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Introduction to R.L. Barth's *Deeply Dug In*

Political poems, especially about war, are often dismissed as historical artifacts, too ephemeral and specific for universal appeal. This is so even if such poems are clear acts of witnessing with no ideology to pound. But though the poems of R.L. Barth in *Deeply Dug In* are eye-witness accounts by a former U.S. Marine of battlefield conditions in Vietnam, they transcend their moment in history, in much the same way as the ferocity of observation in Goya's etchings, "The Horrors of War," transcend the Napoleonic conflict in Spain.

Barth writes frequently in modern versions of classical Greek and Roman satiric epigrams. But the power of his poems come not from ancient forms, or from a still agonizing moment in American history, but from the intensity of his presence in situations the mind does not want to remember, his devotion to what is real, and his steadfastness in fashioning experiences of chaos into poems in which lucidity allows readers to witness what they cannot live.

I'm sure some will find these poems difficult to bear and perhaps will even question why they were written. Americans, after all, have been told lately that politics and poetry don't mix well when it comes to ultimate accolades like White House literary socials. But Barth replies in almost a low growl to such criticism with a characteristic directness in a poem introducing a section called "Small Arms Fire":

"Why not adjust? Forget this? Let it be?
Because it's truth. Because it's history."

And in the best tradition of the ancient and honorable use of invective, he responds in a poem entitled "Don't You Know Your Poems are Hurtful?":

Yes, ma'am. Like KA-BAR to the gut,
Well-tempered wit should thrust and cut
Before the victim knows what's what;
But sometimes, lest the point be missed,
I give the bloody blade a twist."

Barth's satiric realism takes the epigrammatic poems of *Deeply Dug In* beyond the sardonic and paradoxical to ancient metaphors that have the power of war photography. In a poem called "Reading the Iliad" Barth

looks upon Greeks and Trojans fighting yet
The heroes and the foot soldiers, thin and blind,
Forced-marching for the Styx...."

And readers see images of the Bataan death march, of the Long Walk of the Navajo, of the French marching from Moscow in the killing winter, of Polish Jews herded into the showers to be gassed.

Barth never loses himself, or the content of his poems, in classical allusions and distracting esoterica, even though he is a translator of the mid-empire Roman poet, Martial, the master of epigrams. In a poem like "Epilogue," Barth unwinds the epigram's capacity for piano wire finality and concision:

Twenty years later, the poor sons of bitches
Learn jungle rot, decaying flesh, still itches
And, spreading body part to body part,
Even corrupts the chambers of the heart.

And in “Lessons of War,” as in so many other poems, he moves in for the kill with all surgical nuance of Juvenal and his Satires on Roman folly:

Hump extra rounds, frags, canteen, or long ration
But always shitcan the imagination.

Deeply Dug In is one of those rare and timely books that connects the present with the past, and brings the reader to them both in a state of sympathy and understanding. The reader feels and comprehends that all suffering is the same. Barth gives us a human place that spans centuries and allows the common experience of politics and violence to create a solidarity between ancient Greeks and Romans, people who’ve lived through modern wars, and Americans struggling to regain their equilibrium in a post 9/11 world. We realize that Homer’s lances through the throat, and Virgil’s horror of war, are not just locked away in the icebox of the past. They usefully describe the present, as Barth’s poems usefully describe not only a common and collective experience of soldiering and battle, but also the sense that forced antagonism can become almost reflexive, as the 7th century B.C. Greek soldier poet Archilochos wrote in his epigram “Thirst”

I want to fight you just as when I’m thirsty and want to drink.

Barth’s lines in his poems “The Insert” are even more on the a mark:

We deploy ourselves in a loose perimeter,
Listening for incoming rockets above

The thump of rotor blades; edgy for contact,
Junkies of terror waiting to shoot up.

Or in “Ambush” where Barth won’t budge from what he saw:

For thirteen months, death was familiar.
We knew its methods and the odds. Thus, war.
And yet, I never once saw dying eyes
That were not stunned or shattered by surprise.

Why write in the spirit of ancient epigrams? Because it brings strict order, disciplined humor, satire, and concision to the greatest chaos and irrationality humans can experience short of a natural disaster. Virgil described such chaos this way at the end of Book I of the *Georgics*, translated here by Smith Palmer Bovie:

Unholy Mars bends all to his mad will:
The world is like a chariot run wild
That rounds the course unchecked and, gaining speed,
Sweeps the helpless driver on to his doom.

As a witness, Barth contains, condenses, and displays that madness unrestrained in “Foxhole Theology”

Of all the prayers enticed
Under the gun,
I’ve never heard Sweet Christ,
Thy will be done.

Barth speaks across time and space, like an ancient voice at home in a contemporary idiom, speaking with a modern sensibility about universal dilemmas in his poem “A Letter to my Infant Son” written “outside Da Nang.” It might as well have been written on the plains of Troy or before the Battle of Actium. He wonders how he will answer his son’s eagerness for war stories.

War is not the story
That you would have me tell you, as I heard it.
And what is courage? Too many things, it seems:
Carelessness, fatalism, or an impulse.
Yet it is none of these. True courage is
Hidden in unexpected terms and places;
In performing simple duties day by day;
In sometimes saying ‘no’ when necessary;
In, in most of all refusing to despair.

He tells his son that there are “few glorious stories in his war.” That he may

...not comprehend the rot,
Disease, mud, rain; the mangled friend who curses
The chance that saved him (while you look at him,
Wishing him dead, almost); the bitterness
You realize you may not understand;
The children’s bodies small as yours is now....

Just as Barth respects Jimmy Stewart as a story teller over John Wayne, who “embodied the know-nothing or the dupe,” because Stewart the bomber pilot who

..knew first hand war’s suffering and pain
and consequently never played a scene
Perverting combat on the screen.

so Barth makes the only choice he can to his son’s request, which is the eloquence of silence face to face, and the ordered, constrained truthfulness of art in *Deeply Dug In*.

Perhaps war’s most enduring structure is the duality of the grandiose hypocrisy of those who sell it, promote it, and command it compared with the reality of those who do the fighting. As Churchill once said, “Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter.”

Or as Barth has put it in “Allegory for L.B.J.”:

So many Isaacs, Abraham!
You needn’t even lash
Poor boys to altars; seek no ram;
Just raise your knife and slash.

In a world of conflict like our own, with terrorists and armies moving through the normal world like mythic scenes of carnage, the hard, straight clarity of R.L. Barth’s poems of witness serve as a steady guide, mapping reality in a language we can use to help us find our own way out of the minefields of propaganda and the fatal bluster of those who try to lead without knowing the way first hand.