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Book Review: *Unthinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and Western Culture*

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Everyone talks about nuclear weapons, but nobody does anything about them. And that, according to Jeff Smith, is the way it ought to be; or, more accurately, talking about them is doing something, something which with a little luck, and a little help from our resident cultural historians, may get us through the nuclear predicament. This alternately daunting and stimulating little book argues that "the bomb," like the modern sovereign state which creates and "theologizes" it, is culturally rooted in a historically contingent discourse, and that nothing short of a "problematizing" analysis of the postmedieval worldview will avail us in our attempt to prolong history.

Taking up the gauntlet thrown by Herman Kahn in his *Thinking about the Unthinkable in the 1980s*, Smith contends that instead of facing up to the possibility that nuclear war (in Kahn's words) "can still be fought, terminated and thought of as an experience to be survived," people today can and must "unthink" the nuclear nightmare (think it "down," as a reader weary or wary of poststructuralist jargon may prefer it), having actively or tacitly participated in "thinking" it ("up") in the first place. "Cultural history is complex and full of ironies, and a given desire, once turned loose in history, can produce any number of effects, including the opposite of whatever it originally aimed to produce" (147). Thus, in contrast to both those who acquiesce in the existence of the bomb as a tragic given of life from now on, and those who fecklessly call for its immediate abolition, the analyst of historical discourses takes the long view:

It is as if the history of culture is a drive toward [dialectical] syntheses, which, once achieved, establish certain assumptions... facts or conditions as *metaphysically* grounded—as mere reflections of the nature of things—instead of as products of (discursive) history, objects created by the simple fact that people had come to talk in certain ways.

But recognizing these consensus assumptions of a culture for what they are, we can also trace (or in looking to the future, envision) the undoing of them... It is true that the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons can never be taken away, but that's not what's important. That knowledge can do nothing on its own, and the contexts in which it becomes dangerous are vulnerable to changes in discourse. In an important sense, therefore, present policies can be unthought. (17)

Indeed, Smith contends, the process of their being unthought has begun: "Expressions within a discourse constantly shift and reform [like geological fault lines]; coalitions arise and eventually disperse. History created the nuclear crisis, and history can end it—may be ending it even
History, that is, did not end at Hiroshima. What role in this dispersal for the archæologist of knowledge? Using Foucaultian methods, "Accurate scholarship can / Unearth the whole offence / From Luther until now / That has driven a culture mad" (Auden), but it will not be the work of a moment. Western discourse since the Renaissance—indeed, since Augustine and Pelagius—have deposited (Smith's word, not entirely apt, is "precipitated") a complex record of ideas, images, beliefs, and desires to be brought to light and problematized—rethought in the bomb's early light: how did we get to this hard place?

Paramount in the record is the emergence of "the brave new world of [state] sovereignty," which rests upon "a theory of sovereign unaccountability with a related theory that warfare is in and of itself a morally coherent enterprise" (76). Although this theory reaches its most grotesque expression in the nuclear strategists' deterrence doctrine (especially in its MAD formulation), and in the even more perverse "nuclear war-fighting" real-politik of Kahn and the Harvard Nuclear Study Group, the turn toward the modern view of the state can be traced in such exemplary texts as Shakespeare's Henry V, to which Smith devotes his longest and most difficult chapter. (Some will undoubtedly find it a trifle tendentious as well.) The reading of texts once regarded as primarily "literary" or "dramatic" for purpose other than elucidating and appreciating their literary or dramatic qualities is now the regnant enterprise in much of academia; still it is perhaps more than nostalgia for a literary creed outworn that makes us nervous about the proposition that Henry's threatening speech at the siege of Harfleur contains "a key element in the way of thinking that makes nuclear deterrent postures thinkable today" (76). Henry V is a troublesome as well as a troubling play, precisely because of its conflicted portrait of Henry and his attitudes toward war in France. Over it hangs something akin to T. S. Eliot's verdict on Hamlet, that "in it Shakespeare was unable to impose [his patriotic motive] upon the 'intricable' material of the old play" he apparently was working from, or upon English history itself, and that the result is an artistic failure. To be sure, such a verdict is for a whole generation of critics the minimum qualification of its exemplariness. But the questions of when and with what artistic consequences Shakespeare read Holinshed's Chronicles (discussed only briefly in a note by Smith), and of just what melange of genres he used in the play presumably have their place in any discourse about its status—as does the existence of several assured successes among Shakespeare's history plays, none of which Smith refers to, in which war figures to a larger or smaller extent. These questions, had they been addressed, might not have materially deflected Smith's argument, but his silence produces more than a niggling doubt.

More persuasive is the chapter on the origins of Ronald Reagan's zeal for "Star Wars," entitled "Nostalgia for Industry: SDI and American Metaphysics." Rejecting Alexander Cockburn's view that SDI represents "a lunatic fraud designed to place money in the hands of arms contractors and supported only by greed-maddened boffins slavering for research funds and George Ball's hatred of the Soviet Union as an attempt to prevent the "evil empire" from a "shield, Smith locates a deeply-held myth in the themes of the American Reagan's view of growth, but particularly America's gesture of an unassailable industrial era, in the shadow of an industrial perfection—a synthesis, the impossibility of complementing technology were recoverable to its coherence, if not a mark, for it needed a coherent, if not a man for the faith could redeem the bomb by workable defense, and a hypochrictical to the..."
that the proposition in Reagan's speech at the United Nations "a key element that makes nuclear war unthinkable today" (76). At some as well as at others, the SSDI is an attempt to prevailed in a "crusade" against the "evil empire" with the aid of the SDI shield, Smith locates its wellspring in a deeply-held mythology that unites two themes of the American identity:

