

was still reassuring Wesselhoef that “you and I have as much in common and more than we ever had before! This war has taught me a lot of things”. As the war progressed, La Motte was increasingly aware of the possibility of manipulating information for one’s own benefit: “I started out being very prejudiced & partisan, & fed myself from what you call those pellucid wells of truth, the newspapers. Then I got to perceiving some quaint things. The same action was sometimes totally vile, & sometimes totally sublime, according to who did it! This, thinks I, – hard to reconcile with reason & commonsense”. She would explore this question of wartime morality further in *The Backwash of War*, questioning the “Ideals” of the virtuous soldiers she nursed compared to a soldier who had attempted to commit suicide, or the American “Sightseers” who were only at the war “to write a book – to say what they have done – when it was safe!”

In the spring of 1915, La Motte’s commitment to the war effort led her to join the hospital newly established by the American novelist Mary Borden-Turner, L’Hopital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1, in Rousbrugge, Belgium. The pair may have been introduced by Stein or perhaps have already known one

another from suffragette work in London in 1913. *The Backwash of War* is dedicated to Borden, who published her own memoir, *The Forbidden Zone*, in 1929. During this period La Motte told Amy she had “gone down pretty close into human emotions” and had subsequently written two war articles for what she called in February 1916 “the conservative old Atlantic Monthly”: “I am now planning another work – this time my book, me. That last one was not me. I have made a good start over this new book, 2 chapters are finished, the other 8 [lengths?] blocked out and in the rough, ready to be finished in the next few months”. These letters therefore give us an insight into the process of composition of the book and provide the only evidence we have of La Motte’s view of her own work.

By July 1916, she had returned to the United States and left the war behind for good. In August, she wrote from Chicago and told Wesselhoef that her book would be published in early September: “You will like the style, I hope, and also see that in a measure I am finding myself, but as you say, I hope to do better. It consists of thirteen sketches, and the name is ‘The Backwash of War’”. This letter has a note of finality, as La Motte told Wesselhoef she

was leaving for China for about a year with Chadbourne, where she would take up the cause of opium addiction. As she put it to Wesselhoef, “Do you remember those long talks we used to have, about my finding myself, etc? Well, a good part of your predictions have come true. I seem to have had a complete change of ideas and aspirations”. La Motte told Wesselhoef that as “another long silence shall ensue”, she hoped Eleanor [WHO?] could send her a copy of her book when it came out, telling her that it would “explain a lot of things”. The Chesney collection ends here, and we wonder how many more, if any, letters were exchanged between the pair (La Motte sent a postcard to both Stein and Toklas in early September 1916, so it wasn’t that she was not writing). Both would eventually return to the States: La Motte died in 1961 in DC, Wesselhoef in 1972 in California.

Whether *The Backwash of War* explained things to Wesselhoef is a good question. It is, to my mind, one of the most fascinating war memoirs, which deserves to be read alongside other more famous memoirists, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Vera Brittain et al, particularly because it was written, like Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu* in the same year, while the

war was still going on, yet with all of the disillusion and cynicism of the postwar period. In this text where La Motte sought to record the “ugliness” of war, she turns her satirical eye on all aspects of conflict, from the men who wait anxiously for letters from their wives, but spend their nights with fourteen-year-old girls in the war zones, to the mother of the injured civilian boy of ten, who resents being called to the hospital when he dies because she could be making money selling beer to French soldiers, to the maimed and mutilated soldier who is touted as a “surgical triumph” but begs his father to kill him. There are, La Motte tells us, “many people to write you of the noble side, the heroic side, the exalted side of war”, but she writes of “what I have seen, the other side, the backwash”. She later wrote that the book “caused, I believe, a great deal of unpleasant feeling”. The letters at Johns Hopkins, revealing the affectionate, loving side of Ellen La Motte and her political and aesthetic commitments in the pre-war and war years, allow us to read it with fresh eyes — and we cannot help thinking of the abstraction of Stein or Matisse, or the militant feminism of Richardson, when we do so.

The *New York Review of Books* often felt like an extreme form of home schooling. Robert Silvers educated himself like a Renaissance prince through his own magazine, each of his writers another courtier, another tutor. He hardly read anything else. When I first met him – I was twenty-one, fresh from university, assigned to the night shift, which with Silvers could last well into the morning – the only time I saw him reading a book was Stefan Zweig’s *Chess Story*, which he treated like a delicacy, and took his time getting through. My job interview lasted about five minutes. He quickly combed my essay on Wallace Stevens. “I’ve always been sceptical of people who claim to understand Stevens.” It was not the kind of thing you heard from professors. I was mysteriously hired.

As the lowest member on the *NYRB* ladder, my duties included ordering his shirts, delivering galleys by hand to the more ancient contributors, and rendering verdicts on his rushed shaving routine before his regimented evening absences at book parties and operas, only to return to the office, hours later. “Any news?” At all hours, I was ready to lunge towards the computer to take dictation that would begin unprompted, with a “Dear Danny” or a “Dear Mark”, bellowed or wheezed from behind his wall of advance reading copies. Bob had nothing against computers or iPads (“What a dazzling toy!”), but he never bothered to master them, which probably served him well: it was an un-trendy but characteristically wise decision to keep the Blog of the *NYRB* at the same standard as the print version. His scrawled comments and encouragements in the margins of proofs of pieces – A galley, B galley, C galley – were pored over by his writers like report cards or doctors’ prescriptions. Meanwhile, his moods were the weather of his underlings’ lives: moments of exhilaration (“Marvellous piece! She’s done it! This will cause a stir!”), followed by moments of incandescent outrage. When it came up that I did not know who André Malraux was, it was a scandal. Bob paused his eyes, stood up from his desk and

relieved me of my scalp: “Friend of Camus, author of *Man’s Fate*, minister for de Gaulle – he cleaned up Paris! You will never know what Paris before Malraux was like!”

