

THE SOLDIER AND THE SPOKEN WORD

“Those who say nothing, the only ones whose words count”
Charles Péguy, *Notre Jeunesse*

In a treatise entitled *On Chattering*¹, Plutarch refers to the Spartans' preference for silence and brevity: “In obliging his fellow-citizens to practise silence from an early age, Lycurgus helped them to acquire a thought process that made them champions of brevity. In the same manner that the Celts of Iberia temper their iron by burying it in the ground and later removing the coating of earth which has become attached to it, so the Spartan's upbringing tempers his speech, removing the sheath of superfluous words to leave only sharp-edged efficiency. His well-known liking for aphorisms and his skill at quick, stinging repartee are the fruit of a long acquaintance with silence.”

Today, in an age awash with words and a clear sense of confidence in the virtues of communication, the importance of silence and the desire to control speech may seem somewhat foreign to us. Since Sparta, as a warlike city-state, concentrated largely on making soldiers of its citizens, this particularity could easily lead the soldier to speculate – essentially on the basis of his observations – as to whether there were any particular links between silence, speech and the soldier, and the role that such links might have in modern society.

A penchant for silence

Silence is of particular importance for the soldier. It is more than mere absence of speech – it is a form of wealth prized in its own right. This very close relationship with silence has its roots in the requirements of authority, the demands of action and the personality of the soldier.

Silence adds to the authority of a leader. As Charles de Gaulle wrote in *Le Fil de l'épée*, “nothing enhances authority as much as silence”. While it would be foolish for a superior to hide behind a mask that events would, sooner or later, blow away, he should, nonetheless, take care never to reveal himself fully. Silence allows for surprise, which is always useful to one who commands. It creates an air of calm that can

reassure anxious subordinates, and provides an aura of mystery, which adds to one's charisma. It inspires respect by suggesting a force of character that remains impervious to events.

Action makes for silence. The stress of battle strips away the superfluous in an individual. The lips go still, and the senses are awakened, alert to the slightest sign. Speech gives way to other forms of communication. Major de Saint-Marc writes: “[...] at the height of the action, two men can understand each other without uttering as much as a word.”² Indeed, too many words can lead to confusion, which carries with it the seeds of failure. Likewise, poorly-judged speech can lead to ambiguity with catastrophic consequences, as in the film *L'honneur d'un capitaine*, where the captain of the title, referring to a prisoner, gives the order “*descendez-le!*”. By this, the captain means “take him down (to the cells)”. The men, however, interpret the order to mean “shoot him”. Silence is not only generated by action but constitutes one of its essential components.

Military life encourages silence, and many characters – such as Ernst Jünger's Lieutenant Sturm – are blessed with “a gift for both action and contemplation”³. This characteristic springs, first and foremost, from their encounter with the essential (life, death, suffering, etc.). It then develops further as a result of solitude and remoteness from society. The Landscape constitutes a melancholy call to meditation. Regarding one of his heroes, Lieutenant Maxence, Ernest Psichari writes: “The long hours spent travelling on camels through monotonous, unspoiled spaces; the halts where man and object stood draped in infinite silence; the lonely watches under the stars and the long patience of the night-time roads – all of these inched Maxence towards the passionate struggle of man's combat with himself in the clear blue sky of his inner self.”⁴ The proximity of the essential and the remoteness

¹ Plutarque, “Le bavardage” in *La conscience tranquille*, 1991.

² Hélié de Saint-Marc, *Toute une vie*, 2004.

³ Ernst Jünger, *Le lieutenant Sturm*, 2005.

⁴ Ernest Psichari, *Le voyage du centurion*, 1922.

of the rest prepare the ground for a contemplative silence which can – if it is not controlled – prompt one to sever all ties with the outside world, like Lieutenant Giovanni Drogo, who stayed for thirty years in the fortress of Bastiani on the Tartar Steppe.

Respect for the spoken word

Nevertheless, the soldier does not turn his back on the spoken word. On the contrary, it is out of profound respect that he strives to preserve it.

