

PRAISE FOR ALEX MILLER

Prochownik's Dream

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ALEX MILLER

LANDSCAPE
of FAREWELL


ALLEN & UNWIN

Hamburg
Autumn 2004

I

Agamemnon's edict

On examining my reflection in the hallstand mirror before leaving for the conference that morning, it was not my imminent death nor the poor quality of my paper that concerned me, but that I was in need of a haircut and had once again forgotten to shave. Winifred would have run her fingers along the back of my neck and reproved me, *You need tidying up!* As if I were a neglected room in her house. Winifred never had a house of her own, but in the ideal life of her imagination I am confident she had lived in one. For all the forthrightness of her modern feminist spirit, there was something immovably old-fashioned in Winifred's secret longings and I am sure she saw herself, in this life of her interior fantasies, as the broad-hipped, bosomy mistress of a grand establishment with a vast brood of noisy and unruly children and large dogs.

We never talked about it. I just knew it, the way I knew her mood before she came into a room. Could that be where she had gone? Not to nothingness, but teleported to her true home when the summons came? Although I am an unbeliever, I devoutly wished such a blessing on her. For she was a woman who deserved to meet her true—indeed her ideal and imaginary—self one day. Which I cannot say of everyone I meet.

She seemed to stand behind me that morning as I examined my reflection in the mirror, unhappy that her husband, Professor Max Otto, for whom she once possessed ambitions, was not to cut a distinguished figure in front of his colleagues on the occasion of his last appearance before them, but was to be remembered by them at the end as a dishevelled, grieving, defeated old man. But perhaps that is too harsh. I am of average height and a little stooped these days, owing to the persistent pain of a mildly arthritic spine, and my hair, which in my youth was glossy and abundant, floats about at the back of my head like a luminous nimbus. My eyes too have faded—I had not expected this. Once a lustrous amber of great depth and clarity, my eyes are now a pale mud colour and are inclined to water, as if I am forever on the point of weeping—as I should be—or have been peeling onions. And speaking of onions, the skin of my face and neck has become thin and papery, and several of those darkly discoloured patches have appeared on my forehead. I resent this deterioration in my appearance more even than the daily allotment of pain. Until

well into my middle years I enjoyed an unblemished complexion, which I no doubt owed to a distant Barbary ancestor. I took this blessing for granted as something that was mine for life, as if it were the unearned due of class or breeding. Absurd vanity! I am able to detect only the faintest remains of that glorious past today. Now I look on a landscape arid and deserted, where once a gay society flourished amid ripening pomegranates and purple grapes, the splash of fountains and cool sounds of laughter from the grove on summer evenings, from where the erotic imploring of the oud aroused our lusts . . .

But I exaggerate. If only it ever had been thus.

I ran my fingers through my ghostly hair, and touched with the forefinger of my right hand a flaky darkness above my left eye, then patted my inside pocket to make certain I had not forgotten my paper and my glasses, and turned from the mirror and went downstairs into the fresh morning. There was the mahogany glint of horse chestnuts littering the footpath and the grass verges. The fine old trees along Schlüterstrasse were clinging to the last of their leaves—as we humans cling to life and to memories beyond their season. It was that brief, charmed period in Hamburg before the cold arrives, when the weather can still be relied upon to be fine, and even reminiscent of summer. It did not seem inappropriate to me that I planned to end my life on such a day. I had written my paper without conviction, obedient to a duty felt more towards the dead than the living.

There had been no joy in it. It had been a task imposed on me by the grim moral overseer who rules my life—my conscience, let us say. To claim now that I understood then my true motives for persisting with it would be a lie. Perhaps I persisted because I unconsciously desired a *reason* to persist. Who knows? I cannot truly say what my deeper motives were. I did not know them then and I do not know them now. I had postponed my death in order to write this valedictory paper because my daughter told me Winifred would have wanted me to do it. That was all. I composed it with only the most fleeting moments of pleasure and forgetfulness, and entirely without those surprising instants of inspiration that make intellectual labour worthwhile. Its arguments were concocted from yesterday's leftovers, those stale thoughts out of that mouldering store of notes which I had preserved for thirty years—if preserved is the word for it—in the carton on top of my bookshelves in my study. I dug about in the cold ashes of that youthful folly and *came up* with something for this occasion. I hoped no one would notice how second rate it was, or that if they did notice they would not take offence, but would forgive this faltering of my advanced years and greet it with forbearance and silence.