In the middle of the summer of 2003, when one of us sheepishly informed him that there was a city-wide black-out – the cabs outside the window were already jostling for the Grand Prix with no traffic lights to restrain them – he looked up from his pages, and said, “Well, we’ll go on working outside in the park”. When we tried to get him to go to work in Central Park, he couldn’t be budged: there was still enough light coming through the windows. By the time we were informed we needed to leave the building, we had to descend the building steps in darkness – down dozens of staircases. Bob took to the evacuation with relish: a galley in one hand, flashlight in another; he sprinted down each flight, and then very delicately and deliberately flashed the light for where his co-editor Barbara Epstein, slowly coming down the stairs, could see. There was so much of him in these movements: the dash, the studied accuracy, the total immersion in the task at hand.

Over the years, as I got to know him a bit better, I noticed that many of his friends and contributors made a pastime of trying to piece together his past. There was the childhood in small towns in Long Island, which he would reference in laughing flashes about his father’s chicken farm in the Depression, as fantastical and alien an image for him, it seemed, as it was for us. His famous accent was once described by Tom Wolfe as having arrived one day from London in a box; more accurately by a friend of mine as “Mineola via the Grand Tour”. Bob would not have been out of place in *Casa Blanca*, running his own café – with better staff – somewhere between Rick’s and the Blue Parrot. At fifteen, he had been one of the teen-

agers sent to Robert Maynard Hutchins’s University of Chicago – an experimental batch of students that included Richard Rorty, Allan Bloom and George Steiner. But Bob was as abstemious about nostalgia as he was about alcohol and rich food. I remember once handing him a note from an old friend from his undergraduate years, reminiscing about the month they crammed all the Greek tragedies into their heads, and Bob chucking it into the waste bin. His loyalty to his friends was fierce, but when one of them died – George Plimpton was on my watch – a gloom passed over his face for few minutes before he had buried himself back in work.

I remember him being more troubled, a few weeks earlier, when a slightly cold piece by James Fenton on Robert Lowell came in. Lowell was Bob’s old friend, and one of the co-founders of the *Review*. He was not to be meddled with without cause. For in the pages of the *Review* his old friends continued to live, their reputations being rolled over every now and again, with Bob as the master of ceremonies. In later years, I would come across Bob as if he were already a historical figure in books: his name a source of local authority in Naipaul’s *Enigma of Arrival*, a source of “cosiness” in the letters of Isaiah Berlin.

But Bob understood the needs and feelings of writers in a way that made other editors often seem obtuse by comparison. He warned to revisions, thrilled to last-minute corrections, made it seem nothing could be more important than the piece at hand, and was fastidious in avoiding unnecessary fiddling. I cannot remember anyone saying that a piece had not been improved in his hands. He was brilliant at cross-marshalling expertise. An insight into the limits of, say, utilitarianism from Bernard Williams would be frozen, stored, and then suddenly deployed, almost verbatim, months later, on the phone with, perhaps, Ronald Dworkin. And he also knew how to handle

egos: “The trouble with Bernard is that he always wants to write on opera for us, which of course we can’t let him do”. A package of seemingly every book written by Quentin Skinner arrived in the office: “He’s very determined, isn’t he?”

Politically, the magazine was ultimately served well by its flirtation with radicalism in the 1960s, when Bob and Barbara Epstein printed instructions for a Molotov cocktail on the cover of one issue. It inoculated the magazine for a time against charges of being centrist while it quietly reoccupied the centre. The magazine that was out in front against the Vietnam War by the end had warmed up to Henry Kissinger. Style-wise, there was a retuning with invasion of the *Review*’s pages by Oxbridge historians and literary critics, when Bob’s craving for crispness hemmed in a broad New Yorkishness that could be petty but at least occasionally sublime. (But this may have been more of a forced error than is generally acknowledged: by a certain point the British were more capable of *NYRB*-style pieces than many Americans fresh from the troughs of Theory.) Barbara Epstein was more concerned with bringing on new writers and might have had half of *n+1* writing for the magazine, had she lived longer. In its last few years, Tony Judt’s style had become the unofficial house style for political pieces: “very clear” equaling “first-rate” in Bob-speak.

Robert Silvers will go down as one of the great American magazine editors, not simply on the merit of his surgical talent, but as the cultivator of an entire genre and sensibility. Yet his main gift may have been making the inspired pairings between book and author – the ideal salon evenings in his mind – into a reality on the page. He had good writers supply him with more good writers whom he knew how to keep and coddle, and who, in turn, gave him better pieces, for the most part, than they gave elsewhere. And as Bob knew better than most, and as the parade of praise of him by his writers suggests, nothing serves an editor better than his own legend, especially when he knows how to use it.

FREELANCE

THOMAS MEANEY