Tony Harrison, ‘A Cold Coming’ (1991)

di

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Introduction

I have chosen to read a poem by Tony Harrison, ‘A Cold Coming’, first published in news pages of the Guardian in 1991 but reprinted in the same newspaper in April 2003. Given the occasion of these lessons on war, it seems appropriate to put the American invasion of Iraq of 2003 in its recent historical context, what will be called the “First Iraqi War”. The specific context of the poem will be outlined briefly below.

Tony Harrison is a contemporary English poet who is well known for polemical and political poetry which undermines and overturns some preconceptions of poetry as purely aesthetic and private. Poetry, for him, can also involve drama, narrative and politics – in particular the defence of the working-class background from which he came, and the attack on the aggressive foreign policies of the US and Britain (in this poem, for example). On 29 October 2003, Tony Harrison visited the SSLMIT to take part in a brief conference entitled “I linguaggi della guerra/The Languages of War” in which he read some of his own poetry. The conference also hosted the first Italian showing of Tony Harrison’s film/poem ‘The Gaze of the Gorgon’ (1992), translated by Andrea Lorenzini as part of his degree thesis in this faculty. Anyone interested in Tony Harrison’s work should begin by reading Andrea’s thesis.

Context of ‘A Cold Coming’

The poem was written as a comment on a well-known photograph published in the British press in March 1991 which showed the burnt body of an Iraqi soldier inside an army truck (see Appendix). The photograph was taken somewhere on the “Highway of Death”, the name given to the road from Kuwait to Basra in Iraq along which the retreating Iraqi army was attacked and bombed by the U.S. air force. As the text from the web site of the International War Crimes Tribunal makes clear (see Appendix), 20,000 vehicles were trapped along the road, able to go neither forward nor back, and in this position were bombed by US aeroplanes. It has been estimated that as many as 25,000 were killed on the “Highway of Death”, including, according to some reports, some fleeing Palestinian civilians. This was the closing act in a war which had begun with the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 (some say with the connivance of the US, or at least of the ambassador of the US in Baghdad), and which progressed with the UN coalition attack on Iraq in February 1991.

The fact that the vehicles and personnel in them were incinerated suggests, according to the report, the use of napalm or other incendiary weapons such as depleted uranium banned under the Geneva Protocols of 1977. The use of the latter has led, according to the reports of the journalist John Pilger (see for example, his documentary film Paying the Price. Killing the Children of Iraq broadcast on British television in 2000), to the creation of a large area south of Basra which remains devastated and highly radioactive. That the soldiers were withdrawing also violated the Geneva Convention of 1949, which bans the killing of soldiers who are “out of combat”.
‘A Cold Coming’

The entire poem is reproduced below. Rather than carry out a running commentary and paraphrase, I have included “Comments” at various points in the text (highlighted in yellow) which can be seen by clicking on “commenti” from the “visualizza” menu.
A cold coming
The Guardian ran this specially commissioned poem by Tony Harrison in 1991

Friday February 14, 2003
The Guardian

I saw the charred Iraqi lean towards me from bomb-blasted screen, his windscreen wiper like a quill he's reaching for to make his will. I saw the charred Iraqi lean like someone made of Plasticine

as though he'd stopped to ask the way and this is what I heard him say: "Don't be afraid I've picked on you for this exclusive interview.

Isn't it your sort of poet's task to find words for this frightening mask? If that gadget that you've got records words from such scorched vocal cords, press RECORD before some dog devours me mid-monologue."

So I held the shaking microphone closer to the crumbling bone:

"I read the news of three wise men who left their sperm in nitrogen, three foes of ours, three wise Marines with sample flasks and magazines, three wise soldiers from Seattle who banked their sperm before the battle. Did No 1 say: God be thanked I've got my precious semen banked.

And No 2: O praise the Lord my last best shot is safely stored. And No 3: Praise be to God I left my wife my frozen wad?

So if their fate was to be passed at least they thought their name would last, and though cold corpses in Kuwait they could by proxy procreate.

Excuse a skull half roast, half bone for using such a scornful tone. It may seem out of all proportion but I wish I'd taken their precaution.

They seemed the masters of their fate with wisely jarred ejaculate. Was it a propaganda coup to make us think they'd cracked death too, disinformation to defeat us with no post-mortem mililitres? Symbolic billions in reserve made me, for one, lose heart and nerve.

On Saddam's pay we can't afford to go and get our semen stored. Sad to say that such high tech's uncommon here. We're stuck with sex.

If you can conjure up and stretch your imagination (and not retch) the image of me beside my wife closely clasped creating life . . ."
(I let the unfleshed skull unfold a story I'd been already told, and idly tried to calculate the content of ejaculate:

the sperm in one ejaculation equals the whole Iraqi nation times, roughly, let's say, 12.5 though .5's not now alive.

Let's say the sperms were an amount so many times the body count, 2,500 times at least (but let's wait till the toll's released!).

Whichever way Death seems outflanked by one tube of cold bloblings banked. Poor bloblings, maybe you've been blessed with, of all fates possible, the best according to Sophocles ie "the best of fates is not to be" a philosophy that's maybe bleak for any but an ancient Greek but difficult these days to escape when spoken to by such a shape. When you see men brought to such states who wouldn't want that "best of fates"

or in the world of Cruise and Scud not go kryonic if he could, spared the normal human doom of having made it through the womb?)