As I walked down the front steps of our apartment building, little birds flew up at my approach. The publisher's unhappy wife from the apartment below mine, Lydia Erkenbrecht, herself a published poet, had scattered crumbs from her table for them.

Or perhaps, more prosaically, not having a family of her own to feed and therefore having few crumbs on her table, the good woman purchased packets of birdseed from the supermarket for this purpose. At any rate, these little street birds were now her family—starlings and sparrows for the most part, with the occasional avuncular pigeon. I had noticed how shamed she was whenever my sudden appearance in the entryway to our building interrupted this pathetic substitution. But she kept on with it, and now the birds had come to rely on her, and she possessed, besides her poetry, if not love, then an object to her persistence rather less pathetic than my own desperate insistence on delivering my last paper to the conference in Aby Warburg's old library.

It was all—all *this*—on account of my wife's death. I had stood at the window of our darkened bedroom that night, looking down into the deserted street, Winifred's photograph clasped to my breast, my hands folded over it as if I were a devout clutching a crucifix to my heart. For me Winifred was still the young woman she had been then. To see her smile was to see the girl in the green scarf standing in the spring sunshine on the Pont Neuf that first morning of our honeymoon. It was a photograph I had taken more than thirty years ago. I looked down from the window into the deserted street, the leaves of the chestnut trees dancing in the wind and making agitated shadows on the glass, as if hands signalled to me, eager for me to understand. Transfixed

by helplessness at my loss, I was numb with remembering. Until the moment of her death Winifred was an active woman, her energies youthful and her enthusiasms undimmed. We received no warning. There was no opportunity for us to embrace or to murmur a word of fond farewell. It was the evening of another ordinary day in the new routine of our lives. I had been retired from the university less than a month and she had made arrangements for us to travel to Venice for a holiday the following Monday. She was in the kitchen preparing our evening meal and listening to the new recording of Fauré's *Nocturnes* I had given her. I was sitting on the sofa under the lamp reading a young Harvard professor's *New History of the German People*. The astonishingly able professor was two years younger than our daughter Katriona . . . The hammer blow of Winifred's skull striking the floor tiles drove a spear through my heart—I still feel it. I have no memory of tossing the book aside and crossing the room but was at her side, cradling her head in my arms. In her sightless eyes I saw that she was dead. She was gone. Just like that. In a shocking and mysterious way—which I found strangely humiliating and embarrassing—the body I held in my arms was no longer Winifred. We had been cruelly cheated. I howled to the empty room, begging her to return to me. The silence that greeted my howls, the absence, the nothing that death makes of us, overwhelmed me. I am ashamed to write it, but even in that first moment it was for myself I began to fear. The water

for the linguini boiled frantically on the stove above me, spitting tiny arrows of fire onto my neck where I bent over her, Fauré persisting *en mi mineur*. Could I ever be myself again? Panic swept through me and I began to tremble violently. I knew that everything had come to an end.

I stuck it out for a few weeks, perhaps for a month, stumbling around the apartment in a daze, wondering who had brought the flowers and whether I had thanked them, going out to buy eggs and bread and coming home without them, staring emptily at the television hour after hour, an iron band around my chest. Then I made my preparations and telephoned Katriona in London to say goodbye. The whisky and the two small bottles of yellow barbiturate tablets beside the telephone on my night table were a comfort. My good friend Jürgen assured me that in combination they were a painless but certain means for exiting this world of ours. I had never been a whisky drinker. This was to be a new departure for me in more ways than one. A part of me remained detached and interested in the process—the immortal part of me, I suppose it was.

