

10 November 2015

Armistice Day Lecture by Philipp Blom in Ypres

I would like to dedicate this lecture to the late Jon Stallworthy - poet, teacher in Oxford, biographer of the English War Poets, a passionate and outstanding literary historian of the experience of the Great War, and a personal friend, who brought me to see the landscape of the Western Front through the eyes of Siegfried Sassoon:

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;  
And I was filled with such delight  
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,  
Winging wildly across the white  
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
And beauty came like the setting sun:  
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone  
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

How this landscape has changed since then! Tonight, the sun set over a peaceful countryside of orchards and dark-green fields. And yet, this land also bears deep scars, memories of those autumn nights a hundred years ago, when the last rays of the setting sun cast their golden light on an apocalyptic scene: trees without branches, like giant arrows cast down from the heavens; huge craters full of filthy water; a tank run aground in the sodden earth; and everywhere the grey-brown mud, stinking of excrement and rotting flesh. Almost as if human beings were no more than ammunition for the machines.

There is an historical paradox buried along with the soldiers in Flanders fields. Those who died here fell in the name of an ideal, a fatherland, an emperor. They came because they believed they were different from their enemies. But the deadly machines of this battlefield cut them all down in the same mud; the grenades tore all their bodies to pieces, regardless of their convictions, their religion, their class or their nationality. It was in fact a genuine cosmopolitanism of death; the soil of Ypres covers not only Belgians, Germans, Frenchmen and Britons, but Moroccan and Algerian soldiers, too, Tunisians and Senegalese, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Chinese, Indians and Jamaicans.

This global, multiracial community of the dead changed something, not only for the surviving soldiers themselves, but also for the societies they returned to. And to grasp exactly what it was that changed, we must try to get nearer to the experience of the war itself. The British scientist J.B.S. Haldane, who himself served on the Western Front, described it in these words:

“...[A] glimpse of a forgotten battle of 1915. It has a curious suggestion of a rather bad cinema film. Through a blur of dust and fumes there appear, quite suddenly, great black and yellow masses of smoke which seem to be tearing up the surface of the earth and disintegrating the works of man with an almost visible hatred. These form the chief part of the picture, but somewhere in the middle distance one can see a few irrelevant

looking human figures, and soon there are fewer. It is hard to believe that these are the protagonists in the battle. One would rather choose those huge substantive oily black masses which are so much more conspicuous, and suppose that the men are in reality their servants, and playing an inglorious, subordinate, and fatal part in the combat. It is possible, after all, that this view is correct.”

Man as a parasite of the machine? That was the impression hundreds of thousands of soldiers had. Most of them found their courage and strength counted for nothing in comparison with artillery that could bring death at any moment from twenty kilometres away, or with mustard gas wafting silently over the hills. Walter Benjamin, never a soldier himself, wrote:

“A generation that still drove to school in horse-drawn carriages suddenly stood under the open sky in a landscape in which nothing but the clouds had remained unchanged, and in the centre, in a force field of destructive currents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.”

This tiny, fragile body found itself quite suddenly in the most modern place in the world, a place where everything was standardized and industrially produced, where everyone had a number and a uniform, and everyone was trained to carry out identical actions on identical machines. Not only was the Western Front the greatest death factory ever conceived by mankind; the soldiers themselves, far from being heroes of the fatherland, were above all workers in a gigantic industrial system that seemed to be producing nothing but mutilated bodies.

And even survival could be terrible. The poet Siegfried Sassoon was hounded by the idea that he must give a voice to the silent mouths of the dead:

O, but Everyone  
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

But most could find no words for their own song of fear and grief and loss. “Shell shock”, a state of mute insanity and compulsive bodily tics, often resulting from a particularly traumatic experience such as a night spent alone and trapped in the barbed wire of No Man’s Land, sent countless soldiers from the field of combat to the psychiatric ward. The experience of war was simply too appalling for the soldier’s brain to process, the perpetual explosions and the constant expectation of sudden, hideous death too tormenting for his mind to endure.

The dead and the sick, the wounded and the widowed together formed a kind of democracy of suffering.

And yet, on another level, the experience of industrialized warfare may have been even more far-reaching for Western culture, in that it profoundly changed how people thought about themselves and their life in a community.