The soldier is aware of the value of words. During an operation, an order has rapid, concrete consequences which can sometimes be severe, leading even to death. This reality keeps sterile debate, grandiloquence and buffoonery at bay. In Vigny's opinion, speech "becomes something terrible for the soldier, since what one man may say lightly or perfidiously, another must write on the dust in his own blood⁵". Matthew's Gospel provides a striking illustration of the soldier's awareness of the power of speech: "'Lord', replied the centurion, 'I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.'"

Since, "in battle, a word can kill⁶", the soldier gives speech sacred status. It is often associated with the notion of honour, which adds to its noble character: "Human speech now ceases to be merely the expression of ideas; it becomes speech *par excellence*, speech of the most sacred kind, (...); it becomes an oath, now that you have attached to it the notion of Honour."⁷ Keeping one's word is therefore the focus of many inner struggles. This is exemplified by the predicament of the officer in *Servitude and Grandeur of Arms*. Having been released "on parole" (from the French "*sur parole*", meaning "on his word"), he finally pleaded with his jailer to lock him up so that he could not escape and bring dishonour upon himself: "Remember that it is permissible to break a galley-slave's chains, if such a feat is possible, but that a word of honour must never be broken⁸."

The importance thus attached to the spoken word means that it is used very sparingly. Speech must be rare, disciplined

and perfectly controlled. Captain Renaud, "Malacca Cane" in *Servitude and Grandeur of Arms* "spent his time reading, speaking as little as possible and in monosyllables⁹". Major de Saint-Marc writes: "War makes people save their spittle. Those who have been through it are taciturn when they return, because they have understood the effect of words¹⁰." Some have come to the conclusion that "the army is a convent for men, a nomadic convent whose occupants carry with them their habits steeped in gravity, silence and self-control¹¹".

The limits of the spoken word

The soldier, who knows the value of the spoken word, also knows its limits.

Many soldiers who have been in battle have difficulty in talking about it. They fear being misunderstood by people who are too far removed from the event. The intensity of their experience and of their palpable contact with truth tends to make them act with modesty or even avoid company. To them, words seem inadequate when it comes to expressing the power of what they have lived through. Silence, therefore, is preferable. Major de Saint-Marc writes: "I have known highly courageous men. Generally, they spoke little of what they had done, leaving that task to others. They were very modest, but their reputations went before them. They may have felt that it was all too important and too subtle to be told. There are so many things that are not worth putting in words¹²."

Every officer knows that example is more effective than orders. Subordinates are circumspect about verbal orders unless the person issuing them has shown that he, too, is capable of doing what he asks of others. Great military leaders have been aware of the impact of example: imagine the trust and prestige that accrued to "the little corporal" when, flag in hand, he led his troops towards the Bridge of Arcole, or to Alexander the Great when, crossing the terrible Gedrosian Desert on his way back to Macedonia, he refused to drink since there was no water left for his men.

Studies have shown that, while propaganda can make it easier to get soldiers to the front, its effect on their readiness to

⁵ Alfred de Vigny, *op. cit.*

⁶ Hélié de Saint-Marc, *op. cit.*

⁷ Alfred de Vigny, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Hélié de Saint-Marc, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Hélié de Saint-Marc, *op. cit.*

¹² Hélié de Saint-Marc, *op. cit.*

fight soon disappears once they have arrived. In the final analysis, the soldier fights for his immediate group of comrades. In *Psychanalyse du guerrier*, Claude Barrois quotes a revealing extract from the memoirs of a Canadian WWII veteran: “It took me the best part of the war to figure out what I was fighting for,” says one soldier, ‘but it’s for the others, your unit, the guys in your company, and especially those in your platoon¹³.” Words weighed down with ideology fade, and empty words vanish: “One of the good things about war was that there was no room for empty promises. All the pretentious, empty concepts were demolished by laughter¹⁴.”