I wept helplessly when my daughter answered the telephone. 'You can't let go of everything just because Mum's no longer there to hold your hand, Dad.' She took me to task as if I were *her* child. 'You know Mum would have wanted you to write your paper for the conference this year. Farewells were important to Mum.' She was right of course. I was being selfish. I realised

then that the faint ticking I was hearing behind her voice was the click of her computer keyboard—she was multi-tasking. Such was her life. I decided to tell her I was going to kill myself, but changed my mind and instead thanked her for her advice. ‘I’m sorry I lost my composure,’ I said.

‘For heaven’s sake, Dad! You’re allowed to weep!’

How tired she had sounded herself. Our little Katya no more.

When my paper was announced by the chair, I stood up and approached the rostrum along the centre aisle between the assembled delegates. Do I only fancy it now with the benefit of long reflection, and in the shadow of the events that have since transformed me, or did I experience then a tremulous anticipation, the swift touch of *déjà vu*, that fleeting breath of a bat’s wing in the dark—a premonition, indeed, that my world was about to change once again, a further shift in the cataclysm of my last days, a settling of the debris of my life, which had collapsed around me with such unexpected suddenness? Was it really so as I walked down that familiar aisle in the grand library of Warburg Haus for the last time, my steps accompanied by the untidy and distracted applause of friends and one-time colleagues? What are we to make of these premonitory experiences? Something shifts, giving in to the pressures that have built for decades in the tectonic plates that support our poor notions of reality, then, suddenly,

a whipcrack splits the air about us and we are no longer able to judge our world by the means with which we have habitually judged it. The vista before us, the emotional and psychic vista, I suppose I mean to say, is no longer quite what we have been accustomed to, and we find ourselves strangers among our familiars. It is as if our mother tongue were suddenly gibberish to us, our guidance system scrambled and encoded into an alien snickering for which we possess no cipher. Did I feel it then? Or do I only recollect it now in the retelling of this story—that sudden unsteadiness, the unaccustomed *give* in the ground beneath my feet?

I stood at the lectern and took my paper out of my pocket and unfolded it. I did not see the delegates sitting in rows before me as individuals, but saw a kind of greyness topped, as the Baltic was often topped on summer evenings in my childhood, by little white caps nodding unsteadily on that never-still surface of the sea. I cleared my throat and read into the microphone the title of my paper, 'The Persistence of the Phenomenon of Massacre in Human Society from the Earliest Times to the Present'. I smoothed the pages against the familiar slope of the lectern and began to read. I wished for no more than to be permitted to read my paper and then to slip away quietly, to leave unnoticed and unremarked, having paid my dues to Katriona and to Winifred by doing as I was told. I had always felt more at ease when I did as I was told. I began with a quotation from Homer, the first of the poets—according to Curtius the founding hero, no less,

of European literature. Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greek expedition against Troy, and king of the Mycenaeans, cautions his younger brother, Menelaus, against sparing the life of a high-born Trojan. *We are not going to leave a single one of them alive*, Agamemnon says to his brother, *down to the babies in their mothers' wombs—not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them and shed a tear . . .*

When I finished reading my paper the applause was scattered and brief, an eager shuffling and murmuring arising at once in the body of the auditorium, almost before the last word was out of my mouth. Homer and massacre were not my subject. I had long ago settled for the intellectual upheavals of the twelfth century—my slim volume on the power achieved by the bishops during that century was the only work of mine to grace the shelves of the university library. The subject of massacre, however, had obsessed me for a time in my youth, but I had found myself unable to make any headway with it owing to my emotional inhibitions, not least of which was a paralysing sense of guilt-by-association with the crimes of my father's generation, and after several false starts I had abandoned the subject and fallen silent. It had remained an unexamined silence throughout my life, and was my principal regret. Perhaps I chose to speak of it at this time because I believed I would not be called upon to defend what I had to say. If that were indeed the case, then I was blind to it and freely

admit now that it would have been a dishonourable reason. But enough of these maunderings. The grand project of history, of its discontents, and of the necessity for each generation to rewrite it for themselves, was about to give way to the more immediate matter of the buffet lunch, which the caterers had laid out on trestles in the foyer while I was gibbering on about the obsessions of my youth. Like animals at the zoo that sniff the approach of the keepers with their food, the assembled delegates had grown restless. I stood a moment longer at the lectern.