Progress and industrialization at home, and the 'civilizing mission' in the colonies, were both based on an alliance between Enlightenment and religion, each with its own missionaries. People of the nineteenth century had lived with a firm belief in progress and the achievable goal of a world without hunger or poverty or war. The Enlightenment had encouraged this idea of progress through its rhetoric of freedom from old chains. It had seemed to show the way to a perfect world.

And now, what had become of this Enlightenment? It had not only failed to predict the war, but had also been unable to prevent it. It was the brilliant scientists and researchers and engineers and mathematicians who had invented the mustard gas and the machine guns, the barbed wire and the tanks. The creatures of the Enlightenment had begun to destroy their creators. The great tradition of reason was now smeared with blood, the blood of the victims of the new technology.

Through the whole of the twentieth century, thinking people wrestled with this insight, conscious that the tradition of enlightened rationality possessed a darker aspect. A trained statistician can calculate, with equal facility, the transportation of goods or the transportation of people to a planned and rationally financed death. After the end of the Great War, and certainly after Auschwitz and the *Bloodlands*, no one could speak of progress, or of the colonial powers' "civilizing mission", without appearing cynical or naive.

We have not yet managed to put this crisis behind us. We have lost faith in our collective project. The cleft between rhetoric and reality has been shown to be so gaping; the idea of progress has been torn from its moral bearings.

When the Flemish farming families returned to their village in 1918, they found that the bombs and grenades had destroyed every house and every last tree - more, that the landscape itself had been completely transformed. They needed maps and plans to help them reorient themselves in the land of their ancestors, in the life they themselves had lived before the war. And we, too, confront a landscape today that we can barely recognize. But unlike the farmers of those days, we have no map of the moral landscape we want to live in. We still have to chart it ourselves, starting from the land as it now is, a land still undergoing constant change. This task demands a great deal of imagination.

The moral map of the postwar era shows a society transformed by the experience of war, on the way to a revolution in sexual ethics and the rights of women, a moral landscape in which the idea of class has almost disappeared and the idea of race has been replaced by the idea of different cultures. The collective discussion is increasingly about fundamental identities and the rights of individuals, and proportionately less about goals or common projects.

In the decades after 1945, many Europeans opted for a kind of hedonistic quiescence. No need to make history - instead, let's make the perfect *pasta alla putanesca*. We all became to a certain extent cosmopolitan, and all, to a certain extent, unsettled. Our grandparents took their

identity from class, church and country. We proclaim our tribal identity through signature consumer goods, anxiously following what's in and what's out.

What's in and what's out, or rather who's in and who's out: the question is more urgent than ever. The landscape depicted on our moral map is changing before our eyes. Millions of feet have walked across it, from southern and southeastern Europe toward the north. They are the feet of refugees. They know all about the rhetoric of us and them, all about the democracy of suffering, all about the cosmopolitanism of death.

And we, after investing so much energy into the discussion about rights, human rights, we stand mute, amazed, before these people, coming to claim their right to a life without fear, or even a life of striving for their own fulfillment. There are a great many of these people, and they are different from us. Sometimes they come with high expectations and grand ideas from a world of death, of fundamentalism, suppression, and ignorance. People talk of a 'human flood'.

The British writer Kenan Malik has compared our debate on immigration with the debate at the end of the nineteenth century, and he concludes that the argument has hardly evolved at all. At that time, scientists, philosophers and politicians were talking about the poor as 'a different race', a barbarian horde incapable of the most basic civilized behaviour. And what they said about the European proletariat could be applied self-evidently to colonial peoples or people of darker skin. The dividing lines then were class and race.

Today, the dividing line is culture. No one dares to suggest that refugees can't live here because they're not properly educated, or because they're from the wrong race. Instead, it's said that they're too culturally different from us, that their values make them unsuited to western society.

The template of the argument remains the same: they are different from us, inherently and permanently. If we allow our identity to be weakened, our values will be suppressed, parallel communities will develop, and with them the danger of unrest or even civil war. Looked at like this, the welcoming of hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees is the consequence of a decadent West without its own identity, without pride in its own history. In just the same way, nineteenth century Europeans argued against Jews fleeing pogroms and poor Irish Catholics looking for work in England; in just the same way, thirty and forty years later, Americans argued against admitting people fleeing the so-called Third Reich.

