

Shirley Hazzard, *We Need Silence to Find Out What We Think: Selected Essays*, Edited by Brigitta Olubas, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

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Few *JASAL* readers will be unfamiliar with Brigitta Olubas's extensive scholarship on Shirley Hazzard's life and work. In 2012, Olubas published the monograph *Shirley Hazzard: Literary Expatriate and Cosmopolitan Humanist*. That same year she convened a Hazzard symposium at the Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University. Papers from that event were later collected in *Shirley Hazzard: New Critical Essays* (2014). Now, in *We Need Silence to Find Out What We Think: Selected Essays*, Olubas takes readers on a geographical, political and literary tour of Hazzard's life and mind.

This book, which contains some previously unpublished material, spans forty years of Hazzard's lectures, reviews and essays. Through an uneven five-part structure we are introduced to Hazzard as a self-educated, extraordinarily well-read literary commentator; as a public intellectual aflame with a sense of institutional and political injustices and incompetence; and as a traveller who establishes homes in Italy and New York but who becomes, through reading and political engagement, very much a citizen of the world.

The titular essay, originally published in the *New York Times Book Review* in November 1982, opens the collection and draws attention to Hazzard's deeply-felt belief that literature, expressed in 'accurate' language and in such a way that 'tone, context, sound and syntax are ideally combined,' is uniquely placed, among the arts, to articulate the truth of human existence. Hazzard dismisses style and form as idiosyncratic. The right words, arranged correctly 'in the silence of the writer's intimacy with his or her reader,' will be 'intuitively felt' and understood, she argues.

The three essays which constitute the remainder of Part 1 were transcribed from transcripts of the Gauss Seminars, delivered by Hazzard at Princeton University in the first half of 1982. Here the autodidact, speaking at a time when postmodern literary theory and practice seemed to be gaining a powerful hold in the academy, worries about 'our modern age.' She bemoans the 'degradation of language,' the 'modern industry of interpretation.' From a literary criticism perspective these essays read somewhat anachronistically. Yet, in place of analysis or interpretation, Hazzard traces the development of the hero, the anti-hero and the concept of duty, in an extravagant tour through the great works of Western literature.

Hazzard's erudition shines throughout this collection. In 'Translating Proust' (1994), she notes how a 'dozen years or more ago... I set myself the game, on summer evenings, of comparing favorite passages of the *Recherche*.' Through various textual examples she demonstrates her acute respect for, and appreciation of, the difficulties and beauty of the art of translation. Again, in Hazzard's introduction to Geoffrey Scott's *The Portrait of Zélide*, she offers a moving, understated glimpse of her admiration for Francis Steegmuller's work and of the stimulating intellectual companionship they shared.

Hazzard published two monographs about the United Nations: *Defeat of an Ideal* (1973), and *Countenance of Truth* (1990). Believing her work in this area to be insufficiently acknowledged, Olubas has drawn together six compelling essays that constitute a scathing indictment of the UN, under the then Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim. There is real energy in these pieces, generated by Hazzard's palpable fury at 'wasteful exercises,' the 'institutional

shambles,' the 'impenetrable bureaucracy, incapacitated by corrupt appointments and monumental maladministration:'

In the UN, as in the league, a perfect paradox was created: an institution that would proclaim standards only to undermine them; that would profess beneficence while condoning—actively or by silence, or through inconclusive debate—every form of barbarism. These apostatises were enclosed in an aura of righteousness in total contrast to the realities dictating them; and the UN emerged as a temple of official good intentions, a place where governments go to church, safely removed—by agreed untruth, procedural complexity, and sheer boredom—from the high risk of public involvement.

These essays are very much of their time yet continue to be relevant. They speak to ongoing global concerns about the effectiveness or otherwise of the UN, international human rights, censorship and the political suppression of dissent, the dangers of institutions and governments being beholden to big business, and nuclear threat.

Olubas includes some of Hazzard's critical reviews. In her discussion of Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* Hazzard asserts: 'As with all important novelists whose testimony implicates their native land, the fact that Patrick White is Australian is, from the literary standpoint, both essential and irrelevant.' In 2010, I was in New York and headed uptown to East 67th to a New York Public Library event—Shirley Hazzard in conversation with her friend, Stanford Professor of French and Italian, Robert Harrison. Accustomed as I was to the relatively small audiences that turned out on weeknights for author conversations in Sydney, I was surprised by the size of Hazzard's following. A full house. Hazzard reminisced about working in the basement of the United Nations, about pretending to be fluent in Italian in order to secure a more interesting job. She spoke a little about her life with Francis Steegmuller and her friendship with Graham Greene. More surprising to me was the extent to which she talked about her early years in Australia and the importance of those years in her later life. And then her eyes lit up as she described the colour, energy and excitement of leaving a drab post-War Australia and disembarking in South East Asia and what was then Bombay. 'I was never going home again,' she quipped. Some of that youthful excitement informs the delightful 'Canton More Far,' in which Hazzard recounts aspects of her life as a sixteen-year-old in Hong Kong in 1947. From there, the Hazzard world tour takes us through the archaeological museums of Naples, the Renaissance art of Tuscany.

We Need Silence to Find Out What We Think is a book directed towards Hazzard fans and scholars. The 'Notes' provide extensive resource material. In her introduction, Olubas explains that Hazzard felt writing non-fiction was 'something of a distraction' which took her away from the 'work that I love as a poet.' Readers will discover the intricate, inextricable connection between both forms of her writing. The arrangement of these essays give a sense of Hazzard's *big* life. A life of reading, thinking, writing, friendship and travel. The life of a writer spent within the intellectual milieu of mid twentieth century Europe and New York. In 'Posterity: "The Bright Reversion",' Hazzard writes: 'The human wish that something of our existence should linger to inform later generations is at its best one of our larger desires.' In her tribute to William Maxwell she cites Maxwell's protagonist who contemplates death: 'I cannot bear that all this will be here and I will not be.' Shirley Hazzard continues to speak very clearly from the pages of her work.

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