

# De Gaulle: Man With a Chest *by Will Morrissey*

*"The Courage we desire and prize is not the Courage to die decently, but to live manfully. This, when by God's grace it has been given, lies deep in the soul; like genial heat, fosters all other virtues and gifts; without it they could not live."*

—Thomas Carlyle

Don Cook: *Charles de Gaulle: A Biography*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

"The head rules the belly through the chest," C. S. Lewis writes. Reason cannot rule appetites directly; it needs what the Greeks called *thymos*, the soul's "spirited element," to rule the appetites so that reason can go free. Spiritedness cares for oneself and for those like oneself. Refined, it animates patriotism, courage, honor; at its best it animates magnanimity, "greatness of soul." Unrefined, it animates warlikeness, rage, egoism; at its worst it causes madness. Lewis describes modern democratic "intellectuals" as "men without chests." Their heads, however well-trained, remain ineffectual. Our intellectuals lack "heart"—not only the compassion they feebly praise but the courage they ridicule, nervously, as *machismo*.

Few political men have opposed this dispiritedness. Charles de Gaulle was perhaps the greatest to do so. His latest biographer, an American journalist, describes a man of *thymos* caught in but also defying, sometimes exploiting, the entropic forces of the modern age. On the force commonly taken to symbolize late modernity, Cook writes that de Gaulle

... had not the slightest interest in the question of control of nuclear weapons, in nuclear disarmament, in a test-ban treaty, in the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, or in any of the treaties that were spawned in Geneva. . . . He had no interest in think-tank theories about the use of nuclear weapons

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or the risks of one country triggering another into holocaust. He had only one theory and that was nuclear retaliation.

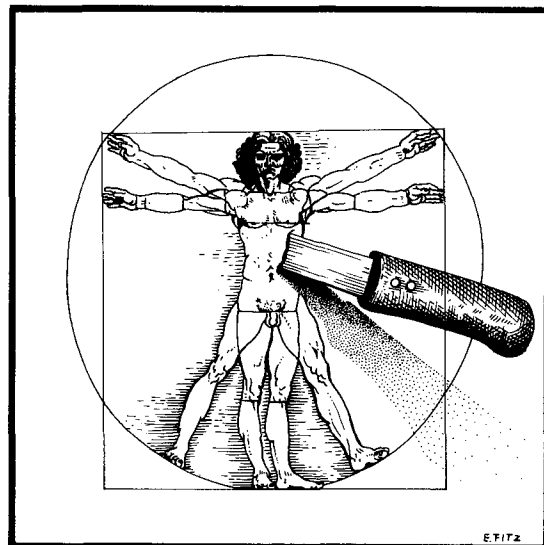
During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, de Gaulle met American and Soviet representatives. To Kennedy's envoy, Dean Acheson, he said, "You may tell the President that if there is a war, France will be with you. But there will be no war." He added, characteristically, "I must note that I have been advised, but not consulted." With Serge Vinogradov, Khrushchev's ambassador to France, de Gaulle deployed fewer words but greater irony:

It was de Gaulle's invariable custom to open such meetings merely by saying, 'Well, Mr. Ambassador, I am listening.' Vinogradov, referring to his telegram of instructions, launched into his warning of the nuclear destruction that France was risking. De Gaulle sat immobile, expressionless and silent, not responding at all. Vinogradov kept going, but de Gaulle's silence was crushing. At last the Soviet ambassador ran out of things to say.

De Gaulle then rose from behind his desk with heavy and ponderous motion, stretched out his hand in farewell to Vinogradov and said:

*'Hélas, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, nous mourirons ensemble! Au revoir, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur.'* (Alas, Mr. Ambassador, we will die together! Goodbye, Mr. Ambassador.)

*Thymos* serves reason here in two ways: it defends reason against tyranny, including the intellectual tyranny totalitarians seek to impose; more subtly, it defends the mind from excessive fear, and allowed de Gaulle to see that



the Soviets are not likely to risk Moscow for the sake of missile bases in the Caribbean. The complementary insight is de Gaulle's famous suspicion that the United States might not risk its existence for the sake of France. He told Eisenhower, "I know, as you yourself know, what a nation is. It can help another but it cannot identify itself with another." De Gaulle accordingly ordered the construction of France's own nuclear arsenal, forcing any would-be attackers to consider how much they want to risk for the sake of conquering France. Thus *thymos* and practical reason allied themselves in the service of moderation—or, at least, restraint.

