

Bart Michiels: the space of memory.

Simon Schama

“Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques that did affright the air at Agincourt?”

Good question, I thought, as I sat in row 6 in the Old Vic in 1955 listening to John Neville speak – almost sing – the Chorus’s prologue which opens Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. Richard Burton would play the King but it was Neville who gathered the ten year old Schama up in the folds of his swishing cape and threw me into the unbounded realm of the historical imagination. This was the first speech Shakespeare wrote expressly addressed to the audience and he flattered them that in the theatre they were equals (O pardon gentles *all*) even if the toffs were in the galleries and the groundlings in the open pit. They all needed to use their imaginations to be there, on the field of battle, to experience its terror, cruelty and euphoria. The exercise was not just grandstanding patriotic ally chest beating rhetoric. It was 1599. It looked like another Spanish Armada was in the offing. Men would be summoned again to die for England. The play’s outcome was reassuring. The band of brothers would prevail against superior numerical odds. But *could* the loose-boweled fear, the irrational adrenaline pump of war be “crammed” within that wooden O” of the Globe’s space?

The “O” was calculated of course to be both a description of space and an exclamation of desperation; an acceptance of the impossibility of translating, in any form, the direct experience of battle. But whether to honour the fallen or berate those responsible for the bloodshed, we can’t let go of the memory. Something about the raw nature of the human animal gets revealed in war as elemental as the paroxysms of sexual love: Eros and Thanatos, Mars and Venus, Helen and Paris, Achilles and Patroclus, helplessly bound together. From the very beginning, the historical imagination of Europe, took war as the ultimate index of understanding about what counted for most in human culture, for better or worse. In their respective ways both Herodotus and Thucydides knew that there was something inhuman about the triumphalist epics of Mesopotamia or Egypt; something uncoupled from human calculation and frailty. Homer had made the determination of the gods the engine of history, with heroes as their catspaws. But with Thucydides in particular, human agency, reckless and ruthless, stumbling into carnage, takes centre stage. Thucydides had been a general and he knew whereof he wrote. Even so, the literary form in which the chasten-

ing reality of battle was expressed was still an inadequate representation. The medieval chroniclers were no better; Ucello has the rearing horsemen of the Rout San Romano as coloured chess pieces; Leonardo caught the madness of Anghiari but could never assemble it; Stendhal brilliantly caught Waterloo as a confusing murmur on the wind. Only Tolstoy achieved the micro-macro of it, the grumbling grunt and the deluded emperor and the legions of the led helpless amidst the chaos.

So how to do it, then? How to recover what we, individually, and perhaps collectively, need from battle-memory? Bart Michiels’s perilously beautiful, poetically eloquent encounters with the landscapes of war offer one of the most powerful, yet movingly tentative answers that have yet been given in any medium of representation. In their terrible quietness, in their depopulated fullness, in their earthy witness, the photographs stand at the opposite pole of response from the stone monuments, the statuary, the info-plaques, the museum “Centres” obtusely built over the earth-covered bodies. Michiels understands that less is more; that somehow the action can be brought to life by the very stillness and emptiness of the space in which it was originally enacted. He begins from the presupposition that the landscape itself has been a military participant: whether the naked beach of Normandy, the shrouded hill of Monte Cassino, or his own local vale of tears, Passchendaele, so he restores to it the status of actor as well as witness. Some of the most striking images co-opt nature (or perhaps they have co-opted his lens) as witness-historian: the sheep-chomped tussocks of Hastings where the clumps of grass stand together as the “Fyrdmen” of Harold’s Saxon army, as Norman horses and arrows come relentlessly at them. Michiels supplies the ground, our historical imagination, animates the action, rescues it from the embalming effect of institutionalised intervention – those monuments. The wind blows at the grass. The fyrdmen stand and stand until they sink into the ground and eventually become the landscape itself. The implacable, imperturbable, sea closes over the burning ships of Lepanto and Salamis, the burdened, doomed waders, the bobbing bullet-riddled bodies of Gallipoli.

The calculated minimalism of Michiels’s approach is, of course, an immense compliment to the imaginative power and prior knowledge of the beholder who needs to know a little, at least, of the mud of Flanders, or the woods of the Teutoburgwald to fill their spaces with historical animation. But that challenge is a flattering summons to engagement. What deadens the dead is precisely the mis-

placed strivings of “re-enactors” dressed up as soldiers, falling on time in heaps of plump enthusiasm, the banging and the drumming tramping past their supine forms, ribcages rising and falling beneath their perfectly got up kit. What *quickens* the dead on the other hand is the nakedness of place, framed either expansively, as in the stunning almost abstract images of Austerlitz, the infinity of furrows doing service for the multitudes of men, or else almost claustrophobically close-up, the meadow flowers of Balaclava smothering the bodies of its dead at the same time as they rise from the fertility of their remains. A commonplace of military memory is that the casualties of disaster have been prolific fertilisers of crops; so that the harvest of the dead becomes something both more and less than an elegiac metaphor: a statement of the paradoxical, vitalism of conflict. The Belgian Michiels knows all those stories of farmers, for generations after Waterloo, discovering teeth as their horses ploughed the dense clayey soil. That sense of pastoral resurrection burgeoning from an arena of apocalyptic destruction will never be more perfectly conveyed than in Michiels’s images of the gently swelling ridges of the Somme, Tara and Usna and above all Thiepval where before the sentinels of the pylons, the loamy earth sweeps up to the descending, saturated sky. All we need are the hymns of lament, or better yet the songs of the Tommies and the poilus playing a muffled sound track in our heads.

They are all there, soldierboys, marching, firing, falling in a mess of blood, shattered bone, and the emptying viscera of horses; men laughing, crying, screaming, cheering, gossiping, pissing with relief or terror, galloping and tumbling, blown sky-high or thrown into craters of gory mud, hanging on the barbed

wire, prostrate on the stretchers, peering through the gas, drinking themselves stupid, shouting through the smoke. But in Michiels’s images they are there as surrogates and analogues, delicate cues for the work of memory: the stout oaks of Crecy and Poitiers with their Plantagenet-Valois crowns of foliage seated, as if on caparisoned mounts, in heraldically regal solitude over their fields of bowmen and knights; the patches of lichen patterning the rocks of Monte Cassino like the puffs of mortar fire; a hedgerow on Naseby, the patiently assembled horse of Cromwell’s troopers, the spindly birches of the Teutoburgwald, either lines of lost centurions or the tribe warriors of Arminius waiting for them; the stubble freckling a snowy field painting a picture of the haphazardly fallen dead of Austerlitz with an exactness the romantic vanities of a Baron Gros could never approximate.

Michiels’s images are the antidote to sentimental threnodies of the natural union between humanity and landscape. He goes there because in places where enormities of comparable (or even worse) horror have been enacted – Hiroshima, Dresden, Coventry – there are now shopping malls and multiplexes and filling stations (although his craft might even provoke our historical imagination amidst the scenery of banality). He is a Belgian of the furrows not the factories. His is a country across which misery has marched and yet he is not entirely a mourner either. The intensity of light in so many of his images reveals him a painter with a camera, a true arcadian mobilised to resist the flatness of oblivion, for as the sententious skull addressed the shepherds “Et in Arcadia ego!”