INTERCEPTED TEXTS

INTERROGATING WATER
AND OTHER POEMS
Philip Fried
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Ensuring the nuts are secure. With the Leveraged Capital
Rubberband, stretch an elastic liberty
Until it nearly snaps, from sea to sea.

To intensify the pronoun
Simply employ the reflexive myself.

Passages such as this are typical of Fried’s bitterly insightful wit, snubbed with double-entendres (‘Ensuring the nuts are secure’) that sometimes withhold their emergence until a second or even third reading. As often as the reader might snort and snicker, the political import behind the humor is no laughing matter.

As evidenced by 2011’s Early/Late: New & Selected Poems, Fried’s political consciousness has long been attuned to the ominous nuances of both mass and specialized discourse, particularly the subtle but not-so-subtle infiltration of military and political vocabulary into widely disparate sectors (contexts) of everyday American popular culture. As we helplessly watch the 2011 surge (flurry) toward the 2020s, it can be argued that post-911 poetry is giving way to post-post-911 poetry as witness and trauma renews to acceptance and despair, or at least to the bitter acknowledgment that we have met the determinism national security state and it is, perhaps not at the jackboots and truncheons stage of 1980s’ Oceania, but within the circumference of that Orwellian nightmare’s countless surveillance, warfare, and willful distortion of language. The rhyme of terms “Today I’m Afraid...” succinctly map the strategy, one that governments have employed since the age of Plato: “As short, portay how we quest for the goal of stability / Through multiple twists, flickering, fast, and safing /... For at all costs, we must battle citizen apathy / With the fiery swift and shimmer of the military.”

Fried’s “Words at War” provides an instructive example of how once purely functional or “oodescript bits of language” can be sanctified, sanctified, sanctified, or impressed into military service, like unavec 18-year-olds in need of direction:

Everyday words, recruited from city and town, to be all that they can be, Take Corner, who listen with no intent at the intersection of surfaces and angles, occupying a small space with pure vacancy.

“Enshrined by / a mission” and “Honed by terror to an adrenalin edge” our once-innocent word...moths to a mirror / weapon, The Corner Shot 2, that kills at an angle of 60 odd degrees, around a corner.”

Fried’s insertion of a registered trademark symbol serves not only as a typographical gag but as an edgelight reminder of the symbiotic relationship between war and commerce, an alliance further satirized in the poem “Catswalk,” which describes a surrealist fashion show where smirting models display the “Toschi-Full Metal Jacket with chainlink bobbles” and the “Zoe Laran Collection Armor Piercing line.” Projecting the influence of military technology beyond even the realms of language and business, the poem “Moral Heuristic” points the invention of a Moral Positioning System (MPS) to align your flight decisions / With four or five of the major world religions.” As far fetched as that sounds, you have to wonder if DARPA engineers haven’t already drafted the schematics.

With the commodification of militarism in everyday life and an increasing desire for technology to do our thinking and acting for us (e.g., Siri, self-parking cars) comes dehumanization, here poetically illustrated by its opposite: the humanization of corporations established by recent Supreme Court decisions, “Considered Opinion,” a villainette all the more acerbic for its graceful execution, chases the grunting of Constitutional personhood to powerful corporate entities:

Corporations divorce, marry, have attitude.
So why can’t they pay to air their sentiments?

That informative voices should not be subdued
In an era of vocal chatter, is common sense.
Yet these sensible citizens are denied free speech.

After due consideration we must conclude,
Supra and Id, no impediments and hence.
The censorship we confront is vast in its reach
When corporate citizens are denied free speech.

Implicit in Fried’s poetry is the fear that humanity itself is in danger of becoming ambiguous, indeterminate (‘Your own image was mirrored deep in the formless’), our ostensibly autonomy and free will disengaged by “bureaucracies of vapor.” As if to underscore this grim prospect, Interrogating Water eschews the indulgence of the poet I, a central Whitmanian or Dantean persona who guides us through a visionary or nightmare path of self-recognition. Instead, Fried intercepts and repurposes the ubiquitous, unthorified vocabulary and rhetoric of the world in which we actually live and lets it coalesce within our individual consciousness, hoping to foster states of heightened attention and awareness. If we are destined for a zombie apocalypse, then those of us who occupy “the ironic zone” along with Philip Fried might as well recognition the warning signs while we can still read them.

Fred Muratori's most recent collection of poems, A Civilization, is forthcoming from Dos Madres Press. His Memoir collection, The Spectre, was issued by Stockport Flats Press in 2011. He is the Bibliographer for English-Language Literature, Theater & Film at the Cornell University Library.