

## *Two Poems by Richard Selig*

### ORESTES

**W**HAT grave at midnight opens, what prophecy comes true,  
What dark mouth opening under a bare bough?  
The long lean tomb of a tall man, taller than life,  
Of Agamemnon's son whose glory, stained on a knife,  
Still shines with crime's renewal, Abel's death, your wish.  
Those ancient bones will tell you: feeble was the leash  
Tethering the righteous man from the unrighteous act.  
What law his mind was tethered to, his heart had lacked.

Cassandra saw and prophesied: beneath the friendly mask  
Lay the king's death, the queen's lust, the lover's obscene risk.  
Mycenae's stone received the blunt fall of heads  
And choking streams of blood, but never any sorrow sheds;  
For witnessing such crimes cannot disturb its sleep.

Yet stones can dream, blood can dry, and mortal reap  
From dreaming stone the shattered moment of his death.  
Because the good Orestes came—straight as youth  
Seeks out its noblest aptitude—to find the dark house  
That bred him, he doomed his strength into a bitter cause.

Step by step the story when retold retells  
How peace is paid for crime by crime. Blood falls  
Repeatedly in seasons: history is one great year  
In which a liturgy of violent acts, deep fear,  
Wronged innocence recurs as do the seasons' storms  
And man is never safe from harms and doing harm.

### A VOYAGE

**B**EGINNING another, stranger voyage, stars shook  
From sails. The water eased against my skin.  
Shawled in wind and salt I took the last look  
At what I was: wine-dark, dark as blood as wine.

With wind for courage, water salty as my tears,  
I gave to grief its due and drowned it with my going.  
Because the land, too still, too slow and full of fears,  
Was out of sight, I sank unsteady roots, began my growing

There, in a feminine, indifferent element  
Where nothing seems to change and nothing stays.  
Accepting all the moods of heaven, kind or violent,  
She held and pleased me upon unquiet thighs.

# BOOKS

## “A Condition of Mere Nature”

“INTERNATIONAL Relations” as an academic discipline, Professor Arnold Wolfers of Yale notes in introducing a curious anthology,\* was born of the idealism of World War One, and particularly of the fervour for a League of Nations that would encompass the family of man in a happy communion. This idealism was itself a union of two incompatible blood-types: on the one hand, a humanist universalism that verged on the utopian; on the other, a doctrinaire liberalism that celebrated the natural right to self-determination, nationhood, sovereignty, and similar appetising things. These rights being asserted, they inevitably clashed, and instead of being in utopia we were back in a “condition of mere nature” (Hobbes) where man wars against every man; and the nations which made up the League began gobbling one another up.

It is not surprising, then, that “International Relations” was sickening from the start, and that it has passed most of its days in an iron lung, i.e. the university. There, it is fed with the leavings from History’s high table (“Rumanian-Bolivian Relations, 1877–1904”) and Sociology’s low one (“Psychological Tensions and International Concord in the Near East”), while trying to make itself more or less useful by tutoring young people in the ways and wiles of statesmen. What it has to teach is what a maiden aunt will tell her innocent young niece who is going off to live in the big city. Such advice, whether puritanical or prurient in tone, ought not to be lightly scorned; but it is of relatively little help when the lights go out, memory fails, and there is only strength of character and native cunning to fall back on.

In international affairs the lights are always going out, which is perhaps one of the reasons

this anthology makes such dim reading. Of what use is it to know that Sir Thomas More lists five kinds of just war in his *Utopia*—especially when they add up to nothing more than that a just war is one entered with clear conscience, and after prudent calculation? The pronouncements on foreign affairs of More, Bacon, Locke, Godwin, Burke, Hamilton, *et al* are important clues for any analysis of their political philosophies. But aside from exposing students to good prose and fine minds, and supplying journalists with a convenient stock of quotations (both good things in themselves, to be sure), the fragments in this book can offer little knowledge about, or insight into, foreign affairs. Selections from diplomatic memoirs would have been far more to the point. For these political philosophers were, in foreign affairs, as much the sport of circumstance, as much bound over to Necessity, as the sovereigns and statesmen they presumed to advise. Their generalisations are generalities, the commonplaces of worldly wisdom; while they do not provide us with any specific analyses of concrete, temporal problems from which one might learn, if only obliquely and analogically, how to get along and ahead.

IS THERE, moreover, a definable Anglo-American tradition in foreign affairs, as the title of this book claims? No one had ever noticed it up to now, and it is most improbable that it had been simply overlooked. It is true that, on the whole, English and American thinkers on politics have been slightly less “machiavellian” and more moralistic in their style of thought than their European counterparts. But, as Professor Wolfers himself points out, this was the result of the geographical insularity of the English-speaking peoples, which endowed them with a greater range of choice in their actions. Even the most “machiavellian” of Continental thinkers (including Machiavelli himself) allowed that geographical luck was one way of escaping from the iron laws of policy they laid down. And in any case, this accident

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\* *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs*. Readings from Thomas More to Woodrow Wilson. Edited with an introduction and commentary by ARNOLD WOLFERS and LAWRENCE W. MARTIN. Yale University Press. London: Cumberlege. 36s.