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Philip D. Beidler, *Beautiful War: Studies in a Dreadful Fascination*, University of Alabama Press, 2016

Philip Beidler's *Beautiful War* helps us make sense of our aesthetic fascination with war, by capturing the human process by which a people's history and memory are built out of the way it tells its war stories. The process Beidler illustrates in these essays has to do with how war stories, war memoirs, and war art are appropriated, even as they are generated, as the building blocks of entire political, cultural, and social systems.

Beidler's collection of essays on war art is as much a cultural as an aesthetic study, and is intensely relevant today, as we struggle to comprehend the cultural implications of a tumultuous social and political response to the age of the war on terror. Each of Beidler's chapters show us a complex process by which cultural legacies emerge to reflect the popular aesthetic response to a war, and then these legacies themselves become the building blocks of a new cultural identity constructed out of such previously inherited strands of history and memory.

Beidler starts his study at that moment in the west when art shows us "war emerging from myth in the traditional sense to become a rationalized instrument of state power." Although sensitive to the systematic, impersonal forces of militarized systems, Beidler is ultimately interested in the individual experience, so the Renaissance is a natural place for him to begin this series of case studies in war aesthetics. Shakespeare marks this moment, when humanism appears alongside a dawning self-awareness of political process. Beidler's opening chapter is a study of soldiering in Shakespeare that documents the spirit of Shakespeare's age, in which older mythologies are insufficient,

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and “new definitions of human individuality are reconfigured against the ideological backdrop of the militarized modern nation state.” Beidler’s diverse subjects in *Beautiful War* go on to include (among others) the literature of American colonial wars against the Five Tribes, the popular cinematic renderings of the American civil war, and WWI and WWII British and American literature, painting, and music.

Beidler is a keen observer of social architecture, and this collection includes studies of urban space from Beidler’s extensive travels. Beidler’s work emphasizes the study of existing works of art, but he ultimately wants to capture what he calls the archaeology of war, a complex phenomenon by which a whole people understand their identity through specific artifacts of history and memory inherited not merely from its wars, but from the way its wars have been culturally manipulated. Beidler uses the public architecture of Qingdao and Cuba as some obvious examples of how social space itself becomes an artifact made up of layers of derivative war ideologies. In the case of Qingdao, for example, Beidler is attentive not just to the aesthetics of what is present in the social and political landscape, but also to those aspects of history and memory that have been erased. The island of Ewinetok, Beidler notes, which is part of the historical narrative of WWII, was vaporized in the explosion of the world’s first hydrogen bomb. Beidler’s attentiveness to this kind of ‘layering’ of details of presence and absence allows him to illustrate cultural phenomena that have a multidimensional aspect that evolves over time and space. After allowing these architectural studies to develop this strand of his inquiry, Beidler turns at the end of his book to the way our own American society has seen its identity shaped by the cultural manipulations of American wars, in a process that is particularly manifold with respect to the legacies of Vietnam and recent conflicts in the Middle East.

Beidler’s voice gains force and power from his own identity as a combat veteran. *Beautiful War* is held together by Beidler’s own investment of his experience and faculties in this task of unpacking the modern fascination with war. While Beidler’s case studies are admittedly aesthetically important moments in the evolution of the modern attitude toward war, their historical scope is too broad to unify this book on its own. Beidler’s own vulnerability as a combat survivor and his unique capacity to identify with the individual artists whom he studies give this book its unity of message. Nowhere is this more evident in the book than in his study of Ralph Vaughan Williams, who survived WWI and went on to grow old as an artist, attesting to the power of art to restore, redeem, and respond to human violence. Vaughan Williams, Beidler asserts, is “the provisional creator who somehow puts the world back together after the end of the world.” Vaughan Williams’ personal experience of combat as an ambulance driver shapes him uniquely as a spectator of war. As Vaughan Williams’ sister commented,

“working in the ambulance gave Ralph vivid awareness of how men died.” This is true of Beidler’s own life as well, for the reader can sense the maturity of a veteran who has dedicated himself and his work to illuminating the way history and memory have to account for themselves to those who cannot speak from beyond the graves of war.

