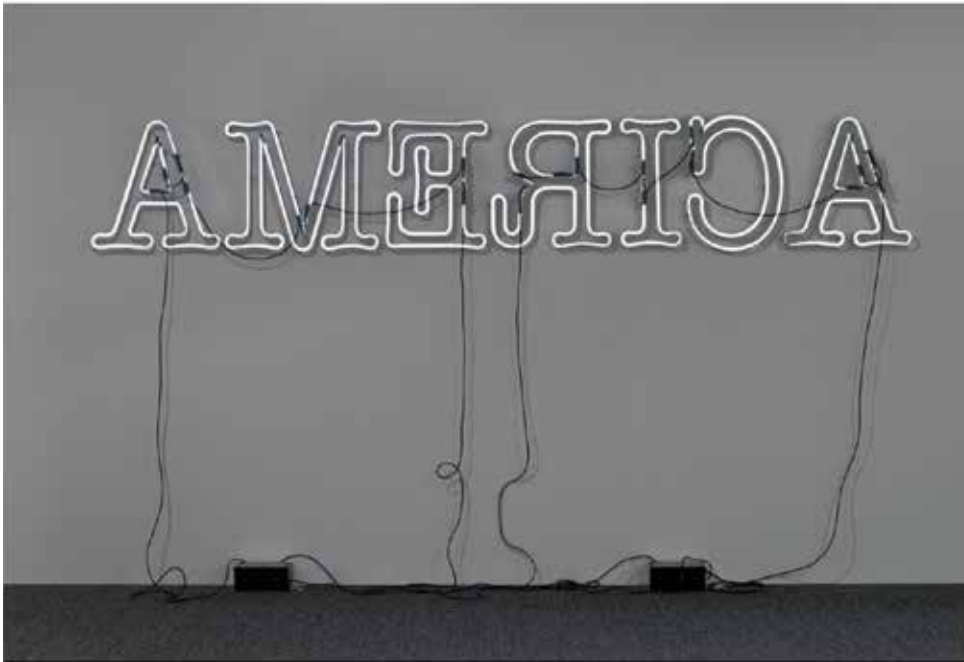


Resist, Refuse

By Teju Cole

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"Rückenfigur, 2009"

Glenn Ligon. From Luhring Augustine, New York; Regen Projects, Los Angeles; and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

The courage of the French Resistance, a courage immeasurably beyond chatter and imposture, helped make "resistance" a holy word in our common tongue. We look back on these people — many of whom were caught, most of whom were tortured and executed soon after they were caught — with frightened admiration. Facing the unspeakable, they committed themselves to the unimaginable.

But "resistance" is back in vogue, and it describes something rather different now. The holy word has become unexceptional. Faced with a vulgar, manic and cruel regime, birds of many different feathers are eager to proclaim themselves members of the Resistance. It is the most popular game in town.

Membership in an actual Resistance cell was no game. The réseau Gloria SMH for instance: betrayed to the Gestapo by the double agent Father Robert Alesch in 1942. Twelve members were shot, more than 80 others tortured and sent to Buchenwald and Mauthausen. Only an early warning saved Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil and her companion Samuel Beckett. They escaped to a free zone. Many others in the network died; these two lived, somehow.

You can sense this nearness to death (the absurdity of having escaped death) in Beckett's postwar work, beginning with his stories of 1946. The work is full of questions about what

can be said and what cannot. He turns definitively to French after the war to free himself of English, to strip down his language. It is a fulfillment of something he had written in a 1937 letter, “More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it.” The writing becomes more obsessive, more doubtful, more pained, less decorative. It is arid for long stretches, seldom dealing with actual matters of the war. The writing of a man who has seen too much.

When I think about the atmosphere of the French Resistance, I also think of Jean-Pierre Melville’s “Army of Shadows” (1969), a somber and intense film that presents heroism in an unusual way: not as a thrill but as a simultaneously heavy and utterly ordinary set of choices. A pilot, a housewife, a philosopher: We are drawn into their world in order to see how they are like us and how, mysteriously, they have chosen risk instead of safety. Their heroism, like that of many in the Resistance, comes to nothing. There’s betrayal. Most of them die.

This was resistance without merriment, abjuring any gestures of entertainment. “A man screaming is not a dancing bear,” as Aimé Césaire wrote elsewhere. The Resistance did not even come with the assurance that it would be strategically effective (the French Resistance was not a unified force with a single coherent set of tactics). So, why did they do it? The writer and resister Roger Stéphane put it this way in 1952: “Never had so many men consciously run so many risks for such a small thing: a desire to bear witness. Perhaps it is absurd, but it was by such absurdities that we restored our dignity as men.”

A dangerous commitment to resistance made by hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands of whom died in France alone. For a spell in the early ’40s, whenever the members of the Resistance killed a Nazi, the Nazis would execute 50 innocent French; an unspeakable calculus, but it did not stop the Resistance (its Communist wing in particular) from killing Nazis. It was a terrible time. The Resistance recognized that what was at stake was not just political power but also human dignity, which, all question of tactical efficacy aside, the resisters saw as nonnegotiable.

This history looms each time the word “resistance” is evoked in the current American political crisis. It judges the triviality of our responses. The sacred word has been made banal, its intensity dulled. The triviality is not in the predicament — so many have died here already, and many more will die — nor is it in the serious work being undertaken by so many people far from the spotlight, but in the voices of those who set the public tone. How I long now, on behalf of America, for Beckett’s aridity, for Melville’s gloom, for Stéphane’s desire to bear witness, for a sobriety of affect that matches the enormity of the crime. How are we to live in this? How are we to inhabit the principle behind the word “resistance” when the meaning of the word itself has changed so much?

Refuse a resistance excised of courage? Refuse the conventional arena and take the fight

elsewhere? Refuse to eat with the enemy, refuse to feed the enemy? Refuse to participate in the logic of the crisis, refuse to be reactive to its provocations? Refuse to forget last year's offenses and last month's and last week's? Refuse the news cycle, refuse commentary? Refuse to place newsworthiness above human solidarity? Refuse to be intimidated by pragmatism? Refuse to be judged by cynics? Refuse to be too easily consoled? Refuse to admire mere political survival? Refuse to accept the calculation of the lesser evil? Refuse nostalgia? Refuse the binary of the terrible past and the atrocious present? Refuse to ignore the plight of the imprisoned, the tortured and the deported? Refuse to be mesmerized by shows of power? Refuse the mob? Refuse to play, refuse decorum, refuse accusation, refuse distraction, which is a tolerance of death-dealing by another name? And when told you can't refuse, refuse that, too?