He heard my thoughts and stopped the spool: "I never thought life futile, fool! Though all Hell began to drop I never wanted life to stop.

I was filled with such a yearning to stay in life as I was burning, such a longing to be beside my wife in bed before I died,

and, most, to have engendered there a child untouched by war's despair.

So press RECORD! I want to reach the warring nations with my speech.

Don't look away! I know it's hard to keep regarding one so charred, so disfigured by unfriendly fire and think it once burned with desire.

Though fire has flayed off half my features they once were like my fellow creatures',

till some screen-gazing crop-haired boy from Iowa or Illinois,

equipped by ingenious technophile put paid to my paternal smile

and made the face you see today an armature half-patched with clay,

an icon framed, a looking glass for devotees of 'kicking ass',

a mirror that returns the gaze of victors on their victory days

and in the end stares out the watcher who ducks behind his headline:

[GOTCHA]

or behind the flag-bedecked page 1 of the true to bold-type-setting [SUN]

I doubt victorious Greeks let Hector join their feast as spoiling spectre, and who'd want to sour the children's joy in Iowa or Illinois
Or ageing mothers overjoyed to find their babies weren't destroyed?
But cabs beflagged with SUN front pages don't help peace in future ages.

Stars and Stripes in sticky paws may sow the seeds for future wars.
Each Union Jack the kids now wave may lead them later to the grave.

But praise the Lord and raise the banner (excuse a skull's sarcastic manner!)
Desert Rat and Desert Stormer without the scars and (maybe) trauma,
the semen-bankers are all back to sire their children in their sack.
With seed sown straight from the sower dump second-hand spermatozoa

Lie that you saw me and I smiled to see the soldier hug his child.
Lie and pretend that I excuse my bombing by B52s,
pretend I pardon and forgive that they still do and I don't live,
pretend they have the burnt man's blessing and then, maybe, I'm spared confessing

that only fire burnt out the shame of things I'd done in Saddam's name,
the deaths, the torture and the plunder the black clouds all of us are under.

Say that I'm smiling and excuse the Scuds we launched against the Jews.
Pretend I've got the imagination to see the world beyond one nation.

That's your job, poet, to pretend I want my foe to be my friend.
It's easier to find such words for this dumb mask like baked dogturds.

So lie and say the charred man smiled to see the soldier hug his child.
This gaping rictus once made glad a few old hearts back in Baghdad,
hearts growing older by the minute as each truck comes without me in it.
I've met you though, and had my say which you've got taped. Now go away."

I gazed at him and he gazed back staring right through me to Iraq,
Facing the way the charred man faced I saw the frozen phial of waste,
a test-tube frozen in the dark, crib and Kaaba, sacred Ark,
a pilgrimage of Cross and Crescent the chilled suspension of the Present.

Rainbows seven shades of black curved from Kuwait back to Iraq,
and instead of gold the frozen crock's crammed with Mankind on the rocks,
the congealed genie who won't thaw until the World renounces War,
cold spunk meticulously jarred never to be charred or the charred,
a bottled Bethlehem of this come- curdling Cruise/Scud-cursed millennium.
I went. I pressed REWIND and PLAY and I heard the charred man say:
Appendix: the “Highway of Death”

“Even in Vietnam I didn’t see anything like this. It’s pathetic.”

— Major Bob Nugent
Army intelligence officer

From the WAR CRIMES Report
of the International War Crimes Tribunal
http://deoxy.org/wc/wc-index.htm:

[The above photo is of the] incinerated body of an Iraqi soldier on the “Highway of Death”, a name the press has given to the road from Mutlaa, Kuwait, to Basra, Iraq. U.S. planes immobilized the convoy by disabling vehicles at its front and rear, then bombing and strafing the resulting traffic jam for hours. More than 2,000 vehicles and tens of thousands of charred and dismembered bodies littered the sixty miles of highway.

The clear rapid incineration of the human being [pictured above] suggests the use of napalm, phosphorus, or other incendiary bombs. These are anti-personnel weapons outlawed under the 1977 Geneva Protocols. This massive attack occurred after Saddam Hussein announced a complete troop withdrawal from Kuwait in compliance with UN Resolution 660.

Such a massacre of withdrawing Iraqi soldiers violates the Geneva Convention of 1949, common article 3, which outlaws the killing of soldiers who “are out of combat”.

There are, in addition, strong indications that many of those killed were Palestinian and Kuwaiti civilians trying to escape the impending siege of Kuwait City and the return of Kuwaiti armed forces. No attempt was made by U.S. military command to distinguish between military personnel and civilians on the “highway of death”. The whole intent of international law with regard to war is to prevent just this sort of indiscriminate and excessive use of force.
There are also indications that some of those bombed during the withdrawal were Palestinians and Iraqi civilians. According to *Time* magazine of March 18, 1991, not just military vehicles, but cars, buses and trucks were also hit. In many cases, cars were loaded with Palestinian families and all their possessions.” — Joyce Chediac, Report presented at the New York Commission hearing May 11, 1991