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Howard Zinn, "Artists in Times of War"

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Thematic Issue *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror*

Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello

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Abstract: In his article, "Artists in Times of War," Howard Zinn examines the role of the artist during war time and finds that the transcendent nature of art not only shows us the beauty of everyday life, but can also go beyond everyday politics and media hype to critically address the problems of the day. In fact, Zinn suggests that it is the job of artists to "to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare to say things that no one else will say." For Zinn, this is especially important given the intensity of the events of 9/11 where the media has consistently failed in their responsibility to serve as investigators who are charged to "think for yourself." By way of example Zinn reflects on the work of Twain, e.e. cummings, Langston Hughes, Bob Dylan, and others. These writers all exemplify ways that art can respond to the atrocities of war. In the end, however, it is Zinn who transcends the conventional wisdom and challenges the reader to do the same.

Howard ZINN

Artists in Times of War

When I think of the relationship between artists and society -- and for me the question is always what it could be, rather than what it is -- I think of the word "transcendent." It is a word I never use in public, but it's the only word I can come up with to describe what I think about the role of artists. By transcendent, I mean that the artist transcends the immediate. Transcends the here and now. Transcends the madness of the world. Transcends terrorism and war. The artist thinks, acts, performs music, and writes outside the framework that society has created. The artist may do no more than give us beauty, laughter, passion, surprise, and drama. I don't mean to minimize these activities by saying the artist can do no more than this. The artist needn't apologize, because by doing this, the artist is telling us what the world should be like, even if it isn't that way now. The artist is taking us away from the moments of horror that we experience everyday -- some days more than others -- by showing us what is possible. But the artist can and should do more. In addition to creating works of art, the artist is also a citizen and a human being. The way that society tends to classify us scares me. I am a historian. I don't want to be just a historian, but society puts us into a discipline. Yes, *disciplines* us: you're a historian, you're a businessman, you're an engineer. You're this or you're that. The first thing someone asks you at a party is, "What do you do?" That means, "How are you categorized?" The problem is that people begin to think that's all they are. They're professionals in something. You hear the word professionalism being used often. People say, "You have to be professional." Whenever I hear the word, I get a little scared, because that limits human beings to working within the confines set by their profession.

I face this as a historian. During the Vietnam War, there were meetings of historians. While the war was raging in Southeast Asia, the question was, "Should historians take a stand on the war?" There was a big debate about this. Some of us introduced a resolution saying that "We historians think the United States should get out of Vietnam." Other historians objected. They said, "It's not that we don't think the United States should get out, but we are just historians. It's not our business." But whose business is it? The historian says, "It's not my business." The lawyer says, "It's not my business." The businessman says, "It's not my business." And the artist says, "It's not my business." Then whose business is it? Does that mean you are going to leave the business of the most important issues in the world to the people who run the country? How stupid can we be? Haven't we had enough experience historically with leaving the important decisions to the people in the White House, Congress, the Supreme Court, and those who dominate the economy?

There are certain historical moments when learning is more compressed and intense than others. Since September 11, 2001, we have been in such a moment. [...] So the word *transcendent* comes to mind when I think of the role of the artist in dealing with the issues of the day. I use that word to suggest that the role of the artist is to transcend conventional wisdom, to transcend the word of the establishment, to transcend the orthodoxy, to go beyond and escape what is handed down by the government or what is said in the media. Some people in the arts and in other professions think, "Yes, let's get involved. Let's get involved in the way we are told to." You see them getting into line in the way they are expected to when the president asks them to do so. And that is echoed by everyone else in politics. How many times have I read in the press since September 11 that "We must be united"? What do they mean by that? I would like us to be united. But united around what? When people say we must be united, they state explicitly or implicitly that we must be united around whatever the president tells us to do.

