

Charles Marowitz

Jan Kott's *Still Alive*

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The trajectory of most books is from the eye to the brain and then out of some imperceptible pee hole at the back of the head. Only occasionally does something that you read enter the bloodstream and become a permanent part of your metabolism. Those are books that become so permanently lodged in the mental archives that they remain on instant recall for the rest of your life. Jan Kott's *Still Alive* (Yale University Press, 1994) is that kind of book for me.

I read it, savouringly, over four or five days, and when I'd finished found scenes and situations recurring in my dreams. An analyst would be able to provide some astute reason why that was so. He would probably prove that it connected up with personal psychic preoccupations triggered by the depicted events, but a critic would have a simpler explanation. He would point out that being vivid, subtle, graphic, and profound, the book fleshed out what was already known in general terms, but here achieved a specificity that made it ineradicably memorable.

The book continues in a haphazard and discontinuous way, the life of a Polish intellectual and political activist who suffered through the terrors of the German occupation and no less terrifying reign of terror unleashed by the Soviet occupation, emerging from these catastrophes with a philosophic detachment bordering on the Absurd. Almost every horrific wartime event is flecked with elements of black comedy. The unbearable and the absurd are constantly in tandem. First-class chronicles of the past seventy years of European history have been churned out at an alarming rate, but I know of none that captures the deracination of those decades as well as this; none that gives you the palpable sensation of being in the midst of the carnage, displacement, and

hunger that characterized those tumultuous years. The book presumes to be nothing more than a souvenir of the past, but being peppered with irony and stewed in bemused contemplation, it gradually becomes a kind of *Paradise Lost* with survival taking the place of both Heaven and Hell.

Throughout the book, Kott, a university professor who rapidly became involved in the Polish resistance, allows his mind to wander from period to period, person to person, anecdote to anecdote, and yet, despite the discontinuity, a kind of thematic through-line asserts itself. As if memory, spreading like buckshot and independent of chronology, had a life of its own.

There are innumerable Polish characters with long, unpronounceable Polish names – party workers, poets, writers, apparatchiks – far too many to achieve any recognizable identity but it doesn't matter. The landscape itself is vivid and the gist of all the roach-like characters that inhabit it illustrate the same themes: bureaucratic oppression, ubiquitous fear of disappearance or death, threatened imprisonment, and obliteration by decree. People are constantly being arrested, tortured, murdered, or committing suicide, and little by little the sense of living in a besieged society where virtually everyone's life is poised on a knife's edge insinuates itself upon the reader. It suddenly and powerfully, makes sense of all those hideous Second World War films where refugees and hostages were constantly being terrorized by jackbooted stormtroopers. It siphons all the clichés out of those cinematic representations of the war and, in the Brechtian sense, 'alienates' it as if seen for the first time.

Kott, a Jew who managed to obtain false papers, preventing his ethnicity from sealing his doom, races from one city to the next, always a step ahead of the Gestapo and the threat of imminent extinction. Miraculously, he survives the war only to be submerged in the mausoleum of Soviet-occupied Poland. Here, because of his Communist credentials, there is a temporary improvement in his status, but in the unpredictable political atmosphere of this post-war Stalinist society, revisionism and the unpredictable vicissi-

tudes of political factionalism force him to develop survival skills even greater than those acquired under the Nazis.

Ultimately, there is an escape to the West where, now as a highly lauded Shakespeare scholar, he settles down in the university at Stony Brook, New York; but the reverberations of what he has lived through never entirely subside. They condition his outlook and permeate his world view. For Kott, the world will always be a place where the status quo, in an instant, does a backflip; where storm follows calm and order precipitates chaos. This is the quintessential European experience of the early twentieth century and Kott not only describes it, he contains and exemplifies it.

The style of the book is casually devastating. Confronted with the most terrifying circumstances, the eyes in Kott's punch-link visage narrow, a smile plays on his lips, and the author immediately proceeds to objectify his experience. Like Good Soldier Schweik, Kott has the ability to be enmeshed in the most harrowing incidents and emerge unscathed, good humour miraculously intact.

In the last chapters, Kott describes with clinical precision and total lack of sentimentality the five heart attacks that each time almost snuffed out his life. The metabolic terror that assaults his body is the biological equivalent of the totalitarianism that wreaked such havoc on his social self between the 1930s and 1960s. The cardiac arrests emerge like the progeny of Stalin and Hitler, Gomulka and Jaruzelski. They are just as irrational, just as menacing, just as impossible to counter or cope with. The clinical descriptions segue into limpid, utterly sensible contemplations that give the book its solid philosophical anchor.

What always made Kott such a distinctive critic was the way in which he was able to find in the classics, particularly Shakespeare, the living essence of contemporary forces. It was Kott more than anyone else who showed us the connection between historical totalitarianism and contemporary power politics; how the kings anointed and the modern despots shared the same ideologies and techniques of plunder; how the so-called

Grand Mechanism was hatched in the Middle Ages and acquired sophistication right up to the present. What *Still Alive* does is to spell out the experiential base from which those theories were hatched.

It was because Kott lived the kind of life he did that he was able to have the insights he had. What made him an astute critic of Shakespeare was not reading and scholarship but converted perceptions about life's cruelties and absurdities. That is what has always lifted Kott far above his critical colleagues. They were writing exegeses; he was extrapolating from personal traumas and tragedies. What makes *Still Alive* such a compelling read is that from his earliest days right through the rigours of the past sixty years, Kott has always been bristlingly, unquenchably 'alive' and it is the quality of that indigenous liveliness that confers such magnetism to this book.

Shakespeare Our Contemporary displays the length and breadth of Jan Kott's intellect and *Still Alive* is a literary microcosm that contains the soul of the man himself.

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Remembering Lenny Bruce

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On 13 October 2012, Lenny Bruce, had he not accidentally overdosed on narcotics (or committed suicide – the jury is still out on that one), would be eighty-seven years old. It is, of course, a thoroughly incredible notion – like an octogenarian Mozart, a superannuated Janis Joplin, or James Dean signing up for a senior citizen pension. *Poètes maudits*, doomed rock icons, and self-destructive superstars are supposed to die young. Their myth demands it, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

Bruce at forty-one, perched on a toilet bowl with a spike in his right arm and his