Combat literature such as Tennyson’s famous “Charge of the Light Brigade” can help us appreciate the pathos of human spirit squandered by “someone” who had blundered, but it is the survivors of war who are situated to respond to the moral and cultural legacy of the conflict in which they fought. Beidler chooses the artists at the heart of his work for the way they can depict the lived conflict between the individual and the implacable hierarchy of the military system. In the militarized modern state, war is increasingly recognizable as one of those “dreadful convergences of history where catastrophic casualties become measured by military pointlessness.” Beidler recognizes in Virginia Woolf’s character Septimus Smith a symbol of the way the state seems inevitably to fail the individuals who have born the cost of combat. Beidler writes of Septimus, “As a catastrophically failed man, he becomes singularly emblematic of a whole failed system of class, gender, privilege and social administration.”

Beidler’s essays help us integrate the individual experience of war and the implacable forces that shape history. Vaughan Williams, for example, can use his music to “help to recreate a recognizable world of history and tradition in which the individual person may feel himself or herself to be a not incidental inhabitant of the landscape.” Lady Butler is similarly able to do this for the common soldier, for she paints the soldier “to let the world see him.”

This humanism is not just found in Beidler’s subject matter, it is also integral to Beidler’s own method of approaching literature, fine art, and architecture, as the ‘canvasses’ on which we can view not just a war, but our human fascination with war as well. In Beidler’s analysis of Ted Turner’s film *Gettysburg*, for example, Beidler illustrates how a “concept” becomes a “property,” and an American ideology emerges around the “business of Gettysburg.” Similarly, Beidler compares two film versions of *Henry V*, finding in Laurence Olivier’s St. Crispin Day Speech in the 1944 production a “moralistic, propagandistic glorification of English military tradition,” while Kenneth Branagh’s in 1989 emphasizes the way a commander can self-consciously become “a medium of psychological and political manipulation.”

Beidler does not bring an ideological agenda of his own to this study of the cultural artifacts of modern conflicts. Precisely because the chapters are such beautiful examples of close, careful study, it is a surprise that an agenda does emerge at the end of the book. Perhaps we can call it a meta-ideological agenda, for what emerges is an imperative to respond in an age in which the cultural manipulation of war has

amplified its corrosive effects on our moral identity. In the penultimate chapter, Beidler explores the American engagement in Vietnam, with its now documented operational atrocities, as the “inevitable catastrophic end point of the American historical mission, the country’s myths of historical innocence and geopolitical invincibility now fused with the endless capacity for dealing death.”

War technology continues to increase the asymmetry of modern conflict, which allows a dominant nation state in part to dodge the challenge of justifying human carnage successfully to families and friends of the dead. Throughout contemporary culture, American art, history, and memory no longer evolve directly, but pass first through a medium of what Beidler calls “technologizing consciousness.” Beidler leaves us his work at a time when the factor of technology has exponentially complicated the already (and implicitly) derivative legacy of war that has characterized the modern nation state since Elizabethan times.

“I no longer have the heart for it,” Beidler concludes, “for the ongoing journey of chronicling, as Tim O’Brien has called it, the lives of the dead.” It is for the next generation of artists and scholars to find the courage to explore how the “materials of human experience and imagination” function in such a world, in which the convergence of art, history, and memory is as yet undetermined. Beidler urges us to “keep faith with the redeeming power” of fiction and the visual arts, and to create a new humanism to reflect the moral hazards of our age.

CH: You said on the phone that your experience in Vietnam in ’69 as a junior officer has “everything to do with who I am.” Can you tell me more about your combat experience and how your development as a writer and teacher has been influenced by your service?

PB: Born just before the end of World War II, I grew up with the belief that my parents’ generation had saved the world. I still believe that. As a kind of crossover young person of the Eisenhower/Kennedy generations, I believed that one owed one’s country an obligation to military service if so required. As to the Vietnam War, I had small political awareness. That is the chief legacy of the war for me: intense political awareness; an absolute scorn for the idea that every culture and/or nation in the world really deep down inside wants to be like us; a passionate wish that we stop fighting wars in the name of American chosen-ness. These have been the themes of my writing on the Vietnam War and other wars; on the accounts of actual history as it has transpired, you can see how abjectly I have failed. As to the concrete experience of being a platoon leader and XO of an armored cavalry troop in III Corps, it was a great emotional and

intellectual sea-change—the weight of responsibility, the intensity of loyalties with fellow soldiers. I had to understand a lot of this years later. Like a lot of people, when I got back, I gradually realized that my life could be dated into everything before the war and everything after the war. I threw myself into my graduate studies and my academic career. Until I quit nearly thirty years ago, I used alcohol as psychic medication. I had (and still have) trouble with lasting relationships. A fulcrum of my life over the last decades has been the rich experience of watching my daughter grow up as an intelligent, independent, aware person. She thinks we ought to travel back to Vietnam together. I think we will probably do that.