Why I paused there I cannot say. Perhaps it was a last forlorn need for a sense of completion. Whatever it was, I hesitated to step out of the spotlight. I did not intend staying for the lunch, but was going home to the apartment at once to have done with my life. I was conscious as I stood there that my unblemished suicide stood before me. It was to be the last act of my free will. My noble exit. It was the one thing I might yet do well and not live to regret. As I made to step away from the lectern a young woman seated in the front row to my left rose to her feet and shouted something. Or it sounded like a shout. Her voice was loud and challenging and had about it the expectation almost of unfolding violence. Her wild shout arrested my movement and silenced the assembly. I teetered, neither going nor staying, then righted myself and stayed. The departing delegates turned and looked in her direction for the source of the commotion. Those who had not yet risen broke off their conversations and

remained in their seats, and those who had already risen, sensing that something of moment was about to happen, sat down again. And I, caught in the spotlight, stood with my spectacles in one hand while dabbing at my watering eyes with my handkerchief in the other, waiting for what was to come.

She was like a bright, exotic raptor spreading her gorgeous plumage in the midst of the ranks of these drab fowls. Her wild cry evidently called me to account. Once she had established an expectant silence, her voice rode upon it, her words filled with scorn and contempt. She was a woman in command of her audience and was clearly intent upon defending territory. In other words, she was young, intelligent and ambitious. With a touch of annoyance, I realised that I was not going to be permitted to slip away without being required to answer for my shoddy paper. I remained at the lectern—no longer the lecturer, but the accused. I was not so much listening to what she was saying, as fascinated by the spectacle of her performance. She did not stand still but walked back and forth, waving her arms about with vigorous gestures and turning every so often to confront her audience, the loose carmine and green fabrics of her clothing billowing around her as if she danced her meaning for us, the power of her case as much in the brilliance and volume of her movements as in her words.

Settled to her task, her voice took on the largeness of a bassoon, its tones rich and dark like the tones of her flesh,

its volume filling the broad confines of Aby Warburg's stylish library—and evidently penetrating beyond the library to the foyer, for I noticed that the back doors were being held open by curious members of the catering staff, who were looking in at the goings on. The passion of a youthful and righteous conviction vibrated through this young woman and she held us spellbound. I had no doubt that she believed herself to be sounding the last trumpet for me. Her energy, her bright clothes, her large gestures, her determination, her sense that this was her moment, flew like a field of banners about her head. Despite the extravagance of her delivery, however, she proceeded methodically, severe and centred, demolishing my paper point by point, quoting my words precisely with an astonishing facility of recall, her manner haughty and contemptuous. Turned half towards me, she made a careless gesture in my direction—'How can this man presume to speak of massacre,' she asked the enthralled gathering, 'and not speak of my people?' She closed her appeal with a last enveloping, flinging gesture, both arms raised in my direction, as if she cast me and the whole tribe of old men to which I belonged from her presence, and from the presence of all serious intellectual endeavour, forever and ever, amen—or for even longer, if her curse would but endure. For her the wheel of history evidently no longer turned, but had come to a stop at her generation's door. I had witnessed the phenomenon before. Such conviction is always impressive, slightly unnerving, and is

usually accompanied by a tendency to an overstatement of the case. As if she suspected herself of just this fault, she laughed. It was a loud, baying, bellow of amusement that bordered on self-caricature—she might almost have shared my thought: *the wheel of history indeed!* She turned abruptly then and stepped down the centre aisle and walked towards the doors, wrapping herself in her colours and not offering me the dignity of a reply—for which last gesture of contempt I was grateful.