CBS news anchor Dan Rather is an anchor of the establishment. He has gone on TV and said, "Bush is my president. When he says get into line, I get into line." After I heard Rather's comments, I thought, here is an important and influential journalist who's forgotten the first rule of journalism:

Think for yourself. He's forgotten what I.F. Stone, one of the greatest journalists of the twentieth century, once said. Stone used to write for major newspapers until he realized he wasn't allowed to say certain things. So he left the mainstream media and set up his own newsletter, *I.F. Stone's Weekly*. It became famous for providing information that you couldn't get anywhere else. He was invited to speak to journalism classes. He told the students, "I am going to tell you a number of things, but if you really want to be a good journalist you only have to remember two words: *governments lie*. Not just the U.S. government, but, in general, all governments lie." That may sound like an anarchist statement, but the anarchists have something there. They are right to be skeptical and suspicious of those who hold official power, because the tendency of those who hold that power is to lie in order to maintain it. When Dan Rather made his statement, he violated the Hippocratic oath of journalists, which implies that you must think for yourself. Rather's comment is the kind you would expect from a journalist in a totalitarian state, but not from someone in a democracy. [...] It is the job of the artist to transcend that -- to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare to say things that no one else will say. Fortunately, throughout history we have had artists who dared to do this. I think of Mark Twain, the great novelist who wrote stories that everyone loved. When the United States went to war against Spain in 1898, Twain spoke out. Spain was quickly defeated in what was called "a splendid little war." But when the United States went after the Philippines, that wasn't a splendid little war. It was long and ugly. The Filipinos wanted to rule themselves. Twain was one of the voices speaking out against this war, which in many ways foreshadowed the Vietnam War. By 1906, the war had been going on for five years and several hundred thousand Filipinos were dead. You won't find much in your history books about that. The U.S. Army committed a massacre. You might call it an act of terrorism in the sense that innocent people were mowed down. Six hundred men, women, and children were murdered. President Theodore Roosevelt sent a message to General Leonard Wood, who carried out this operation against virtually unarmed Muslims in the southern Philippines: "I congratulate you and the officers and men of your command upon the brilliant feat of arms wherein you and they so well upheld the honor of the American flag." Twain denounced Roosevelt. He became one of the leading protesters against the war in the Philippines. He stepped out of his role as just a storyteller and jumped into the fray (110-20; see also Scott). Twain dared to say things that so many in the country were not saying. Of course, right away, his patriotism was questioned. As soon as you speak outside the boundaries, as soon as you say things that are different from what the establishment, the media, and leading intellectuals are telling you to say, the question of your patriotism arises.

Twain wrote something very interesting about loyalty in his novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*: "You see my kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its officeholders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the body from winter, disease, and death. To be loyal to rags, to shout for rags, to worship rags, to die for rags—that is a loyalty of unreason, it is pure animal; it belongs to monarchy, was invented by monarchy; let monarchy keep it. I was from Connecticut, whose Constitution declares "that all political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority and instituted for their benefit; and that they have at all times an undeniable and indefeasible right to alter their form of government in such a manner as they may think expedient" (64-65). Twain's idea of loyalty is important because, in the present discussion, boundaries have been set and lines have been drawn. Those who go outside those boundaries and criticize official policy are called unpatriotic and disloyal. When people make such accusations against dissenters, they have forgotten the meaning of loyalty and patriotism. Patriotism does not mean support for your government. It means, as Mark Twain said, support for your country. The feminist anarchist Emma Goldman said, at roughly the same time as Twain, that she loved the country but not the government.

To criticize the government is the highest act of patriotism. If someone accuses you of not being patriotic, you ought to remind him or her of the Declaration of Independence. Of course, everyone praises the Declaration when it is hung up on a classroom wall, but not when people read it and understand it. During the Vietnam War, a soldier was disciplined for putting it up on his barracks wall. The Declaration of Independence says that governments are artificial creations. They are set up by the people of the country to achieve certain objectives, the equality of all people and the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." And "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends," the Declaration says, "it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute [a] new Government." That's democratic doctrine. That's the idea of democracy. Therefore, there are times when it becomes absolutely patriotic to point a finger at the government to say that it is not doing what it should be doing to safeguard the right of citizens to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Today everybody is talking about the fact that we live in one world; because of globalization, we are all part of the same planet. They talk that way, but do they mean it? We should test their claims. We should remind them that the words of the Declaration apply not only to people in this country, but also to people all over the world. People everywhere have the same right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When the government becomes destructive of that, then it is patriotic to dissent and to criticize -- to do what we always praise and call heroic when we look upon the dissenters and critics in totalitarian countries who dare to speak out.

