The Zoom of a Hornet: Writers in the Shadow of War

by Izabela Morska

In *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid*, Virginia Woolf notes, without ornament, that German aircraft passed over her house 'last night and the night before that'. This is her new reality, the reality of war: 'Here they are again'. We once believed we had moved beyond such repetitions, that 1989 had delivered us into a different future, when Fukuyama announced the end of history—as if the only history worth mentioning was the history of wars. And yet the zoom of a hornet returns. Here we go again.

Doris Lessing, in *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, a series of lectures delivered for the Massey Series in 1985, reflects on the purposefulness of writers. She sees them as independent commentators and members of a kind of spiritual unity: 'writers, generally, in every country' are 'almost like an organism, which has been evolved by society as a means of examining itself'. In this light, writers form a monkish, transnational order—one of the few forces that resists the gloss of neoliberal capitalism, which is forever trying to evict dissenting voices, deeming them failures or public menace.

The other side of the coin, Lessing notes, is that 'a great many people enjoy war—not only the idea of it, but the fighting itself'. She recalls 'many many hours' spent listening to people discuss war, peace, and the prevention of war, without anyone acknowledging that 'for large numbers of people war is exciting'. We can suppose it may even be intoxicating if some might, later, say it was the best time of their lives, including those whose lives were ruined by it. From here she moves to her most unsettling observation:

> People who have lived through a war know that as it approaches, an at first secret, unacknowledged, elation begins, as if an almost inaudible drum is beating… an awful, illicit, violent excitement is abroad. Then the elation becomes too strong to be ignored or overlooked; then everyone is possessed by it.

For many years I wondered whether I would ever witness such a moment myself—that grim fascination, that collective quickening, the transformation of ordinary people into ecstatic warmongers, as though in a novel by Musil or Remarque.

It seems that while many in Europe have learnt the lesson, to those on other continents who have never witnessed war with their own eyes in their own hometowns, the idea that a city built over generations can be destroyed in seconds appears particularly appealing, since the technology offers the possibility to watch it in real time as a kind of spectacle. If a war can be 'played' elsewhere, if 'the zoom of a hornet' (in Woolf's words) is unlikely to sting you to death in your own home, if it is not your child lying under the rubble of a bombarded school, then the destruction begins to resemble a video game—and soon turns into something even more ghastly in its appeal.

And so, in Tom Stevenson's 'Iran, Week One' in the *London Review of Books*, I read his account of the opening days of the campaign: the first week marked by a disregard for civilian life, with medical facilities and a school among the early targets. Even the official nomenclature, he notes, 'matched the sense of euphoric violence emanating from the war itself'—names such as Epic Fury, chosen as if centuries of warnings, from Tacitus' *Historiae* to countless historical analyses, could simply be brushed aside. Stevenson observes that some outcomes are tragically predictable: there will be war crimes; people once described as awaiting liberation will instead become refugees; and those who initially welcome the attack may discover that external powers care no more about political freedom in Iran than they do in other authoritarian states.

The spectators who treat war as a form of entertainment—the video-game players promoted to armchair strategists—seem unaware that war is like grief: it takes a course of its own. That is not Woolf or Lessing; that is me.

We cannot write as if this weren't happening. As if the pure gibberish of war announcements did not concern us simply because their intended audience thrives on language emptied of meaning, cherishes rhetoric that glamorises violence, and inhabits online ecosystems that metabolise that rhetoric into fantasy.

In the concluding lines of *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid*, Woolf urges her readers—and herself, it seems—to be lifted out of despair and towards responsibility: 'Unless we can think peace into existence we—not this one body in this one bed but millions of bodies yet to be born—will lie in the same darkness and hear the same death rattle overhead'. She reminds us that while one can fight for freedom with actual weapons or by 'making arms, or clothes or food', there is 'another way of fighting for freedom without arms; we can fight with the mind'.

We cannot write as if this were happening elsewhere, to someone else, in a world adjacent to ours. Woolf's warning remains uncomfortably current: unless we learn 'to think peace into existence', millions yet to be born will inherit 'the same death rattle overhead'. If Lessing's belief that writers form a kind of global conscience holds up, then our task is not to echo the drumbeat of excitement but to expose it; not to aestheticise violence but to interrupt its seductions—especially when language emptied of meaning circulates widely, flattering its listeners with the promise of glory and reinforcing communities that treat violence as destiny.

The work of writing—slow, reflective, stubbornly humane—may seem small beside the machinery of war. But it is one of the few tools we have that does not require the destruction of another life. To write now is to refuse the euphoric lie. It is to insist that attention is a form of resistance, and that peace, if it is ever to exist, must be consistently re-imagined.

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Works Cited

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