its folly. Recounting the dubious status of the global war on terror, the last three essays drift deliberately along that narrative tone, as if testing one’s ability to act as a moral witness. This is because Danchev aims at our ‘artistic conscience,’ which is proposed in the opening chapter. The German artist Gerhard Richter made it conceivable to admire a group tagged by the state as ‘terrorists.’ He abstained from condemning the state for treating them

harshly for “they are all too human—like us” (p.16). This is the integrity of an artistic conscience—it puts across the will to ‘equilibrate’ our own code of ethics. This can be measured by dedicating ‘senseless acts of kindness to the enemies at the threshold of death, or realising that a war diary was a ‘secret immunity’ against the “sadness” of war. The implication of one with an artistic conscience seems terribly profound—but not impossible as each essay testifies. That artistic conscience was actually present in the tapestry version of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ inside the UN; it was covered prior to Powell’s campaign speech to attack Iraq (Dodds, 2007).

Despite an intensive and expansive cross-referencing with philosophy, history, political sociology, classical and contemporary creative works, Danchev is unequivocal in his ‘miniature modelling.’ This allows the readers maximum and unfettered ‘description and re-description’ of what they are reading. Such readers might join, as Danchev hopes, a ‘moral community’ willing to stand and defend ‘sober hope’ as provided by art. For now, this is a possibility that remains unpopular, which is duly noted by Danchev. Reason enough for Ward (2008) to conceptualise “poetics” or the ethical modelling of law with literature in dealing with terror and the terrorists. This is because stories are basically about humanity’s cruelty against each other.

This volume is for every one; those with artistic conscience, those who can endeavour to extend an alliance with the enemy. This is also for those who ‘poetically’ strive to insulate their imagination against the wounding outcomes of politics and ideologies.

Bibliography

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