I want to point to some other artists who spoke out against war. The poet e. e. cummings wrote "i sing of Olaf glad and big / whose warmest heart recoiled at war: / a conscientious object-or / ... / but -- though all kinds of officers / (a yearning nation's blueeyed pride) / their passive prey did kick and curse / until for wear their clarion / voices and boots were much the worse, / and egged the firstclassprivates on / his rectum wickedly to tease / by means of skillfully applied / bayonets roasted hot with heat-- / Olaf(upon what were once knees) / does almost ceaselessly repeat / "there is some shit I will not eat" (*Complete Poems: 1904-1962*. By e.e. cummings. Ed. George J. Firmage). e.e. cummings and other writers were reacting to World War I, to that great martial spirit that was summoned up in 1917 to get the United States into the war. People were being herded into line, and the flag was being waved. When the war ended, people looked at the 10 million dead in Europe and asked, "What was this all about?" After the initial period of flag waving and bugle blowing, people began to think again -- and to look at the terrible things they did. In war, terrible things are done on one side and terrible things are done on the other side. Then, after a while, the second thoughts come: What have we done? What have we accomplished? That's what happened after World War I. That experience of World War I led to the writings of John Dos Passos, Ford Madox Ford, Ernest Hemingway, and to that great antiwar novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, by Dalton Trumbo. [...] It is important to remember that wars look good to many people in the beginning because something terrible has been done, and people feel that something must be done in retaliation. Only later does the thinking and questioning begin. [...] Eugene O'Neill, the great playwright, wrote this to his son six months after Pearl Harbor, when the whole country was being mobilized for war: "It is like acid always burning in my brain that the stupid butchering of the last war taught men nothing at all, that they sank back listlessly on the warm manure pile of the dead and went to sleep, indifferently bestowing custody of their future, their fate, into the hands of State departments, whose members are trained to be conspirators, card sharps, double-crossers and secret betrayers of their own people; into the hands of greedy capitalist ruling classes so stupid they could not even see when their own greed began devouring itself; into the hands of that most debased type of pimp, the politician, and that most craven of all lice and job-worshippers, the bureaucrats" (528-29).

Well, I would never use such strong language myself, but I am willing to quote it when somebody else says it. When I talk about acting outside the boundaries that are set for us, I am thinking of the idea of our national power and our national goodness -- the idea that we are the superpower in the world, and we deserve to be because we are the best, and we have the most

democracy and freedom. It's not only kind of arrogant to think that terrible things are done to us because we are the best -- it is also a sign of a loss of history. We need to bring ourselves down a peg, to the level of other nations in the world. We need to be able to come down to earth and to recognize that the United States has behaved in the world the way other imperialist nations have. It's not surprising. We have to be honest about our country. If we are going to be anything, if there is anything an artist should be -- if there is anything a citizen should be -- it's honest. We must be able to look at ourselves, to look at our country honestly and clearly. And just as we can examine the awful things that people do elsewhere, we have to be willing to examine the awful things that are done here by our government.

Langston Hughes, the great African American poet, wrote a poem called "Columbia." For him, "Columbia" meant the United States:

Columbia,
My dear girl,
You really haven't been a virgin for so long
It's ludicrous to keep up the pretext.
You're terribly involved in world assignments
And everybody knows it.
You've slept with all the big powers
In military uniforms,
And you've taken the sweet life
Of all the little brown fellows
In loin cloths and cotton trousers.
When they've resisted,
You've yelled, "Rape,"
...
Being one of the world's big vampires,
Why don't you come on out and say so
Like Japan, and England, and France,
And all the other nymphomaniacs of power
Who've long since dropped their
Smoke-screens of innocence
To sit frankly on a bed of bombs?

