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### Lifton's Law and the Teaching of Literature

When Robert Jay Lifton visited Japan in the spring of 1962, he was amazed to find that, in the seventeen years since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, while the U.S. army had made extensive (and largely classified) studies of the effects of burns and radiation, no-one had studied the psychological effects of the bombing on the survivors. Lifton began a study of the *hibakusha* (literally, atom-bomb struck or affected persons) which led to his major work on the Hiroshima *hibakusha*, *Death in Life*, as well as to his becoming one of the most thoughtful writers on the psychic realities of the nuclear age. The astonishing fact that only the strictly physiological aspects of the bombing had been studied also led Lifton to devise what he describes as a "terrible . . . but essentially accurate rule of thumb . . . the more significant an event, the less likely it is to be studied" (Lifton and Fall 38).

Nowhere is Lifton's law that the likelihood of formal study is inversely proportional to its actual significance more evident than in the intellectual life of universities. Nearly all of us know perfectly well that all of human life and culture is now permanently on six minute standing notice of extermination and that some of the sharpest brains both East and West are working tirelessly to whittle down those six minutes. Equally, most of us are aware that those six minutes are in increasing danger of evaporating, not as a result of human volition but through an unforeseen software error or a faulty microchip. The often-rehearsed scenarios of nuclear extermination are so mind numbing that our unwillingness to associate ourselves with them on an intellectual level would be thoroughly understandable were it not for the fact that the popular culture which our students consume outside of the classroom — *Top Gun*, *Rambo*, *Rocky IV*, *Red Dawn* and *Boys in America* as well as the mind-numbing fourteen and a half hours of ABC Television's *Amerika* — compels us to consider what it is we know. Yet the suppositious archeologists of the future would find pr

cious little of this daily psychic reality from a university calendar of the 1980s — least of all from the literature courses. Apart from a few courses at a handful of institutions specifically focussing on the literature of the nuclear age, there would be few clues that the generations born after 1945 inhabit a psychic reality qualitatively different from that of all preceding generations.

A number of reasons have been offered for our steadfast intellectual avoidance of the most urgent fact of our existence. Just over a year after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a linguistics specialist writing in *The New Yorker* suggested that the enormity of the nuclear threat defeats writers because it is, literally, beyond words (Feinstein 100). If that is the case, then it's understandable that, as teachers of language and literature, we would shy away from a subject whose nature demonstrates the limitations of our discipline and its subject matter. A thoughtful essay published a couple of years ago in a special issue of the *New England Review and Breadloaf Quarterly* demonstrates this. The poet Terrence des Pres describes the landscape which he sees from his house and which informs his thought and his poetry. But he lives not far from the Griffiths Air Force Base with its store of nuclear weapons and its radar installations designed to chart the path of incoming missiles. So alongside the visible landscape which is the source of poetry is the shadowy, almost hypothetical, nuclear landscape which, despite its invisibility, threatens and calls into question both the visible landscape and the poetry it engenders. Des Pres, like several other contributors to the special issue, meditates on the way in which the nuclear threat is dealt with so infrequently and so inadequately in his own and in other contemporary American poetry.

There may be another reason too for intellectual shunning of the nuclear predicament within educational institutions. Once again, Robert Jay Lifton offers some useful clues. He suggests that "the subject matter itself" is a "violation . . . of traditional patterns of teaching and learning. We generally understand our teaching function as one of transmitting and recasting knowledge, in the process of which we explore a variety of structures and narratives. We have no experience with a narrative of potential extinction — of ourselves as teachers and students, of our universities and schools, our libraries and laboratories. Our pedagogical impulse understandably shies away from such a narrative."<sup>(6)</sup> In other words, our sense of the intrinsic value of teaching lies in a pattern of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next — a pattern which is sabotaged by the introduction of the idea that there may be no future. Also, teaching in the traditional sense is nearly always predicated on the idea that some people know more than others. Yet when we are faced with the subject

of nuclear extinction, we confront a democracy of terror in which we are not any longer senior to our students and in the face of which the educational hierarchy is itself a patent absurdity.