CH: When we talked, you mentioned that the Vietnam War literature of the 1970s had inspired you as a young veteran to start writing about the works that were coming out. What authors in particular have inspired you, and why? What did these Vietnam writers teach you about reading classics such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*? What other mentors have shaped the way you write?

PB: I can name three writers directly off the top who got me started: Tim O'Brien (*If I Die in a Combat Zone*); Philip Caputo (*A Rumor of War*); and Ron Kovic (*Born on the Fourth of July*). From there on I understood that one of my missions as a writer would be to write about these attempts—and countless others that have followed—to make some kind of meaning out of what happened to the Americans and the Vietnamese in that terrible war; and by extension to engage writers such as Crane and Woolf who along with myriad others attempt to mine some kind of redemptory meanings out the representations of war. As to war writers who have inspired me in my own efforts to combine personal memory and cultural reflection, I would have to put Robert Graves, Paul Fussell, and Tim O'Brien at the top of my list. *Good-Bye to All That*—even now as I grow old—still seems to me the story of my life. Beyond reading, I have had the privilege of friendships with Paul Fussell and Tim O'Brien, and I credit them both greatly with my education as a writer.

CH: *Beautiful War* is a series of studies that are more than academic – they are rich with your own personal insights, such as the moment you realized, standing in the National Portrait Gallery in London, that Sargent's 1919 painting *Gassed*, hanging in the Imperial War Museum, was refigured in his 1922 painting *General Officers of World War I*. How did you choose the studies that make up *Beautiful War*? What are your own favorite studies from this volume, and why?

PB: I grew up in Adams County, Pennsylvania, on the outskirts of the Gettysburg battlefield. On Sundays we would see the Eisenhowers at the Gettysburg Presbyterian Church. They always sat a few rows back from the pew where Lincoln had sat as part of his visit to the National Cemetery. History has always had a living presence for me. On our campus in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, we have memorialized the site where two black students tried to register as George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door. As to the epoch of history I chose for *Beautiful War*, it had to be modernism. That's what I know about. My parents were born in the first decade of the 20th century; my daughter as grown up in the first decades of the 21st. The Shakespeare lead essay, once I found the title "Arms and the Bard," almost seemed to write itself. The one on the Ted Turner movie Gettysburg, obviously engaged a lifelong passion. The one on the great English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, and how he came to terms with his horrific experience as a stretcher-bearer on the Western Front, became a new source of late-life inspiration concerning my own memories. The concluding essay on Vietnam "by the numbers" says that until we engage the brute facts of our ten-year campaign of death and destruction there, all the words written about the war will not matter one iota. Ditto Iraq.

CH: At the end of *Beautiful War*, you say that you "no longer have the heart" for writing about war. What will you write about now? How do you think the themes of art, history, and memory, which are so much at the center of *Beautiful War*, will carry over into your future work?

PB: I am despondent about our nativism, our militarism, our incorrigible belief in our national and cultural exceptionalism. In my later years (I am 72) I still want to talk about history as a presence. But I now want to concentrate on artists I love who—again, with emphasis on modernism—have brought beauty and at least provisional meaning into the world through their frequently strange historical lives and afterlives. I have looked for Clover Adams at Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, DC, Mark Twain in Hannibal, Missouri, and Gustav Mahler in Jihlava, Czech Republic; Virginia Woolf (Mrs. Dalloway) in London (Westminster) and Michael Cunningham (The Hours) in New York (The West Village.) I call it my "old man" book. It will get done when it gets done.

CH: The breadth of your work in *Beautiful War* includes studies of some classics of film, painting, music, and literature, alongside your 'readings' of

the compound cultural artifacts exhibited in modern landscapes of urban architecture and social space. As someone with a degree in the Classics, I am wondering what advice do you give your students about the relationship between their study of the western classics and their ability to make sense out of our digital, technocratic world?

PB: Good question, and one that I actually brought up in one of my classes this week. I told them to travel, travel, travel in a world where this is now an endless possibility. Given what they are paying for tuition, travel now seems a relatively affordable medium of education as well. Similarly, I told them to use their wealth of electronic opportunities and resources to travel, travel, travel, to engage other cultures and, as you say, their living landscapes. Meanwhile, we might remember that this begins at home. Fifteen miles south of the place where I am writing this, there is a vast pre-Columbian city left by mound-builders. The civilization vanished sometime around the time of the Norman Conquest. To this day, no one knows why.



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