Reagan's view of things was an outgrowth, but also a variant, of a peculiarly American romanticism that has a long cultural history. To European settlers America was once unspoiled nature, and thus potentially an unassailable garden. But in the industrial era, the continent fell under the shadow of advancing technology, superficially a threat to its pastoral perfection—until, by a clever synthesis, the images of garden and technology were reconciled and made to complement each other. This synthesis..., in turn, has been threatened in our own age by nuclear weapons—a new shadow. Reagan's outlook, and its concrete embodiment in SDI, is an attempt at a new synthesis that would achieve the same purpose as the old synthesis of technology and garden. It is an attempt to recover the virtue that once was felt to inhere in technology, and, under the old synthesis, in America too. (109)

If anything, Smith's development of this line of argument carries him beyond the mark, for it nearly turns Reagan into a coherent, if not always articulate, spokesman for the faith that American technology could redeem its original sin of creating the bomb by creating a rational and workable defense against it. It would be hypocritical to fault Reagan's applauded reaction—once he grasped its "logic"—to our calculated status as hostages to Soviet missiles under MAD; yet his famous gaffe (unmentioned by Smith) that if necessary we can recall our missiles does not inspire confidence that he was sufficiently in command of the basics of intercontinental hardware to attain the degree of coherence Smith attributes to him. Indeed, Reagan's fantasy of a defensive shield may owe as much to his deep memory of a 1940 propaganda film he acted in as to his intuitive grasp of the myth of American moral and technological superiority. In the film, "Murder in the Air," something called the "inertial projector, a device for throwing electrical waves capable of paralyzing alternate and direct current at source [sic]" not only "makes the United States invincible in war but in so doing promises to become the greatest force for world peace ever discovered, which is the hope and prayer of all thinking people, regardless of race, creed, or government." Curiously, Smith makes no mention of this remarkable document.

But perhaps, here's no great matter, for "the real good news" Smith offers in his concluding chapter is that "it is not necessarily the case that we must get people to 'change' their 'beliefs.' What we need to encourage are discursive shifts.... What ought to be looked for instead [of conscious changes of position] are transfers of given beliefs into new contexts in which they take on different coloration, have different outcomes, perhaps even ironically reverse themselves" (151). If this seems a somewhat "laid-back" approach to the threat of nuclear annihilation, be assured that Smith can take the gloves off—usually in combatting what he sees as the "failed"
approaches of other antinuclearists such as Jonathan Schell, Helen Caldicott, and Robert Jay Lifton, all of whom in one way or another "de-historicize" the problem of war and the sovereign state and thereby unwittingly promote despair of a solution. Of course this procedure is routine in the conduct of contemporary critical discourse: a text deconstructs the pretexts which in turn generate it. One wishes that it could be done without-in the old parlance-attacking one's friends. Still, Smith's last chapter is not only the most optimistic but the most forthcoming in the book, which holds out the prospect of an antinuclear politics based on confidence that history is not over, that "Humanness, at its most basic level of needs and desire", is undying; and that just as "people's narrative constructions of the world can shift and change, ... ultimately, the story itself can change" (157). It is nice to be able to think so.

David Huisman


No Mercy, by nationally distinguished poet and former GVSU faculty member, Lee Upton, is a spirited yet subtle reminder of poetry's ability to reach behind the ordinary and touch something riotous. Selected by James Tate as part of the 1988 National Poetry Series, this remarkable second collection both illuminates and nourishes our contemporary human condition as we move toward the end of the 20th century. As Tate writes, "The poems are intimate in such peculiar ways that they make us savor our fragile humanity."

Upton explores the margins of everyday life, undertaking risky excursions into those moments when we slip into the subjective gap between our own ideals and reality, between private memory and public fact, between vision and event. In poems such as "The Imagination of Flowers," abstract ideas push against portraits of the mundane until the tension between the two quietly explodes. "He's rich,/ the man who watches the woman/ raking around a plaster chicken. And/ the woman, they say, is not quite/ right. Making a plaster chicken at home/ is all it looks like to him."

Such precise and marvelously rich images, which form the infrastructure for many of these poems, call up issues that are immediately and intimately familiar-but which seldom get addressed with such exactness and honesty. The calm, conversational tone of a poem like "New Year's Eve on a Train" works to enlarge this emerging sense that behind the apparently insignificant details of everyday lingers an ever-changing something that-once recognized—for an instant transforms us: "I believe that train/ moves to another year/ and we can't help/ forgetting ourselves. / Slowly everyone becomes friendly—as if we have been/ excused from our memories./ I have changed./ Please tell me. Is the same the same there?" Whether through the details of a train ride, an impressionistic account of a woman by the sea, or in the distilled images of a father buying his daughter a piano, the ordinary and the inevitable collide with compelling results.

At times the world Upton renders seems seductively: these lines from "The Wine at the glass, the world/ colors, one band/ dream of direction translated into various places of the world./ To breathing, safe in a room/ best of your travels on, experience, or recalling of it, is not/ and no amount—only the/ likely to change the heart/ of the human condition/ your property are what pink, in the/ decency. Mercy/ your wife is. You/ again/ but wondered/ Fine. She is fine."

With intelligence and perceptiveness, Mercy presents a view of it—in the present—to the end of a century and no ocean/ no ocean/s. It is a view more compact that choose to see. And which insists upon the madd/ balance each of us and the/ one hand, and the/ affairs on the other/ brings this volume close describes the more meditative close describes, simply, "Happy."

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