What is the evidence for suggesting that the sensibility of both teacher and student in the nuclear age is so radically different from any generation threatened by war? Didn't, for example, the generation born in the last decade of the nineteenth century experience not merely the threat but the reality of everything they had ever valued being obliterated by the First World War? Yet what is so vividly illustrated in the literature of World War I is the sense of the war having a specific locale, a battlefield, and the existence, for British and North American soldiers at any rate, of a "home" protected and insulated from the carnage and of a pastoral landscape which remained immune from the battle. Sometimes this unhazarded home is viewed with bitter irony in the war literature of the period; sometimes it is seen as a restorative haven for the battle-weary. But even in the bleakest accounts, what remains is a sense of continuity. Take, for example, Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'," written in 1915, which takes its title from the Book of Jeremiah: "Thou art my battle ax and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms." (I i.20)

Only a man harrowing clods  
 In a slow silent walk  
 With an old horse that stumbles and nods  
 Half-asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame  
 From the heaps of couch grass;  
 Yet this will go onward the same  
 Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight  
 Come whispering by:  
 War's annals will cloud into night  
 Ere their story die. (II, 295-6)

Even for a profound pessimist like Hardy writing in 1915, the ploughman and the lovers represent a continuity which renders the ravages of the battlefield remote and ephemeral. In the war-visions of the 1980s, however, radiation rains on ploughman and lovers alike. In the 1980s, even in non-nuclear wars, most victims are not soldiers, but civilians. In World War I 95% of casualties were military, while in Vietnam War the civilian population suffered 90% of all casualties (Head 5). In a nuclear war, there is no battlefield and what is destroyed is not only the human beings, protagonists or not, but nature itse-

Just how fundamental is this shift in consciousness which has taken place during the nuclear age can best be illustrated not by reference to World War One writers, but rather with a single line from a singularly apolitical writer who died just at the time when the arms race of the 1890s was reaching the breakneck speed which led to 1914. The turning-point of Hopkins's "God's Grandeur," and the most deeply-felt line in the poem, is surely "And for all this, Nature is never spent . . ." We cannot now read that line with anything like the sense of renewal and refreshment which Hopkins intended. For the modern reader, who lives with the threat of the literal death of nature, the poem's subtle movement between the language and metaphor of commerce and the infinitely regenerative force of nature is hopelessly disrupted. For us, Nature is not only "spent," but also, potentially, in the slang of war "wasted." The example from Hopkins is a particularly poignant one, but it is easy enough to produce dozens of others. After all, regeneration and rebirth is one of our most central cultural metaphors, so central and obvious that we rarely bother to give it explicit critical recognition unless it appears as the central imaginative vehicle as is so often the case in myth or in folk drama. I'm not suggesting here that images of rebirth or regeneration become unrecognizable to us, but rather that on an emotional and an aesthetic level we no longer fully grasp them. The analogy that occurs to me is that of the light of the sun during the major partial eclipse we saw in the Fall of 1986. The afternoon sun didn't noticeably darken, but the air grew colder, and the light, though bright, showed objects as oddly flattened and two dimensional. This, I think, is analogous to the effect that living in the nuclear age has on our aesthetic sensibility.

What does this mean to the students we teach? A good many recent studies suggest that most high school and university students do not believe that they will reach the age of thirty. In one way this is nothing new. Most of us at eighteen could not imagine ourselves at thirty or forty. But this is not the standard adolescent romantic fantasy of early death in an automobile or plane crash with its pleasant sequel of friends and relatives grieving inconsolably. The fantasy, if one can call it that, is one of universal, not individual, death. In the face of this, why should we be surprised if our students seem to us to be dedicated ephemeralists to whom any notion of history or of cultural traditions seems both unreal and uninteresting? As early as 1950, a theologian, Edward L. Long, noted the way that the existence of nuclear weapons sabotaged any sense of history, that while formerly, "there was comfort in the fact that the life of humanity was bound to outlast the individual," now one could "no longer take history for granted." (quoted in Boyer 280) In the same year, William Faulkner in his fre-

quently-quoted Nobel Prize address, remarked on the way in which the energies of the writer were undermined:

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problem of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing. (119)

Since we have no control group, living in the same culture, but unaware of and unthreatened by nuclear extermination, we have no way of measuring what effects the threat has had on our consciousness and our culture. The social sciences cannot help us here. Instead, I suggest we turn to myth for some measure of how fundamentally our culture has been changed. Most people recall only that Prometheus, as instigator of all arts and sciences, gave human beings the gift of fire. What is generally forgotten is that the gift of fire was useless without Prometheus' other gift. Before Prometheus, the story runs, human beings were numbly inactive because everyone knew the precise day and time of his or her own death. All creative energies were stifled, but once Prometheus had taken away this knowledge, human beings were freed to use Prometheus' other gifts. "I made man cease to live with death in sight . . . Blind hopes I caused to dwell in him," Prometheus explains in Edith Hamilton's translation of Aeschylus (106). There's an odd irony that nuclear fission, so frequently described as "promethean" by the atomic advocates of the 1940s and 1950s, should be the means of reducing us to a pre-promethean state of cultural inertia. More importantly though, Aeschylus' account of the origins of human culture is a vital reminder that a sense of continuance and tradition, if not of personal survival, is the essential element in all worthwhile human activity.

