

A Few Thoughts on Writing *The Silences of Ararat*

by L. Timmel Duchamp

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Last summer, like many people living through the SARS-CoV2 pandemic, though I did not suffer an infection, I was in a bad way. I spent a lot of time in bed. I pored over my newsfeed incessantly. And I refreshed the COVID19 statistics page, always open in my browser, numerous times a day. And then something happened: Nisi Shawl invited me to join a writing jam she had begun hosting on Zoom. So, every day, I opened Zoom and spent two hours writing, framed by an ongoing conversation with Nisi, Kristin, James, Caerdwyn, Jo, and Paul. I organized my life around the jam. And when I needed to put my writing aside for my Aqueduct press duties, I spent the jam's two hours performing those duties. (Before then, I'd let a lot of them slide.)

I started, not with the current novella in progress (the fourth in a series of four that I'd been working on for the past two years)—I'd dropped work on it in it in March 2020 when the reality of the pandemic was just beginning to bite—but a story I'd drafted during the Bush2 years with the working title of “Paulina’s Tale.” Back then, I'd known something was wrong with the story, and so I'd put it away with other stories of mine that needed fixing. I'd almost forgotten it. But last July, a dream made me think of it, and so I decided to look at it afresh.

“Paulina’s Tale” was a feminist revision of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. At the time I'd written it, my focus had been on developing a plausible context for explaining the apparent randomness of Shakespeare’s King Leonides’s jealous rage. Paulina’s role in Shakespeare’s tale was that of a strong, wise woman speaking truth to power, and that was what intrigued me about the play. In real life, we have many

examples of men conceiving irrational jealousy based on imaginary infidelities or even mere attractions. Shakespeare doesn't really lay the groundwork for that in Leonides' case as he does in, say, *Othello*. (But then plausibility is not what one would call a strong suit of *The Winter's Tale*.)

Reading "Paulina's Tale" in July 2020, some fifteen years after I'd drafted it, I saw that my transplanting of Leonides' monarchical court into 21st-century North America had been too much of a cut-and-paste job. I had, yes, been quite clear about the culture of King Leo's court and of Ararat (my name for the kingdom, not Shakespeare's) as white supremacist, fundamentalist Christian, and authoritarian. This tells me that it didn't take Q-Anon to help me imagine Ararat's culture, since I only learned of Q-Anon's existence in 2019. The lineaments of such a culture were there well before Donald Trump became that culture's emperor-god.

But what I hadn't thought about when writing the story were two things: first, the relation between the writer's (and reader's) now and the story's then, and second, Paulina—who she was and how she managed to stand up to Leonides in Shakespeare's story. In "Paulina's Tale," she was the narrator and a *dea ex machina*—both the framer of the story and the one who made the impossible happen. Which is to say, a moral force *par excellence* (and thus in its way true to Shakespeare's story). I failed to ask, though, when writing "Paulina's Tale" how such a person as Paulina could even be found in the Ararat depicted in my story. I needed to figure out how a woman combining her particular perspective, moral power, and ability could not only survive but even thrive in its mind-numbingly repressive environment.

From the vantage of 2020, the relation between the writer's/reader's now and the narrative's then was obvious to me. (The insurrection at the Capitol in January 2021 confirmed my sense of this.) While I hadn't needed Donald Trump's ascendancy to provide me with the lineaments of Ararat's culture, that ascendancy did push my political imagination to see how we might indeed (and alas) get from here to there.

And that, I suspect, was the key to my reimagining “Paulina’s Tale.” Because I hadn’t worked out a future history that could link the depiction of Ararat to our moment, I’d rendered it static, in the way allegory is static. Allegory is a form whose core meaning is always the same, regardless of historical circumstances or other contingent factors implicit in the context into which it has been imported. That’s why it’s such an attractive form for conveying religious or political lessons claiming to be timeless and universal. It might be argued that Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, for all its superficial shenanigans, is such an allegory. I have never read it as such myself. And I certainly had no notion of writing a story intended to deliver a political lesson. My desire was to draw out the figure of Paulina and imagine a story hinging on her evolving relationship with Hermione. And, not incidentally, to wrench the story away from Leonides and his (male) advisers.