Thoroughly entertained, the delegates applauded and watched her progress back along the aisle with delighted approval. A group of students standing by the doors shouted repeated bravos. She was the new Wallenstein and armies of scholars would fall back at her approach. Well, such was the theatre of the moment. Or so it seems to me now as I sit here writing this and doing my best to recollect the details of that day with its dramas and reversals. I am reminded again that it is never simply a matter of deciding to do something in order to actually do it. Certain other forces, complementary to our decision to act, must arise and range themselves alongside us or, despite our will and determination, we achieve nothing. However great our resolve, we never do anything alone—whether for good or ill—even in the matter of our own death, except of course in the interior ideal world of our imagination, where our private will is the unhindered master of ceremonies.

I was still standing at the lectern, clutching my spectacles

and dabbing at my eyes with my damp handkerchief, and no doubt cutting quite as forlorn a figure as any abandoned bride at the altar. It seemed only right that this black princess of a barbarous new order should have arrived at the very moment of my departure. Such efficiencies of the unexpected must surely be more than mere coincidence. Is there not in them a conjunction of historical lines of fracture whose sources are mysterious and ancient? Could she and I be more than merely actors on the stage at this fortuitous moment, playing out our parts as puppets do, without a will or a cause or an effect to call our own? As I watched her triumphant progress along the aisle, I saw in her the new commander-in-chief of the expedition against the old order, her intention none other than Agamemnon's: *We are not going to leave a single one of them alive!* We—I mean my generation of old men—had failed. Oh, I had known it years ago. I had not doubted our failure for decades. It delighted me now that the baton of the struggle for truth—if we must call it that, and what other word do we possess?—was to pass from my deluded, exhausted and defeated generation into the hands of such as this woman. I would not have been her match even in my youth. There had been none like her then. Just for this moment she had made it seem to us that a moral advancement of our kind might yet be achieved, and we were grateful to her for that. She had made it seem that all was not lost, that things might yet be done that we had dreamed of doing. Humankind, for example, might

yet be made good, let us say—there was nothing modest in her style. She was a leader and she had insisted we acknowledge her message. There is a kind of genius of intuition in these things which enables certain individuals to choose their moment well. She had the style of it. And she sowed within each of us—for an hour or two at any rate—new thoughts of liberty and justice. We saw in her the exercise of an incandescent power to preach the word of truth and we were not immune. For goodness' sake, who is? We knew this power—or at least my own generation knew it—to be a dangerous power that is given to a few individuals to exercise briefly over the minds of their fellows. We did not think of danger, however, but happily submitted to her spell. There is a greatly seductive, indeed there is a sensual pleasure in such momentary submission, and we do not resist. No spell, however, no matter how potent, can withstand for long the assault of sceptical reflection. Which is why it is the sceptic, and not the believer, who is in the end our saviour. We go home, we drink a glass or two of wine, we watch the latest news of massacres and famines on the television, and we are restored to sanity, our ecstasy forgotten.

As I stepped down from the lectern for the last time that day, it occurred to me, with a little jolt of pleasure, that there was one decent thing I might yet do before going home and killing myself. I knew at once that Winifred would approve the spirited generosity of the intention. Even though I had just been given

my dishonourable discharge, as it were, I smiled at the thought of Winifred's pleasure.

My old colleague and friend, the gifted teacher and amateur flautist Tamás Bartsch, stepped alongside me and took my arm in his—I have known Tamás ever since we were schoolboys together. 'So what is it you find in all this to smile at, dear friend?' he inquired of me solemnly.

'It is the thought of Winifred's pleasure at what I am about to do,' I replied at once, for Tamás and Winifred had greatly admired each other and there was nothing I wished to conceal from this dear man—except, of course, my decision to die within the hour.

'Ah, my poor fellow,' he said and squeezed my arm.

