

**Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order**, by Charles Hill. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010, 384 pp., \$27.95 hardbound.

### **Politics and the Literary Imagination**

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Is the inability of men and women in national leadership to understand global conflicts in terms of history and human nature part of our civilizational decline? Charles Hill, author of *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order*, a study of the political theme in poetry and fiction and of the literate character of effective politics, thinks that the answer is yes, and he implies that we are living in a period of extraordinarily limited political thinking, a kind of higher illiteracy. *Grand Strategies*, itself grand, embraces Western narrative from

Homer and Vergil to Roberto Calasso (*The Ruin of Kasch*, 1994), including the dramatists (Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Shaw) and poets (Dante, Milton, Eliot), while making forays into Asian literature. Marxists have long claimed that literature, along with everything else, is political. Hill, a thinker in the broad American pragmatist tradition, discovers that politics rarely renders itself transparent in restrictively political discourse, but rather that statecraft, and most especially the statecraft of diplomacy, requires the holistic thinking of the belletristic imagination to give it fully intelligible articulation.

Hill begins where Western literature begins, in Homer, whose *Iliad*, in the manner of ancient epic, not only tells a story—the one about Achilles’s wrath against Agamemnon—but also rehearses the full worldly knowledge of the Archaic Greek society for which the poet wrote. By making the Trojan War the backdrop of his two poems, Homer guaranteed that the conflict would ensconce itself at the center of subsequent literature as an unavoidable original reference. Of course, as the salient event in an oral tradition that linked the emergent world of the polis with the defunct world of the Achaeans, that war

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must already long have functioned as a paramount incident of storytelling.

It was not only the war itself, however, that provoked Homer's exegetic prodigality; the consequences of the war, the distant ramifications of grand political and military decisions, likewise fascinated him. Homer lived in a time of new polities, but he wrote of a time when the polities of legend had entered their phase of decline and disintegration. The collapse of the heroic world appears most clearly in *The Odyssey*, but Hill concentrates on *The Iliad*. In particular, Homer's representation of diplomatic activity exercises Hill's critical sensitivity.

Agamemnon wants victory over Priam. Victory requires that Achilles and his Myrmidons continue to participate in the siege, but Agamemnon has offended Achilles, who has withdrawn his services in protest, sapping Greek effectiveness. The outcome of the Greek expedition now turns on Agamemnon's capacity for making amends and assuaging Achilles's sense of justified indignation. The Greek alliance on the shores before Troy thus resembles an incipient polity whose internal order is not fully established. As Hill puts it, "diplomacy precedes the state and is natural to the human condition." As much then as *The Iliad* is, as Simone Weil called it, "the poem of force," it is also, as Hill remarks, a

poem about the fundamentals of political theory.

The word *theoros* indeed stems from Archaic Greek, where it meant ascertaining the truth of a situation and reporting back to those whom duty appoints to address issues. Phoenix, Ajax, and Odysseus go to Achilles on behalf of Agamemnon, but, in Hill's extremely subtle reading, none acquits himself as a fully competent ambassador. Phoenix delivers "the rambling disquisition of an old man," while Ajax in frustration merely "vents his anger on Achilles." As for Odysseus, he possesses "a diplomat's useful quality of 'creative dissembling' but does not know its limits." Achilles returns to battle, but not in response to the botched embassy. With Achilles's death, the Greeks must resort to subterfuge.

Everywhere in *Grand Strategies* the reader recalls Eric Voegelin's oft-cited observation that the order of history lies in the history of order, an insight that Hill has achieved in his own quite independent way. The Achaeans prevail at Troy, brutally and vainly. The heroic world has exhausted itself in the Troad, the long absence of the baron-kings having given skullduggery its home-front opportunity. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* deals with the consequences of acts that predate the Trojan War.

Aeschylus, as Hill sees it, understood with supreme clarity two things: the nature of the state and the state's kinship to what goes by the names of civilization and order.

That "the *Oresteia* locates civilization's origin in the creation of the state...in a transition from the primeval cycle of revenge to a civil society based on judicial order" is not in itself a novel comment. In the "six concepts" by which Hill systematically glosses the basic *aperçu*, however, *Grand Strategies* makes a noteworthy, original contribution. In crossing the threshold to civilization, Hill argues, the family must cede authority to institutions, such that "private interests...may not overtop the *public* good"; legal contracts must trump status in civic argument and "the integrity of *process* must be maintained," even to the degree that apparently guilty parties go free on technicalities.

There is more, of course, which Hill divulges as he works his way through the three Aeschylean plays. He ventures the bold statement that "irrevocably, capital punishment will [in the context of civilization] be a matter for the state to decide in accordance with open procedures centered on the jury"; and beyond that, "this makes the death penalty the foundation of civilization." William Wordsworth once made the identical

point in a sequence of sonnets. Hill leaves Wordsworth out of the discussion, but brings in Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn*, where feud is also a theme. Hill then applies the lesson of the *Oresteia* to the American embroilment in Afghanistan and Iraq: "The clan puts the substance of a problem above all else; the state is concerned with process. The state focuses on the public good; the clan cares most for its own private cause." Once the state has sorted out the chaos of clan rivalry and blood feud that precedes civilized life, the problem of establishing regular relations with other states moves to the center. Greek literature again offers the great first-order articulations of the phenomenon—in Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War*.