*Thymos* defends its own. Even when the schoolboy de Gaulle played with toy soldiers he insisted, "France is mine!" Wounded and captured by the Germans during the Great War, he used his enforced confinement to study the enemy's language, "return[ing] home from thirty-two months as a POW with a suitcase full of materials for future writings and lectures"—many of which would warn against German military resurgence. In 1919 he saw action in Poland, participating in "the miracle of the Vistula" when Polish troops and foreign volunteers unexpectedly defeated the Red Army

and saved Poland from foreign domination. Decorated by the Polish government, de Gaulle evidently regarded Poland as an exception to the perfidious general run of foreign countries. He condemned the Yalta settlement from the beginning and, as late as 1967, visited Gdansk and said, "The obstacles that you think are insurmountable today, you will without any doubt surmount them. You know what I mean." Poland too had become "his."

No tyrant, de Gaulle admired *thymos* in others. In the 1920's he saw the French colonies in the Mideast and wrote, "My impression is that we haven't really made much impact here, and that the people are as alien to us—and we to them—as they ever were." The French must therefore either compel obedience or "get out." His decision to disband France's colonial empire followed from this recognition of both the strength and the limits of *thymos*.

"A statesman is needed." De Gaulle wrote that on May 3, 1940 to the Third Republic's last prime minister, Paul Reynaud, who proved unequal to the need. As the nazis conquered France and his mentor, Marshall Pétain, capitulated, de Gaulle reacted simply to France's "men without chests": "I saw treason before my eyes, and my heart refused in disgust to recognize it as victorious." Not only military and political timeservers but many intellectual luminaries endorsed Pétain; these included Gide, Mauriac, and Claudel.

In those early days, it was not men of experience or leadership, it was not the intellectuals or politicians or administrators or serving officers who were the first Gaullists and rallied to the Cross of Lorraine. They did not come from the châteaux or the cathedrals, but from the parish churches and the synagogues, the French of the Paris Métro, the fishing villages, the factories, for whom all was clear and simple.

When de Gaulle founded Free France in London, less than one-sixth of the French then on British soil joined him; those likely to be on foreign soil were unlikely to respond to a simple call to honor.

By 1941, "he had made up his mind that the war would be long, that Britain and the Allies would win, and that his priority from then on would be to claw back everything he could for a victory for France." The clawing among de Gaulle and Churchill, Roosevelt, and the anti-Gaullist French drew blood. Although Churchill quarreled angrily with him (going so far as to threaten, "If you obstruct me, I shall liquidate you!") de Gaulle found Roosevelt and the French elites more consistently hostile. The American President dreamed of a new, postwar state, "Wallonia," to be fabricated from "the Walloon parts of Belgium with Luxembourg, Alsace-Lorraine and part of northern France." Although he considers various explanations of Roosevelt's allergy to de Gaulle, Cook finally decides that "there can be no rationale or explanation of what amounted to a personal obsession." (Perhaps Roosevelt, who exemplified the American liberal's ambivalence toward *thymos*, resented a man "of one piece," a man who at once blocked the liberal's ambitions but who did not share the liberal's moral reservations concerning ambition.) As for the French, during the war de Gaulle contended with the old right (the Vichyites condemned him to death *in absentia*); after the liberation "it was a struggle for local power between the Communists and the Gaullists," a struggle de Gaulle won by the spirited expedient of ordering the Communists to the front lines. It was the postwar exhaustion of *thymos* that caused de Gaulle to resign as prime minister.

Although de Gaulle could be a master of any parliamentary debate he chose to enter, he was never cut out for the maneuvers and cut-and-thrust of parliamentary democracy. . . . It was not his idea of how to run a government.

The French viewed his departure with relief and did not expect him to return. When he did, it was of course on his terms. Foremost among these was a new constitution, a presidential regime that ended parliamentarism. The men without chests, talkers who confused action with the force of inertia, found themselves subordinate once

more to the man of *thymos*.

In previous books, Cook has written extensively on World War II, and 60 percent of this book concerns the war and its aftermath. The chapters on de Gaulle's founding and defense of the Fifth Republic are well supplemented by Bernard Ledwidge's recent biography (*De Gaulle*; St. Martin's Press) and by several chapters in Malraux's *Le Miroir des Limbes* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston). De Gaulle's constant theme during those years, *la grandeur*, inspired fear and hatred, admiration and ridicule. Cook does not quite understand de Gaulle's intention, but he does present the words and actions of a statesman attempting to bring a thoroughly modernized populace to the unmodern virtues of courage and moderation, a statesman forced to use modern tools for unmodern ends.

