

Christopher Hampton – Three Poems

PROLOGUE TO WAR

'The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.'

Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference Speech, 2nd October 2001

This is what transcendence does to us.
 It brings about the triumph of the cloaked,
 the invisible, the unaccountable,
 over that which can be brought to book.
 Things driven by the god-obsessed
 and their so-called godless enemies
 sweep aside the human context
 even as the hidden hand of profit does.
 Now, with the moral order of the West
 assuming beneficent control of the just
 against the absolutes of Islam,
 the politics of transcendence float above
 the brutal politics of hatred and death.
 And how are we to treat this high-altitude
 language of the liberal conscience pitting
 compassion against force, and telling us,
 even as the bombers move in on Kabul,
 'the values we believe in should shine through
 whatever we do in Afghanistan.'

THE IMPERATIVES OF PROMISE

So take it up again. What waits in silence
 through the tragedies of history, in the broken mists,
 beyond the doorstep, out below the planets,
 where the questions beckon, is the key: the word-game.
 Play it cool, play deep, play hard, make patterns
 count in the thrust of dispute and disjunction;
 bring together what in a century of betrayals
 pulls apart – these broken imperatives of promise
 that have driven millions to crisis and despair.
 It's not an option. There are words that cross the frontiers
 of hope and failure, to challenge the violence

that isolates and make it possible to act
 against the operators of the killer-systems
 we have helped to put in place. And what they start from
 is refusal, stubbornness of quest, insistence
 on the fundamentals of distinction by which
 fuses are lit that might begin to bring back light
 to a darkened and damaged universe.

ROSA LUXEMBURG AT WRONKE

October 1916 until July 1917

To be free to think and dream
 as she walks the rain
 in Madam Kautsky's cloak.
 To feel as much at home
 with the green of her plants
 as ever she'd been on the battlefield
 of European politics.
 The world was there with her of course –
 that murderous world
 she'd walked the tightrope of
 through all the jugglings of expediency,
 up to the edge with the SPD
 and its war-credit sell-out.

*Listen! When I get back
 there'll be no more meetings,
 clandestine or otherwise!
 I'll take my stand
 in the thick of the action
 where the wind roars in the ears.
 I've had enough of talking.
 What we need's commitment,
 getting at the roots, making things new!*

Now though it's back to my plants!

Christopher Hampton is the author of The Ideology of the Text and editor of A Radical Reader: The struggle for change in England 1381-1914 (Spokesman Books, forthcoming). These poems are from his latest collection, Border Crossings (Katabasis Press).