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 juggling 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).