

Written in the Night

The pain of living in the present world

John Berger

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I want to say at least something about the pain existing in the world today. Consumerist ideology, which has become the most powerful and invasive on the planet, sets out to persuade us that pain is an accident, something that we can insure against. This is the logical basis for the ideology's pitilessness.

Everyone knows, of course, that pain is endemic to life, and wants to forget this or relativise it. All the variants of the myth of a Fall from the Golden Age, before pain existed, are an attempt to relativise the pain suffered on earth. So too is the invention of Hell, the adjacent kingdom of pain-as-punishment. Likewise the discovery of Sacrifice. And later, much later, the principle of Forgiveness. One could argue that philosophy began with the question: why pain?

Yet, when all this has been said, the present pain of living in the world is perhaps in some ways unprecedented.

I write in the night, although it is daytime. A day in early October 2002. For almost a week the sky above Paris has been blue. Each day the sunset is a little earlier and each day gloriously beautiful. Many fear that before the end of the month, US military forces will be launching the 'preventive' war against Iraq, so that the US oil corporations can lay their hands on further and supposedly safer oil supplies. Others hope that this can be avoided. Between the announced decisions and the secret calculations, everything is kept unclear, since lies prepare the way for missiles. I write in a night of shame. By shame I do not mean individual guilt. Shame, as I'm coming to understand it, is a species feeling which, in the long run, corrodes the capacity for hope and prevents us looking far ahead. We look down at our feet, thinking only of the next small step.

People everywhere, under very different conditions, are asking themselves – where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we

being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?

The well-heeled experts answer. Globalisation. Postmodernism. Communications revolution. Economic liberalism. The terms are tautological and evasive. To the anguished question of where are we, the experts murmur: nowhere. Might it not be better to see and declare that we are living through the most tyrannical – because the most pervasive – chaos that has ever existed? It's not easy to grasp the nature of the tyranny for its power structure (ranging from the 200 largest multinational corporations to the Pentagon) is interlocking yet diffuse, dictatorial yet anonymous, ubiquitous yet placeless. It tyrannises from off shore – not only in terms of fiscal law, but in terms of any political control beyond its own. Its aim is to delocalise the entire world. Its ideological strategy, besides which Osama bin Laden's is a fairy tale, is to undermine the existent so that everything collapses into its special version of the virtual, from the realm of which (and this is the tyranny's credo) there will be a never-ending source of profit. It sounds stupid. Tyrannies are stupid. This one is destroying at every level the life of the planet on which it operates.

Ideology apart, its power is based on two threats. The first is intervention from the sky by the most heavily armed state in the world. One could call it Threat B52. The second is of ruthless indebtedment, bankruptcy, and hence, given the present productive relations in the world, starvation. One could call it Threat Zero.

The shame begins with the contestation (which we all acknowledge somewhere but, out of powerlessness, dismiss) that much of the present suffering could be alleviated or avoided if certain realistic and relatively simple decisions were taken. There is a very direct relation today between the minutes of meetings and minutes of agony.

Does anyone deserve to be condemned to certain death simply because they don't have access to treatment which would cost less than \$2 a day? This was a question posed by the director of the World Health Organisation last July. She was talking about the Aids epidemic in Africa and elsewhere from which an estimated 68 million people will die within the next 18 years.

I'm talking about the pain of living in the present world.

Most analyses and prognoses about what is happening are understandably presented and studied within the framework of their separate disciplines: economics, politics, media studies, public health, ecology, national defence, criminology, education. In reality each of these separate fields is joined to another to make up the real terrain of what is being lived. It happens that in their lives people suffer from wrongs which are classified in separate categories, and suffer them simultaneously and inseparably.