What I am suggesting is that in our own lifetimes we have become witnesses to an alteration in the human condition of much greater significance than, for example, the industrial revolution — an alteration which, like the industrial revolution, has entirely changed the nature of our culture, but which, as students of our culture, we have been doing our best to ignore. What then do I think we should be doing?

It seems to me we must begin by examining the ways in which our own modes of thinking and expression have been deformed and brutalized by living in the nuclear age, the ways in which our consciousness has been re-shaped. Although it may be more comfortable to consider the nuclear threat as a psychological problem for our stu-

dents, we are compelled to consider it first as a psychological problem of our own.

There are ways, too, in which we can make use of what we know. Unlike most of our students, by training and by preoccupation most of us have a sense of history and tradition. It seems to me more and more necessary to use that sense to illuminate the changes in cultural sensibilities in our own time. For example, I know of no critic who has examined the literary and cultural responses to the moral shift which took place during World War II to allow terror bombing of civilians as acceptable pragmatic strategy. The policy of "obliteration bombing" or "terror bombing" had already changed the face of warfare, and, I suggest, of Western culture itself, years before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Lewis Mumford, for example, pointed out in 1948 that through the terror bombing of Japanese cities, genocide had already become accepted American practice, and that the only new thing about the atomic bomb was that it "wrapped up this method of extermination in a neater, and possibly cheaper package" (327-8). Mumford was also shocked at the way in which genocide as warfare was quickly accepted by the public:

It is as if the Secretary for Agriculture had authorized the sale of human meat during the meat shortage, and everyone had accepted cannibalism in daily practice as a clever dodge for reducing the cost of living (328).

Another way in which we are by training and preoccupation uniquely situated is in our ability to act as critics of Newspeak and its descendants. Not much serious effort seems to be devoted to this area — which is alarming, since very serious efforts indeed are being made to render everyday language useless as a medium for political discussion. One example of this is the memorandum which came from the consultant employed by the right-wing "think-tank" High Frontier to sell the concept of Star Wars to influential public figures and eventually to voters. The memorandum calls for an "approach that seeks to disarm . . . opponents . . . *by stealing their language*" ("[Memorandum]" 23, my emphasis). More specifically, the memo outlines a way of derailing the whole concept of arms control by this method:

A primary objective is to force a drastic reorientation of the arms control debate in such a way as to make it politically risky for BMD opponents to invoke alleged "arms control arguments" against an early BMD system. *In fact, the project should unambiguously seek to recapture the term "arms control" and all the idealistic images and language attached to it.* ("[Memorandum]" 23, my emphasis).

Orwell evidently was only half-right in his account of Newspeak. This much more sophisticated step-child of Newspeak deliberately identi-

fies the key words in any meaningful debate and renders them opaque and useless.

Similarly, it seems to me both revealing and disappointing that the effort to expose the ABC television series *Amerika* as frighteningly dangerous Cold War propaganda has had to come entirely from performing artists and writers, without any help from academics in any discipline. Indeed the response of intellectuals in general to the series, namely that it was too boring to be considered dangerous or to be taken seriously, indicates a colossal ignorance of the nature of propaganda. The most perfunctory acquaintance with the Fascist propaganda of the 1930s, for example, shows immediately that none of the individual items has the remotest claim to intellectual or aesthetic merit, but that its effectiveness as propaganda springs from its pervasiveness, and its ability, therefore, to establish itself within the range of views ordinarily regarded as acceptable.

A friend of mine who was a student in Berlin during the Nazis' rise to power has described to me the terrible sense of disillusionment she experienced as one by one the professors whom she respected and admired proved to be equivocal and offered no resistance to the Fascist takeover of their lives and institutions. What those Berlin professors in the 1930s were experiencing, of course, is what Hannah Arendt calls "inner emigration" (18-19) — a way of being intellectually, emotionally and morally "not there" while the atrocities are taking place all around you. I would suggest that our discipline is participant in a similar "inner emigration" and that it is time we begin in the well-worn phrase of the Society of Friends, to "be present where we are."

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