

Exiles in Our Own Country

When Chris Smith first proposed, several days after the recent election, that I be the toastmaster this evening, I have to confess I had a great reluctance to toast or celebrate anything. I was still reeling from the frightening reality that the American people had elected a man who campaigned on the promise to ban refugees coming to the United States on the basis of their religion, who had promised (and apparently still promises) to build a wall between the United States and Mexico based on a denigrating slur of Mexicans as rapists and criminals, and who had promised not only to keep Guantanamo prison in Cuba open, but also to pack it further with those whom he deems terrorists. He has described climate change, in defiance of the overwhelming consensus of contemporary scientists, as a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese. He has advocated the proliferation of nuclear weapons, intimating that our allies South Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia should develop their own nuclear stockpiles to spare us the expense of defending them. To deal with the threat of terrorism, he has legitimized waterboarding and even more extreme forms of torture. Further, he has said that he will kill family members of suspected terrorists, dismissing the killing of wives and children as justifiable collateral damage--this despite the fact that both the torture and the intentional killing of civilians are explicitly prohibited by the Geneva Conventions. And besides these deeply disturbing policy aberrations, he has in his personal career as businessman and celebrity a history of racial discrimination in his housing, a false five-year "birther" campaign to discredit the citizenship of our first African-American president, and a video documenting his boasting about being able to sexually assault women and get away with it because he was "famous."

And this man is now to be the president of the United States.

So how did we get here? Seventy years ago, just after World War II, in his essay, “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell famously railed against the misuse of language and its political consequences. As he said, “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties.” So Orwell advocated getting rid of meaningless words, pretentious diction, and dying metaphors to state clearly what in fact is the case. But today we have a different, and in many ways, a more alarming misuse of communication with dire political consequences.

Rather than avoid language or arguments which were brutal, our president-elect embraced them. With crude error-filled appeals to racial, ethnic, and religious fears, he shrank political and cultural complexities down to the 140 characters of a Tweeter feed with bumper-sticker chants of “Build the wall” and “Lock her up.” Then, with the enthusiastic and avaricious cooperation of both mainstream and 24/7 cable news networks, these hate-filled and fear-filled rants, extended to hours-long rallies, were broadcast in their entirety to the nation, thereby providing billions of dollars worth of free advertising for the man and his message. What may qualify as an epitaph not only for the degraded and degrading campaign but also for the moral bankruptcy of our current politics is an observation of the chairman of CBS. Commenting on the profits his company was making on its advertisements as it broadcast these rallies in their entirety, Les Moonves gleefully noted, “it may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS...The money’s rolling in, and this is fun.” Unfortunately, the country as a whole will have the coming four years to absorb the consequences of this “fun.” Without being overly

melodramatic, I submit that many Americans--in fact now that we know Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by over two and a half million votes-- the majority of the American electorate find ourselves in a peculiar and disheartening position: we are ethical and political exiles in our own country, what Seamus Heaney has called inner émigrés, “lost, unhappy, and at home.”

But as frequently is the case, in times of crisis as well as exultation, those books that we read and advocate may provide some guidance and consolation. For that reason, the text I’ve chosen for tonight is a poem by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. For decades, Herbert was forced to write and to live under the yoke of Soviet authoritarianism, and he, along with other East European writers, created a kind of parable poetry to sustain themselves in the midst of artistic and political suppression. In this case he looks back to a writer of antiquity to provide, albeit obliquely, some exemplary guidance for contemporary life:

Why the Classics

by Zbigniew Herbert

1

**in the fourth book of the Peloponnesian War
Thucydides tells among other things
the story of his unsuccessful expedition**

**among long speeches of chiefs
battles sieges plague
dense net of intrigues of diplomatic endeavors
the episode is like a pin
in a forest**

**the Greek colony Amphipolis
fell into the hands of Brasidos
because Thucydides was late with relief**

**for this he paid his native city
with lifelong exile**

**exiles of all times
know what price that is**

2

**generals of the most recent wars
if a similar affair happens to them
whine on their knees before posterity
praise their heroism and innocence**

**they accuse their subordinates
envious colleagues
unfavorable winds**

**Thucydides says only
that he had seven ships
it was winter
and he sailed quickly**

3

**if art for its subject
will have a broken jar
a small broken soul
with a great self-pity**

**what will remain after us
will it be lovers' weeping
in a small dirty hotel
when wall-paper dawns**

Translated by Peter Dale Scott and Czeslaw Milosz

Herbert looks to classical writing in general and Thucydides in particular to find a selfless exemplar of knowledge, dedication, and resistance. Rather than wallow in self-pity or succumb to the paralysis of depression and passivity, he sees in Thucydides a way forward, a way to think and write, a way to be proud of the legacy he would leave behind him.

And with Herbert in mind, I would like to see what we are recognizing and celebrating tonight as having analogous value, especially in these discouraging times. The study of literature, as you know, is currently under siege, especially in the wake of the Great Recession.

There is an enormous and understandable pressure to make undergraduate education the conduit to guaranteed employment, and the study of literature—or for that matter, the humanities as a whole—is seen as a superfluous distraction. But each time one of us studies the corrosive consequence of political ambition in a play like *Macbeth*, witnesses the grotesque psychic consequences of racial discrimination in a novel by Toni Morrison, or empathizes with the acknowledgement and acceptance of one's inevitable mortality in a poem by John Keats, we are not only expanding and deepening our interior understanding of what it means to be human, but also—paradoxically enough—becoming better citizens in the exterior worlds of family, community, and country. The human and humane values of toleration, inclusion, and compassion are the bedrock of any liberal democracy, and the absorption of those values is an essential consequence of the study of imaginative literature.

So in the midst of this economic and political gloom, I find tonight's celebration particularly helpful and healing. The fact that all of you are here, being honored as members of Sigma Tau Delta, means that you, even more than your fellow students, have understood and embraced these values. I should add, too,—and you may not know this—that this honor you are receiving has its own redundant benefit for us, your teachers. When we see how successfully you have taken to these values, we feel much more assured not only about the way in which we have shaped our lives but also about the future that awaits us all. So in addition to the warm congratulations I wish to offer you with the toast this evening, I also offer you our collective thanks.

Here's to the incoming class of Sigma Tau Delta.

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