Which brings me to the second problem I found in my new look at “Paulina’s Tale.” I had the sense, reading it, that Paulina was addressing someone in particular, and I began to catch glimpses of her. More to the point, my reactions to Paulina’s story were those of that interlocutor, someone from outside of Ararat, who was hard put to understand why Paulina had remained in Ararat through thick and thin and not left it for a less hostile environment. (A writer can actually have such reactions to a story she has written when enough time has passed since she’s seen the story or thought about it.)

Once the interlocutor entered the story, it became more complicated and, for me, much more interesting. Communication, even between people raised in the same culture and speaking the same version of their culture’s language, is always a challenge. And it is necessarily affected by particular circumstances. To start with, living in Ararat imposed years of constant self-censorship on Paulina. The culture her interlocutor, Carolina, was born and raised in and even the language she speaks differed in significant ways from those of Ararat. This matters, because so much

communication depends on a shared language in particular and culture in general. While their cultures and languages overlap to a great extent, they are not the same. Paulina and Carolina are also of different generations, another source of differences that can thwart communication. And yet, despite the differences in the way they use language, Paulina's intercourse with Carolina gives her a reason for trying to put into words ideas, perceptions, and feelings she would never attempt to express to anyone living in Ararat.

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I finished drafting "The Silences of Ararat" in November 2021. And then came January 6, 2021, when a mob intent on overturning the 2020 presidential election overran and vandalized the US Capitol, baying like hounds after a fox in their pursuit of certain members of Congress they had demonized. I suppose the issue that preoccupied me most when thinking about "The Silences of Ararat" after January 6 is what it really means for large groups of people to operate with such incommensurable epistemologies that they cannot hold a discussion or even engage in a rational argument.

As I noted earlier, this split has been developing in the United States for some time. And it has been doing so with the enthusiastic encouragement of individuals in high places. Various Republican governors and state legislatures have been attempting to ban the use of particular words (as did the Trump White House) by public employees and those who perform contractual labor for public institutions; such censorship has sometimes included the mere mention of certain historical facts in public schools. The refusal to admit particular scientific facts and historical events into public discourse is nothing new, of course. But only recently did I began to think about what it means for such censorship to occur where a majority of the population does not share the ideology such censorship was meant to serve. My first glimpse of

the social implications of this came in November 2016 when my newsfeed was flooded with stories about how family holiday get-togethers had become impossible because family members could not agree on the most basic facts and thus could not talk to one another without contention, anger, and bitterness. Every subject, from health care to sports to education to the weather, has in the United States become infused with ideology. Communication between members of the polarized cultures has gone from strained to fractional.

Examples of such cultural polarization can be found throughout history. The one I know best, since I studied it as a graduate student in history, resulted in many, many deaths in Western Europe from the mid-16th through the mid-17th centuries. Not only did state-sponsored militaries slaughter, wholesale, populations espousing the “wrong” religious fundamentalism, but also mobs in communities, triggered by vicious rumors (often involving mutilating or even eating babies), slaughtered their neighbors and family members. (Roman Catholics believed that Protestants were evil, and Protestants believed that Roman Catholics were evil, and even, to put a finer point on it, Lutherans believed that Anabaptists were evil.) Since rulers determined which faith was mandatory for their subjects, revolts and attempted revolts on religious grounds also led to deaths, usually in retaliation. We like to remember that period as the time of Montaigne (who did his best to stop the bloodshed in his neck of the woods, with mixed results) and, in the early 17th century, the beginnings of the Scientific Revolution. But in fact, competing religious fundamentalisms (and remember, Protestantism came in numerous flavors) made individual survival in that rough century much, much more difficult than it might otherwise have been. I used to wonder how large numbers of people could drop one worldview and, on a dime, adopt another, either because one’s ruler ordered it, or because this or that preacher was an effective demagogue. As a graduate student, I could recite a lot of facts about

the religious wars, but I never really understood them. I can say, though, that my study wiped out every last vestige of the fundamentalist Lutheranism I was raised in.

But, back to the 21st century. Over my lifetime (now topping seventy years), I've seen people come to believe in all sorts of pernicious ideas that I resisted without even having to think about it, and then later shed and pretty much forget that they'd ever bought into them. Sometimes I discover that I, too, have uncritically accepted received wisdom, but like most people, don't notice the shift in my thinking. That's how human culture works. But the shift allowing people to believe canards like "Pizzagate" strikes me as something else entirely. For one thing, they've not been absorbed into mainstream culture or institutions (such as the media, the academy, and religious organizations) in the way that ideologically driven self-deceptions often are, so that people subscribing to far right-wing conspiracy theories are easily identifiable as "fringe." For another, their epistemology routinely denies the factual and, indeed, insists that below the surface of the factual lies a sinister reality that only they can see for what it is. (Does that remind you of a certain blockbuster sf film released in 1999?)

