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Eric Linklater, *Private Angelo* (1946)

In the opening pages of *Private Angelo*, the eponymous Italian soldier “hero” announces, with relief, that it “has taken us a long time to lose the war, but thank heaven we have lost it at last” (3).¹ Angelo—a self-confessed and unashamed coward—speaks the truth that other men dare not utter, confronting expectations with a faux-naïve honesty that exposes the absurdity of war and the men who fight it. First published in 1946, the book is a sharply observant satire dissecting the male vanity, national hubris and hypocrisy behind the “logic” of war. It is also an understated yet passionate defence of human values in an inhuman age. The book deserves to be better known, not least because of its unexpected joyfulness. Although profoundly concerned with the horrors of war, this is an optimistic book, infused with what might be termed the spirit of the post-war settlement. It is driven by a compelling faith in culture and it wears its propagandist intent lightly. *Private Angelo* works—like so many of the successful films of the period—to diminish a powerful enemy by refusing to take him seriously, and by insisting on the possibility of something better. Above all, in its absurd plot and unexpected emphasis on forgiveness, it imagines the potential of a new internationalism. This is a book that cherishes national difference while utterly condemning nationalism, and it is as much a book for 2017 as it was for 1946.

Private Angelo is double voiced. In structure a comedy, right down to the concluding celebratory feast, it simultaneously works to reveal the unremitting brutality of Nazi ideology and the appalling consequences of total war for civilian populations. It is suffused with acts of cruelty, no less powerful for being lightly drawn. The narrative is held together through the picaresque misadventures of Angelo, bastard son of the Count of Pontefiore, a beautiful well-meaning young man with a gift for languages and no talent whatsoever for the art of war. Over the course of the novel this hopelessly unmilitary figure is conscripted into three different armies, a process that enables him to observe, with some bewilderment, the alien characteristics of the men competing for Italy. With the Germans presented as rule-bound sadists and the British as schoolboy adventurers, the stereotypes are familiar, but Angelo’s outsider perspective confounds assumptions. Indeed, by uncoupling the connection between manliness and

¹ Pages references are to the Canongate reprint (Edinburgh, 1992).

combat—Angelo simply refuses to accept the necessity of physical bravery—the book exposes both the Germans and the British as childishly destructive, reckless and immature.

The contrasting modes of masculinity parodied in the text also illuminate a clash between tradition and modernity. Angelo is a citizen of a bucolic pastoral Italy, a worshipper of beauty (in nature, art and women) and a man outside the hard-bodied mechanical scientific paradigms of modernity. He owes his allegiance to a timeless civilised Italy symbolised by Piero della Francesca's "Adoration of the Shepherds," a painting that almost becomes a character in the novel, valued on a par with human life. When a hiding place is sought for the precious image, Angelo argues, "with a great deal of feeling and considerable eloquence," that "a work of such divine perfection should not, even for its own safety, be imprisoned in darkness or humiliated by confinement in a farmhouse attic" (26). And when its hiding space is exposed, the painting—surreally—fights back, tormenting the arrogant Captain Schlemmer with the revelation of his own epistemological uncertainty. Art has the quality of profound *being*, against which Nazi striving becomes nothing more than a temporary and futile aberration. Yet even as Linklater invests art with a power and longevity the Third Reich could only dream of, he remorselessly depicts the irretrievable damage done to people by war. The Countess of Pontefiore, heroic and resourceful in the face of invasion, is broken by the loss of the books that were her dearest possession; Angelo's beloved Lucrezia is raped while her lover struggles with his unloaded gun; the town of Pontefiore is inadvertently bombed to destruction by the Allies.

Private Angelo is not without its limitations. It is perhaps inevitable that in a book in which men behave like children, women's role (and fate) is predominantly maternal. But Lucrezia's desires are a match for Angelo's—the pair of them accumulating a mini United Nations of illegitimate children—and she is far too robust a character to suffer the fate of her guilt-ridden classical forebear. Lucrezia also contributes to the attack on what is, arguably, the prime satirical target: the euphemisms of war. "The poets and historians of the world," she argues, "are always at hand to argue that soldiers are justified in their horrid trade of destroying life" (185). This might seem an obvious statement, an echo of the soldier poets of the First World War, but Linklater recognises that each new conflict creates its own evasions, rejecting one set of illusions only to delude itself with another. It is the ever-polite Angelo who provides our translation: "We are very grateful to you for coming to liberate us, but I hope you will not find it necessary to liberate us out of existence" (142-3).

This, then, is a book about surviving collateral damage, but why does *Private Angelo* deserve to be better known? In short, because it's a fine

example of Second World War writing. And why should we care about Second World War writing? Read *Private Angelo* and find out.

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