The prophets of national decline through immigration have generally been wrong. Where they predicted rivers of blood, there emerged - yes, confrontation, but also cooperation, and a new kind of identity. Where they foresaw the polluting of local culture through cultural difference, there was a new cultural blossoming - from the Greek manuscripts in the baggage of fleeing Byzantine scholars in the middle ages, to Golden Age Amsterdam and Jewish Vienna - and the beginning of a new, cosmopolitan Europe.

This Europe will come - with or without our agreement. With shrinking, ageing populations, surrounded by regions in chaos, and with the socially and economically destabilizing effects of continuing global warming, we are not in a state to resist immigration for long. *Fortress Europe* is not only abhorrent from a moral point of view; even regarded quite pragmatically, it is impossible. We cannot erect a wall in the supposed defence of western, Christian values, when in reality we are building it to protect our wealth from the poor.

But the great change coming upon us will also bring us enormous opportunities: without migrants, Europe would have long since disappeared from history. Without migrants, our cultural narcissism would be even more relentless than it is; without them, our great economic wheel could scarcely turn; without them, our daily life would be the poorer; without them, our populations would be shrinking more quickly and to lower levels - more than twenty per cent of the people already living in Germany have non-German roots. Without migrants, there can be no European future. And how this future will look from the outside has been suggested already, by someone who lived during another great debate on immigration: Saul Ascher, a fighter for Jewish emancipation, who in 1815 wrote:

“No one asks - and no one should ask: What does this new arrival think? Instead we ask: what does he do? How does he live? If he obeys the laws of the land, he is a good citizen.”

It is perhaps not too much to suggest that the world of 1914 was torn apart because it could not assimilate the changes within itself, that the tension between an inflexible aristocratic elite and a modern society was simply too great.

In an age of dizzying globalization - industrial and economic as well as cultural - the rhetoric of emperor and fatherland and national pride, and the celebration of an imagined great past, served to reassure those who felt themselves to be victims of a 'rootless' modern cosmopolitanism. The story was complete fiction, but it was gratefully accepted. The results we know. We are here today to mourn the victims. We remember their senseless deaths, the sacrifice of millions of young people who had the right to pursue their own lives, their own personal happiness.

That situation is strongly paralleled today. We, too, see change approaching on the horizon. Some of us hardly recognize our own world. In this era of identity rights, our world threatens to turn into a battleground as we struggle for our identity, for our culture. Populist parties and movements all over Europe find greater support every day, it seems, and they are promising strong borders and national sovereignty. They conjure up a great history; they call on Christianity (or Islam); they fabricate an ancient identity for their people, an identity now being contaminated with something alien. This contamination, they say, can be restricted, or even, one day, eliminated completely.

We think we are reacting to a concrete situation, but we are thinking in long outdated stereotypes. And that, not immigration, is the new threat to peace in Europe. That is the story

being told by populists inside and outside the European parliament; it's the story that Putin is telling, and Erdogan and Orban, and evangelical preachers in the USA, and Islamic terrorists. It is an illiberal conspiracy against the Enlightenment, and it represents a turn toward catastrophe on Europe's road.

Our faith in the Enlightenment has been so damaged by the bloody history of the twentieth century - can its great ideals still guide us through the vertiginous changes of the coming decades? Can the Enlightenment still serve as a foundation of our Western way of life, in a time of such rapid change?

For an answer to this question, you need to wander alone, as I did today, through one of the many cemeteries where those young soldiers are buried. There they lie, in the cosmopolitanism of death. Can we transform their sacrifice into the struggle for a cosmopolitanism of the living? Can we develop a moral plan for the new landscape?

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;

wrote Siegfried Sasson, a highly decorated officer, who in 1917 made the decision never again to take up a weapon, and found himself confined to a psychiatric hospital in Scotland.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;  
And beauty came like the setting sun:  
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror  
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone  
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

This is our decision: to lend words to this song; to decide how we are going to react in this historical situation, how we are going to negotiate it; to decide whether we can regard the changes happening in our communal life as a challenge, and work to shape them ourselves; to decide what kind of society we want.

the singing will never be done.

*The Armistice Day Lecture is organised by the Flemish Peace Institute, Ypres City of Peace and the In Flanders Fields Museum.*