What makes our current cultural polarization so fraught, though, is that this fringe thinking is shared by so very many people and is at this moment calling the shots for the Republican Party—marginalizing those not cynical enough to go along with it.

On the other hand, what makes our current cultural polarization so interesting is that in 2016 the mainstream had to actually choose a side. From my left-of-center point of view, that made for some strange bedfellows. Similarly, the Me-Too and Black Lives Matter movements (for the latter, especially after the events in Charlottesville in August 2017) have made mainstream voices and organizations choose sides—business-as-usual on the one side, or speaking out against sexist violence and racist violence on the other. I've recently come to see the polarization as a reality in which a long, slow cultural revolution has begun to be felt in our

mainstream institutions, opposed by a minority who were previously the dominant force; unable any longer to gain purchase using the mainstream forms of thought, knowledge, and speech, that minority, rejecting the received forms, constantly reaches back to the past, claiming this or that fragment of thought as “foundational” (the way fundamentalist churches have always done, relentlessly amnesiac about their own histories). Truth to tell, when, following the 2016 election, I began to hear mainstream commentators (including so-called “moderate” conservatives) express thoughts similar to my own, I was troubled. I have been so used to never hearing my own observations, perceptions, and opinions voiced in mainstream venues, I worried that I might be missing something. It’s still the case, of course, that only a fraction of what I’m paying attention to is spoken in public space. It’s just that, from my point of view, what is known as “common sense” has gone through a larger than usual version of its continual readjustments.

“*Common* sense,” did I say? I’ve never been a fan of common sense, but its fracture is the most obvious symptom of our cultural dissensus. Something like 30% of the voting age population has rejected mainstream common sense. These are the people who, during a pandemic, would rather die and see others die than wear a mask over their noses and mouths, as opposed to the 60% who conscientiously seek to protect not only themselves but, even more earnestly, others. (Yes, it is true: people are more motivated to wear masks by the wish to protect others than by the wish to protect themselves.)

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In depicting the culture of Ararat, I made the intuitive decision to leave most of its details submerged in the text rather than to highlight them. The reason is simple: I did not want to write a satire of Make America Great Again culture. Doing so would have cast shade on Paulina’s reflections on her life and art, which was my real interest.

Paulina is in the untenable position of straddling two irreconcilable cultures, one of which she is no longer in reliable touch. She has childhood memories, the remnants of patterns of thinking and of knowing, and the values she grew up with to inform her personal sense of the world. But she has no one in Ararat she can share these with, except, to a limited extent, for Hermione and Emilia (and she must censor herself even with them). Her practice of art and her work in Stephen Arundel's theater give her a space in which she can think and express her values.

How could art not be essential to Paulina's survival *qua* the Paulina she has become?

The power of art may be limited in its most direct effects, but its potential for expanding the imagination (political and otherwise) cannot be overstated. Jacques Rancière addresses this potential in his *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009):

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in, and the way in which they are "equipped" to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable, and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. (72)

Paulina is aware that every viewer of a piece of sculpture will react differently to it (perhaps even not at all), contingent upon a whole host of circumstances. Rancière sees the "multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience" as a feature, not a bug of works of art (whether painting, music, writing, dance). It is

something that writers (as well as readers) need to learn to accept. An audience, that is to say, is composed of individuals, no matter all that the individuals in an audience have in common.

Self-censorship exists in every society, but is more comprehensive and thus onerous in authoritarian ones like Ararat. Ararat is in desperate need of disruption of “the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations.” One can easily imagine that even an easy-going production of *Measure for Measure* could, without challenging Ararat’s monarchy, expand the imaginative possibilities for thinking not only about authoritarian rule (the one Shakespeare depicts depends on the benevolence of its ruler for the decency of its rule), but also about relations between men and women and even between siblings. Art offers a stimulus for perceiving and thinking about how a society constructs reality, regardless of a work’s lack of outright “rhetorical persuasion.”

Saying which, I should perhaps end by noting what will be obvious to most readers: *The Silences of Ararat* is not about how I imagine the future, but about us, now.

—Port Townsend

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