Group cohesion and the feeling that one belongs to a community – which is an important parameter for operational effectiveness – also owe little to words. They develop over time. Ernst Jünger wrote: “For soldiers to be effective, they not only need training in the strict sense of the term. They also need firmly-established relationships, just as atoms need cohesion between them. This takes a certain amount of time, and requires that the men, as a group, weave a piece of life’s substance – i.e. that they lay up a common store of little joys and sorrows. There must be a coating of history¹⁵.” The community is also bound together through the passing on of tradition that links one generation of the same regiment to the next, intensifying the feeling of belonging, placing their action within the context of a shared history and giving each member access to the same common outlooks. While this passing on of tradition obviously requires the use of language, other vehicles – such as behaviour, habits and custom, which are often perpetuated through ritual – play an even greater role.

The soldier knows that, in the final analysis, an individual’s worth becomes apparent only in battle. It is only then that one’s true nature comes to the fore, since it is then that the outward trappings are swept aside and that a seemingly-grey individual suddenly excels himself, afire with courage, initiative and determination. Jünger refers to “soldiers who stand out only during battle¹⁶”. The opposite is also true, with certain smooth-talking, self-confident soldiers coming

apart when the going gets tough. Soldiers know from experience that, in such matters, nothing can ever be taken for granted. Each new situation constitutes a fresh challenge, and past actions will never rush to their aid.

A valuable characteristic

The soldier’s distinctive relationship with the spoken word sets him apart in a society awash with words. His self-control renders him less visible in the eyes of his contemporaries. While this fact may give rise to regret, the soldier should take care not to overlook the considerable attendant advantages.

Today’s world has little time for silence. People are concentrated in dense urban zones which are constantly busy, saturated with noise of all sorts, and buzzing with verbal communication. The communication media broadcast words incessantly, and everyone can take their fill of “chatter” at will. The quality of the spoken word has suffered. People make pretentious, empty statements using words which have lost much of their value. While its effects can be greatly increased by the new capacities of the mass media, the spoken word has lost much of its substance.

Modern man has an ambiguous relationship with the spoken word. He overestimates its effect, thinking that it can solve all conflicts, while, paradoxically, feeling that it is of lesser value than the written word, which enjoys greater permanence. This reasoning creates mountains of contracts, receipts, statements, etc., all designed to serve as proof. Given that he originates in – and has frequent contact with – the civilian world, the soldier adopts some of its trends, and such developments are, therefore, not totally foreign to him. Having said that, the particular culture attaching to his status does, as has been pointed out above, distinguish his approach in a number of ways.

This characteristic should not be misinterpreted as meaning that the soldier is against all forms of expression. Now, as in the past, many military men write books, articles, essays and so on, and, contrary to popular wisdom, they are no less prolific than in the past. However, as has always been the case, the soldier expresses his thoughts essentially through the medium of writing. What *has* changed, fundamentally, giving the

¹³ Barry Broadfoot, *Six war years (1939-1945): Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad*, 1974, quoted by Claude Barrois, *Psychanalyse du guerrier*, 1993.

¹⁴ Ernst Jünger, *Le lieutenant Sturm*, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ernst Jünger, *Jardins et routes*, 1979.

¹⁶ Ernst Jünger, *Le lieutenant Sturm*, op. cit.

impression that soldiers have retreated into the background, is not so much their readiness to express their ideas, as the huge importance now attached to the spoken word in the public sphere.

Some people find the soldier's lack of visibility irritating, and would like there to be a more audible military presence. They would like soldiers to join the oral fray. It would not be desirable for them to do so, because – although they should not rule out speech as a matter of principle – soldiers should, in general, use the spoken word sparingly. This lends additional weight to their statements. The soldier must, therefore, fight the current temptation to lead an existence dedicated to the mirage of surface appearance. He must remain true to his traditional approach to the spoken word, and continue to cultivate verbal self-control and modesty. Moreover, the particularly sensitive nature of his missions means that he must express himself essentially in writing, which lends itself better to measure, precision, distance and reason. In this way, he will continue to enjoy the authority given by silence. In the midst of those who “come and go like hollow vessels, void of thought and full of noise ¹⁷”, he will, in addition, remain one of those who remind us of the value of the spoken word in an environment where that value is being eroded.

¹⁷ Plutarque, *op. cit.*