A current example: some Kurds, who fled last week to Cherbourg, have been refused asylum by the French government and risk being repatriated to Turkey, are poor, politically undesirable, landless, exhausted, illegal and the clients of nobody. And they suffer each of these conditions at one and the same second. To take in what is happening, an interdisciplinary vision is necessary in order to

connect the ‘fields’ which are institutionally kept separate. And any such vision is bound to be (in the original sense of the word) political. The precondition for thinking politically on a global scale is to see the unity of the unnecessary suffering taking place. This is the starting point.

I write in the night, but I see not only the tyranny. If that were so, I would probably not have the courage to continue. I see people sleeping, stirring, getting up to drink water, whispering their projects or their fears, making love, praying, cooking something whilst the rest of the family is asleep, in Baghdad and Chicago. (Yes, I see too the forever invincible Kurds, 4,000 of whom were gassed, with US compliance, by Saddam Hussein.) I see pastrycooks working in Tehran and the shepherds, thought of as bandits, sleeping beside their sheep in Sardinia, I see a man in the Friedrichshain quarter of Berlin sitting in his pyjamas with a bottle of beer reading Heidegger, and he has the hands of a proletarian, I see a small boat of illegal immigrants off the Spanish coast near Alicante, I see a mother in Mali – her name is Aya which means born on Friday – swaying her baby to sleep, I see the ruins of Kabul and a man going home, and I know that, despite the pain, the ingenuity of the survivors is undiminished, an ingenuity which scavenges and collects energy, and in the ceaseless cunning of this ingenuity, there is a spiritual value, something like the Holy Ghost. I am convinced of this in the night, although I don’t know why.

The next step is to reject all the tyranny’s discourse. Its terms are crap. In the interminably repetitive speeches, announcements, press conferences and threats, the recurrent terms are Democracy, Justice, Human Rights, Terrorism. Each word in the context signifies the opposite of what it was once meant to. Each has been trafficked, each has become a gang’s code-word, stolen from humanity.

Democracy is a proposal (rarely realised) about decision-making; it has little to do with election campaigns. Its promise is that political decisions be made after, and in the light of, consultation with the governed. This is dependent upon the governed being adequately informed about the issues in question, and upon the decision-makers having the capacity and will to listen and take account of what they have heard. Democracy should not be confused with the ‘freedom’ of binary choices, the publication of opinion polls or the crowding of people into statistics. These are its pretence. Today the fundamental decisions, which effect the unnecessary pain increasingly suffered across the planet, have been and are taken unilaterally without any open consultation or participation. For instance, how many US citizens, if consulted, would have said specifically yes to Bush’s withdrawal from the Kyoto agreement about the carbon dioxide greenhouse effect which is already provoking disastrous floods in many places, and threatens, within the next 25 years, far worse disasters? Despite all the media-managers of consent, I would suspect a minority.

It is a little more than a century ago that Dvořák composed his *Symphony From the New World*. He wrote it whilst directing a conservatory of music in New York, and the writing of it inspired him to compose, 18 months later, still in New York, his sublime *Cello Concerto*. In the symphony the horizons and rolling

hills of his native Bohemia become the promises of the New World. Not grandiloquent but loud and continuing, for they correspond to the longings of those without power, of those who are wrongly called simple, of those the US Constitution addressed in 1787. I know of no other work of art which expresses so directly and yet so toughly (Dvořák was the son of a peasant and his father dreamt of his becoming a butcher) the beliefs which inspired generation after generation of migrants who became US citizens.

For Dvořák the force of these beliefs was inseparable from a kind of tenderness, a respect for life such as can be found intimately among the governed (as distinct from governors) everywhere. And it was in this spirit that the symphony was publicly received when it was first performed at Carnegie Hall (16 December 1893).

Dvořák was asked what he thought about the future of American music and he recommended that US composers listen to the music of the Indians and blacks. The *Symphony From the New World* expressed a hopefulness without frontiers which, paradoxically, is welcoming because centred on an idea of home. A utopian paradox.