We live in a rich and powerful country and, yes, a country with great traditions like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. But our greatest traditions and proudest experiences have come not from governments but from what the people of the United States have done when they have banded together to fight against injustices like slavery. They have come from what working people have done to change the conditions of their own lives because the governments would do nothing. Well, the government would do something. It would send the troops and the National Guard and the police out to club and shoot workers. We have to think about what kind of country we want to be in the world and whether it is important for us to be a superpower. What should we take pride in? That we are the strongest? That we are the richest? That we have the most nuclear weapons? That we have the most TVs and cars? Are those the things we want to be most proud of? Is that really strength, or is it something else?

One of the artists whose work I think of as transcendent is Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch-22*. If, right after World War II, someone had written a nonfiction book on the ambiguities of war and the atrocities committed by the supposed good guys -- if someone had written suggesting that "the greatest generation," as Tom Brokaw calls it, was not necessarily the greatest; that the conflict was much more complicated, because war corrupts everyone who engages in it, and soon the good guys would begin to look like the bad guys -- such a book would have been difficult to publish. There was such a glow surrounding that war. But Heller could write a novel like *Catch-22*. Artists can be sly. They can point to things that take you outside traditional thinking because you can get away with it in fiction. People say, "Oh, well it's fiction." But remember what Pablo Picasso said: "Art is a lie that

makes us realize truth." Art moves away from reality and invents something that may be ultimately more accurate about the world than what a photograph can depict.

Joseph Heller was one of these writers who could use fiction to say things that could not easily be said in nonfiction. Yossarian is Heller's crazy bombardier protagonist. He's crazy because he doesn't want to fly any more missions. He's had enough of war. If he wanted to bomb, he'd be sane.

At one point in the novel, another character in the book, Nately, is in a brothel in Italy talking to an old Italian. He's puzzled because the man says that America will lose because it's so strong and Italy will survive because it's so weak (252-55). The old man wasn't talking about losing or winning the war. He was talking about the long run of history. It makes you think again about what we define as strength and what we define as weakness. The strong, by extending their strength to every corner of the world, become more and more vulnerable -- and, as a result, ultimately weaker. The old man and Nately have another interesting exchange about nationalism: "There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!" [Nately] declared. 'Isn't there?' asked the old man. 'What is a country?' A country is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries, usually unnatural. Englishmen are dying for England, Americans are dying for America, Germans are dying for Germany, Russians are dying for Russia. There are now fifty or sixty countries fighting in this war. Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for" (257). Heller also has a powerful passage in *Catch-22* about the impact of the war on civilians, When a number of his troops are about to go out on a bombing run, General Peckem explains, "They'll be bombing a tiny undefended village, reducing the whole community to rubble" (335). Heller had been a bombardier in the air force. He understood the nature of bombing and how you often pretend to be bombing military targets so you will believe it. But it is the nature of bombing that you never bomb only military targets. Kurt Vonnegut also wrote a novel set during World War II, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He wrote about the British and American bombing of Dresden, in which perhaps 100,000 civilians died. To write about this and denounce it in nonfiction would have been difficult, but Vonnegut was able to reveal the horror of Dresden in a novel.

During the Vietnam War, artists spoke out in different ways against the war. The poet Robert Lowell was invited to the White House and he refused. Arthur Miller also refused an invitation. The singer Eartha Kitt was invited to the White House for a social event in January 1968. Here was a singer who was not supposed to be paying any attention to the war, but at the event she spoke out against it. She told Lady Bird Johnson, "You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed" (qtd. in Tuck B1). It was shocking. An artist was not supposed to do such things. But artists were doing all sorts of things during that period to show that they were citizens and that they were thinking outside the boundaries. They showed that they were transcending the given wisdom. An artist named Seymour Chwast did a poster that was reproduced everywhere. It was a very simple poster. It just said, "War is Good for Business -- Invest Your Son."