Cook gives the two customary explanations of de Gaulle's failure to complete his second term as president: from 1958 to 1968, French university enrollments tripled and de Gaulle did not sufficiently anticipate the resulting tensions; in 1968, the Soviets crushed Czechoslovakia's experiment with civil liberties, thus refuting de Gaulle's claim that Soviet ideology mattered less than Russian nationality. In both instances, the man of *thymos* underestimated the power of ideologies. (The French university students were not only more numerous; a significant fraction of them put on ideological costumes, stitching together patches of anarchism, pop psychology, and the teachings of Mao Zedong.) De Gaulle rightly considered these ideologies absurd. He wrongly dismissed them as irrelevant to serious politics. That is, he underestimated the power of intellectual absurdity in human life, a power that never lasts at its peak but reappears with the persistence of dandelions. If allied with reason, *thymos* can rule the appetites. But in late modernity the appetites have themselves made alliance with reason, using reason to build ideologies, distinguished from religions or philosophies by their egalitarianism.

Statesmen are still needed.

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# The Mind of a Manichean *by Brian Murray*

*"Religion, Love, Nature, Polity—All select things have a reference to Mysticism."*

—Novalis

Czeslaw Milosz: *The Land of Ulro*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

In 1980 Czeslaw Milosz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. At the time he had been living in Berkeley, California, for just over 20 years. But it is safe to say that until Milosz became a Nobel laureate, very few readers of serious literature were on even the most casual terms with his poetry, or with his less acclaimed, though no less erudite and subtle, prose. The reasons for this neglect are not difficult to fathom. Milosz, who is 73 years old, writes almost exclusively in his native Polish, and only in the last three or four years have translations of his work become readily available. Moreover, Milosz has absolutely no taste for the sort of shameless self-promotion that in this country has aided and abetted so many literary successes. He has not posed in a wrestling costume for *Vanity Fair*. He has not appeared on *The Tonight Show* or in one of Warren Beatty's movies. Indeed, shortly after he learned that he had won the Nobel Prize, Milosz bluntly told reporters: "I don't want to be famous! . . . I prefer to continue my strange and private occupations."

Still, Milosz has not been entirely invisible. He has written often of his passions and prejudices, and of the social and historical circumstances that shaped his artistic sensibility. In *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (1968), Milosz traces his descent from a fairly distinguished Lithuanian family of minor property-holding gentry; he describes how he spent his formative years quite contentedly in the lush, fertile, almost paradisaic region of Vilnius, at that time part of Poland. He notes that as a youth he was very much intrigued by the beauty and mystery of the natural world, and by extension in a wide

range of scientific and theological questions. Accordingly, while still in high school, Milosz took it upon himself to study an assortment of apostasies and heresies that, in the Middle Ages at least, sparked considerable debate. Milosz's writings prove that he still understands the subtle differences between, say, Albigenianism and Catharism. They also show that he is himself particularly attracted to the concept of a metaphysical and religious dualism—to the Manichean theory that a benevolent God has for some inscrutable reason leased the world of matter in its entirety to Satan, the cause of all Evil. In *Native Realm* Milosz concedes that his "propensity" to Manicheanism remains.

Milosz also admits that, as a student in Poland during the 1930's, he came to regard Marxism as "vital and bracing" and so "turned into a Red." During World War II Milosz fought the nazis as a member of the Polish resistance movement; after the war he assumed the position of cultural attaché in Washington and Paris for the Soviet-controlled "People's Republic of Poland." As he explains at some length in the concluding chapters of *Native Realm*—as well as in the Preface to his 1953 "speculative essay," *The Captive Mind*—Milosz quit his diplomatic post in 1951 and went into exile in Paris after deciding that he could no longer stomach the myriad tyrannies of Stalinism, or compromise his literary independence for the sake of "socialist realism." For "socialist realism," notes Milosz in *The Captive Mind*, is "not merely an aesthetic theory to which the writer, the musician, the painter or the theatrical producer is obliged to adhere." It involves, by implication, "the whole Leninist-Stalinist doctrine." It "forbids what has in every age been the writer's essential task—to look at the world from an independent viewpoint, to tell the truth as he sees it, and so to keep watch and ward in the interest of society as a whole."

In 1961 the multilingual Milosz assumed the position of Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. In *Visions From San Francisco Bay* (1969) he continues to frankly advertise his biases as he meditates on life on the West Coast during a decade of unprecedented social turbulence. Here he records his distaste for the "Worship of the Golden Calf, the rule of the dollar" that he finds pandemic in the United States. He condemns the American media for its employment of a language "which makes everything shallow and false"; for its putting a premium on "garishness, brutality, sex"; for its creation and celebration of a very vulgar "mass norm." He complains too that America lacks, among other things, an "historical imagination" which he suggests "is perhaps why in American films both ancient Romans and astronauts from the year 3000 look and act like boys from Kentucky."



But Milosz makes it clear in *Visions From San Francisco Bay* that he should not be counted among those many leftist artists and intellectuals who automatically equate America with all that is ugly and corrupt in the modern world. For example, he writes of his admiration for the discipline and the simple earnestness—the "virtue"—that he finds displayed at American country fairs, and he mocks the typical urban-bred "long-haired revolution-

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