She—I mean the black princess, of course—was standing by the doors at the far side of the library in conversation with the group of admiring students and junior members of staff who had chanted their enthusiastic approval of her performance a few moments before. As Tamás and I came towards them one of the young women indicated my approach to her and she turned and looked at me. When she saw who it was, it was clear from her expression, and in the way she physically set herself to encounter me, that she anticipated a fight. Tamás murmured a desire not to meet her and went on through the door to get himself some lunch. The young woman introduced herself to me as Professor Vita McLelland, from Sydney University.

I offered my hand. She examined my extended hand for a moment as if she thought it might conceal a weapon, then took it in her own. Her clasp was firm, definite and brief, her gaze direct and challenging. She was ready for me. Her manner said, *Bring it on, Professor Otto!*

‘Permit me to apologise to you, Professor McLelland,’ I said, ‘for the poor quality of my paper. You are right, of course, to condemn such shoddiness. It saddens me greatly to have been responsible for your anger. Let me say again, I am sorry. It was not such an end to my career as this that I envisaged when I was a young man of your own age, believe me. Indeed I do not truly understand by what means I have arrived at this shabby state. It is a puzzle to me and has not been by my conscious design, I assure you. I sincerely hope that when you reach the end of your own career, which I am certain will be illustrious, you will do better than I with the question of the succession.’

She looked at me in silence after my little speech. The expression in her beautiful dark eyes was curious, engaged I would say, but disbelieving. She suspected irony, no doubt.

Recalling my beloved father and his state of bewilderment at his death, I said, ‘Passing the baton of truth from our own generation to the next has always been a perilous affair. Perhaps especially in my country.’ It was an artless expression of my thoughts on this difficult subject, and I feared, even as I said it, that my clumsy expression might give further encouragement to

her contempt for me. We may not ourselves have participated directly in massacring our fellow humans—and surely no sane person will hold the children responsible for the murders committed by their fathers—but our troubling sense that we are guilty-by-association with their crimes is surely justified by our knowledge that we are ourselves members of the same murdering species as they. I am a human being first and only second, and by the chance of birth, am I the son of my father and mother. I know myself to be implicated in the guilt of both my species and my parents, for it is to these categories of being, and to these only, that I own a sense of membership.

I was concerned that my apology might have sounded pompous to her, for it had been delivered in the very voice of the old order, which she was determined to silence. She did not relax but remained on her guard, evidently anticipating some trickery on my part. ‘Goodbye, Professor McLelland,’ I said and I smiled to see a doubt still for an instant the fierce and uneasy lights that flickered within the depths of her dark eyes. ‘May I wish you good fortune in the struggle.’ I inclined my head to her, an indulgence in an old-fashioned courtesy more familiar to my father’s generation than to my own. It was a private, and somewhat symbolic, gesture of farewell, however, to life and to a generation, and perhaps to my father’s hopes for me. Yes, even that. It was a homage to the ghosts of my own fallen heroes, to those men—and they had all been men—whose books in my

youth had seemed destined to stand forever as imperishable landmarks in the epic story of a Europe that had, since then, ceased to exist, their names unknown to this woman's generation, their works no longer valued or read. New histories have arisen since then. In our youth it is only the histories we write ourselves that seem to us to be just and true. As we grow old ourselves, however, our youthful certainties begin to fail us, just as our bodies do, and we see at last that we have been wrong to have believed as we have believed and that truth has no permanence but is a shifting thing.

I turned aside and walked through the lunching crowd. I pushed the doors open and walked down the steps, leaving the grand old library of Aby Warburg behind me. Professor Vita McLelland from Sydney University was the future. I was glad I had met her face to face. I was glad, too, to have held her hand and to have seen how she had at the last moment looked searchingly into my eyes and been affected by the heartfelt sincerity of my apology. I was glad for my father's memory, for his *sake*, indeed—for he still lived in my heart—that mine had not, after all, been a dishonourable end. On my way to my death I was feeling a rather silly optimism for the future of humankind, my judgment rattled, no doubt by the emotion of the moment, and my senses a little dizzy with the wonder of Professor Vita McLelland's glorious youth. How wonderful it would have been to live again that grand illusion.