Great music was being written and performed during that era by musicians who insisted on being considered not just as musicians but as people who were so moved by what was going on that they had to say something. Bob Dylan wrote his song, "Masters of War":

Come you masters of war
You that build all the guns
You that build the death planes
You that build the big bombs
You that hide behind walls
You that hide behind desks
I just want you to know
I can see through your masks

You that never done nothin'
But build to destroy
You play with my world
Like it's your little toy
You put a gun in my hand
And you hide from my eyes
And you turn and run farther
When the fast bullets fly

Like Judas of old
You lie and deceive
A world war can be won
You want me to believe
But I see through your eyes
And I see through your brain
Like I see through the water
That runs down my drain

You fasten the triggers
For the others to fire
Then you set back and watch
When the death count gets higher
You hide in your mansion
As young people's blood
Flows out of their bodies
And is buried in the mud

You've thrown the worst fear
That can ever be hurled
Fear to bring children
Into the world
For threatening my baby
Unborn and unnamed
You ain't worth the blood
That runs in your veins

...
Let me ask you one question
Is your money that good
Will it buy you forgiveness
Do you think that it could
I think you will find
When your death takes its toll
All the money you made
Will never buy back your soul.

The trick in acting transcendently is to think. What questions are the voices of authority not asking? I am saying all this at a time when it is unpopular to speak against the bombing of Afghanistan or Iraq. The undeniable truth is that some fanatical group killed 3,000 people in New York City and Washington. The government has leapt from that to "Therefore, we must bomb." We've always met violence with violence. But if you knew some history when this happened, you would ask, "What was the result?"

It would help to redefine the word "terrorism." What happened on September 11 was an act of terrorism. But to isolate it from the history of terrorism will dangerously mislead you. This act of terrorism exploded in our faces because it was right next door. But acts of terrorism have been going on throughout the world for a long time. I bring that up not to minimize or diminish the terror of what happened in New York and Washington but to enlarge our compassion beyond that. Otherwise, we will never understand what happened and what we must do about it. When we enlarge the question and define terrorism as the killing of innocent people for some presumed political purpose, then you find that all sorts of nations, as well as individuals and groups, have engaged in terrorism. Along with

individual and group terrorism, there is state terrorism. When states commit terrorism, they have far greater means at their disposal for killing people than individuals or organizations.

The United States has been responsible for acts of terrorism. When I say that, people might say, "You are trying to minimize what was done." No, I'm not trying to do that at all. I'm trying to enlarge our understanding. The United States and Britain have been responsible for the deaths of large numbers of innocent people in the world. It doesn't take too much knowledge of history to see that. Think of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Millions died because the United States was interested in "the rubber, tin and other commodities" of the region (4). Think of Central America. Think of the 200,000 dead in Guatemala as a result of a government that the United States armed and supported. ... So far, the United States has killed as many or more people in Afghanistan as lost their lives on September 11 (see Coile). There are perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have died in Iraq as a result of the current and previous Gulf Wars and the sanctions we have imposed and enforced. It is not a matter of measuring -- they killed more than us or we killed more than them. We have to see all these things as atrocities and figure out what to do about it. You can't respond to one terrorist act with war, because then you are engaging in the same kind of actions that terrorists engage in. That thinking goes like this: "Yes, innocent people died, too bad. It was done for an important purpose. It was 'collateral damage.' You must accept 'collateral damage' when you are doing something important." That's how terrorists justify what they do. And that's how nations justify what they do.

I am asking all of us to think carefully and clearly. For if we are all being herded into actions that will make the world even more dangerous than it is now, we will later regret that we went along silently and did not raise our voices as citizens to ask, "How can we get at the roots of this problem? Is it right to meet violence with violence?" All of us can do something, can ask questions, can speak up.

Note: The above article is a revised excerpt from Howard Zinn, "Artists in Times of War" in *Artists in Times of War and Other Essays*. Ed. Howard Zinn. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. 7-37. Republished by permission of Seven Stories Press <<http://www.sevenstories.com>>.

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