Today the power of the same country which inspired such hopes has fallen into the hands of a coterie of fanatical (wanting to limit everything except the power of capital), ignorant (recognising only the reality of their own fire-power), hypocritical (two measures for all ethical judgments, one for us and another for them) and ruthless B52 plotters. How did this happen? How did Bush, Murdoch, Cheney, Kristol, Rumsfeld, *et al et* Arturo Ui, get where they did? The question is rhetorical, for there is no single answer, and it is idle, for no answer will dent their power yet. But to ask it in this way in the night reveals the enormity of what has happened. We are writing about the pain in the world.

The political mechanism of the new tyranny – although it needs highly sophisticated technology in order to function – is starkly simple. Usurp the words Democracy, Freedom, etc. Impose, whatever the disasters, the new profit-making and impoverishing economic chaos everywhere. Ensure that all frontiers are one-way: open to the tyranny, closed to others. And eliminate every opposition by calling it terrorist.

(No, I have not forgotten the couple who threw themselves from one of the Twin Towers instead of being burnt to death separately.)

There is a toy-like object which costs about \$4 to manufacture and which is also incontestably terrorist. It is called the anti-personnel mine. Once launched, it is impossible to know who these mines will mutilate or kill, or when they will do so. There are more than 100 million lying on, or hidden in, the earth at this moment. The majority of victims have been or will be civilians.

The anti-personnel mine is meant to mutilate rather than kill. Its aim is to make cripples, and it is designed with shrapnel which, it is planned, will prolong the victim's medical treatment and render it more difficult. Most survivors have to undergo eight or nine surgical operations. Every month, as of now, 2,000 civilians somewhere are maimed or killed by these mines.

The description anti-personnel is linguistically murderous. Personnel are anonymous, nameless, without gender or age. Personnel is the opposite of people. As a term it ignores blood, limbs, pain, amputations, intimacy, and love. It abstracts totally. This is how its two words when joined to an explosive become terrorist.

The new tyranny, like other recent ones, depends to a large degree on a systematic abuse of language. Together we have to reclaim our hijacked words and reject the tyranny's nefarious euphemisms; if we do not, we will be left with only the word shame. Not a simple task, for most of its official discourse is pictorial, associative, evasive, full of innuendoes. Few things are said in black and white. Both military and economic strategists now realise that the media play a crucial role, not so much in defeating the current enemy as in foreclosing and preventing mutiny, protests or desertion.

Any tyranny's manipulation of the media is an index of its fears. The present one lives in fear of the world's desperation. A fear so deep that the adjective desperate, except when it means dangerous, is never used. Without money each daily human need becomes a pain.

Those who have filched power – and they are not all in office, so they reckon on a continuity of that power beyond presidential elections – pretend to be saving the world and offering its population the chance to become their clients. The world consumer is sacred. What they don't add is that consumers only matter because they generate profit, which is the only thing that is really sacred. This sleight of hand leads us to the crux. The claim to be saving the world masks the plotter's assumption that a large part of the world, including most of the continent of Africa and a considerable part of South America, is irredeemable. In fact, every corner which cannot be part of their centre is irredeemable. And such a conclusion follows inevitably from the dogma that the only salvation is money, and the only global future is the one their priorities insist upon, priorities which, with false names given to them, are in reality nothing more nor less than their benefits.

Those who have different visions or hopes for the world, along with those who cannot buy and who survive from day to day (approximately 800 million) are backward relics from another age, or, when they resist, either peacefully or with arms, terrorists. They are feared as harbingers of death, carriers of disease or insurrection. When they have been 'downsized' (one of the key words), the tyranny, in its naïveté, assumes the world will be unified. It needs its fantasy of a happy ending. A fantasy which in reality will be its undoing. Every form of contestation against this tyranny is comprehensible. Dialogue with it, impossible. For us to live and die properly, things have to be named properly. Let us reclaim our words.

This is written in the night. In war the dark is on nobody's side, in love the dark confirms that we are together.