Thucydides is not so much a "political scientist" interested in "replicable results" who "must focus on a narrowly defined corner of an event and on a few variables" as he is a *literatus* who responds by refined intuition to "the multiplicity of variables." Hill boldly declares that "neither historians nor political scientists can deal with the complexity of true strategy and statecraft," but men of literature can do so because "literature does not restrict itself." Hill reminds readers how closely involved many of the great writers have been in politics, indeed, how many have

participated actively in the state. He also reminds readers how many notable statesmen have brought to their profession the benefits of a literary education. The *Peloponnesian War*, for example, begins with a discussion of the Trojan War, hence also of Homer, whose *epoi* Thucydides takes consciously as his models, using prose instead of verse. Julius Caesar wrote fine prose, as did Marcus Aurelius. In later ages, Dante's politics sent him into exile from Florence to Ravenna; Montaigne, half-Jewish, served as a parliamentary lawyer in Bordeaux, where he mediated the internal conflict between Catholic and Protestant.

Vergil's *Aeneid* incorporates elements from both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, placing the origins of the emergent *Imperium Romanum* of the poet's day in the context of the Trojan War. Vergil had knowledge of almost a thousand years of history between Homer's era and his own, with the episode of Alexander's prodigious conquests and the squabbles of his successors standing in between. Hill contends plausibly that only narrative could serve the cognitive goal of grasping the significance of those centuries. What Vergil has cognized in *The Aeneid* is the theory of empire. "Literature's greatest subject," Hill

writes, "is the founding and preservation of a polity." Vergil's poem "powerfully displays Rome's role as steward of a world-scale international system." The poet knows that such a system is "precarious," an achievement "gained and maintained only at great cost." Hill also discovers in Vergil's epic a contest between the "heroic code," represented by Turnus, and the "civic code," represented by Aeneas, according to which "the fight is not for yourself...but for posterity" and with the aim of "reconciliation with your enemy."

Vergil looms over the Middle Ages, and is Dante's guide in the first part of *The Divine Comedy*. Hill's reading underlines Dante's acute sense of political reality as he reminds readers that Hell reserves many places for specifically political crimes. Chaucer, like Dante, mined the legend of the Trojan War and the associated lore concerning the ancient origin of the Roman state, as did Shakespeare. Hill writes, "Early modern texts depict the international order deteriorating at the same time that new possibilities are creatively considered." Shakespeare's "Henry" plays, for example, take place at the time of the Hundred Years' War. In these plays, the semi-historical, semi-legendary character of Joan of Arc—who

awakened the intuition of a unified national identity among the French—makes an early appearance in English letters. From Shakespeare's treatment of Joan, Hill moves to Friedrich Schiller, Mark Twain, and Bernard Shaw, who also found the Soldier-Maid to be a pivotal figure in the making of the modern world.

The treatment of Western literature as forming a pattern of rigorous self-reflection is one of the qualities that make *Grand Strategies* such a riveting read. Tracing out the web of filiations brings Hill, in his last two chapters, to Thomas Mann, Boris Pasternak, Hermann Broch, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Salman Rushdie and the already mentioned Roberto Calasso.

Throughout *Grand Strategies*, Hill repeats, in different ways, his thesis that political understanding and literate understanding are inseparable. In assessing Günter Grass's *Meeting at Telgte* (1947), a fictional account of an event associated with the end of the Thirty Years' War and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), Hill remarks how "[i]n 1947 the polluted language of Nazi Germany still resonated, and the Orwellian newspeak of Stalinism was making civilized discourse impossible," so that "language renewal," a job for poets and fiction-writers, had become "a precondition to the renewal of

international community." By contrast, Hill sees Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a deliberate obfuscator of clear literary and therefore also of clear political thinking, a precursor of the nihilism taken up later by Martin Heidegger and the deconstructionists. Hill regards T.E. Lawrence as having in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) "prophetically sensed the danger of those who would use terror to realize their apocalyptic vision," a theme that surfaces again in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988). With respect to exceptionally literate statesmen, Hill offers an anecdote about Reagan-era secretary of state George Schultz's January 1986 speech to the PEN Club in New York City, in which the conservative politician defended freedom of expression while a large segment of his left-radical audience attempted to shout him down.

With American armies grinding their equipment through the dust in Mesopotamia and Central Asia, with vertiginous imbalances threatening America's internal economic order, and with the increasing polarization of the domestic Left-Right split, Americans find themselves in dire need of the best political intelligence that they can get. Literature is a form of political intelligence. In reminding us of this truth, *Grand Strategies* guarantees its own necessity, whether

key people act on that necessity or not. *Grand Strategies* would indeed serve well, for example, in an introductory course in comparative literature or in a senior-level survey of critical theory for English majors. Hill actually knows what *theory* is, and he recognizes the primary texts to be the

*loci* of actual theory. Given the narcissistic conceit of what calls itself “theory” nowadays, the humanities professoriate will probably not admit *Grand Strategies* to its bookshelf of cherished titles, but that might well constitute the proof of the book’s distinction.