

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 pen ready to write down thoughts for men,

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 gassed 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 millilitres?
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 . . ."

Comment [s1]: See the photograph of a burnt Iraqi soldier which was published in the British press in March 1991. (*Appendix*).

Comment [I2]: The charred Iraqi is ready to give his testimony through the pen, though he does so instead by giving an "exclusive interview" with the poet, chosen because he can give expression to the "frightening mask". The charred Iraqi is thus a voice which speaks from beyond the grave, like Virgil for Dante or like the dead German soldier in Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting'.

Comment [I3]: War journalism and journalism in general is characterised by the desire for exclusive interviews. Imagine the scoop to get the real story from an Iraqi soldier, and a dead one too. Tony Harrison's poetry itself is linked to journalism: his poem appeared, on his insistence, in the news (rather than the literature) section of the *Guardian*. He was subsequently sent to Bosnia in 1995 specifically to write poems about the war. Tony Harrison is thus a "war poet" in a very special sense, with a job similar to that of a "war correspondent".

Comment [I4]: The first lines of T.S. Eliot's 'The Journey of the Magi' ("A cold coming we had of it/Just the worst time of the year/For a journey ...") gave the title to Tony Harrison's poem and appeared at the head of Harrison's poem when it was originally published. Harrison gives Eliot's first words a sexual sense, and this is typical of his iconoclastic treatment of some of the accepted canons of English literature. Harrison's poem, however, continues the sense of the cold and unwelcome nature of the epiphany: in Eliot's version an awakening to the cold difficulties of the Christian life; in Harrison's the cold barbarism of the war in Iraq.

Comment [s5]: The Iraqi army used nerve gas during the war against Iran in the 1980s.

Comment [I6]: *last* rhymes with *gassed* in Tony Harrison's Yorkshire accent. See his poem 'Them and [uz]' if you want to enjoy Harrison's attacks on Received Pronunciation, which he throws "into the lap of dozing Daniel Jones".

Comment [I7]: The technological sophistication of the Americans enables them to be immortal – or at least to procreate after death. The rest of us are "stuck with sex".

(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 blobblings banked.
Poor blobblings, 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

Comment [18]: But the poet's job is to do just this: to look into the frightening mask, the "gaze of the Gorgon" and be able to speak, to reach the warring nations with the soldier's testimony.

Comment [19]: The American soldier watches television – but also fires his weapons through monitoring the target on a screen?

Comment [110]: "to show them that you are angry with them, either by telling them or by using physical force" [AM: INFORMAL, RUDE] (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*). An expression beloved by George Bush Sr. with regard to Iraq.

Comment [111]: "GOTCHA" (= got you, "preso"). This was the full page headline of the *Sun* newspaper in 1982 "celebrating" the sinking of the Argentinian ship the *Belgrano* during the Falklands War. The *Belgrano* was in fact sailing away from the hostilities and was outside of the 200-mile exclusion zone proclaimed by the British. 323 Argentinian lives were lost. In the British general election of 1983, an independent candidate stood against Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister during the war, in her constituency, Finchley, for a party ironically named "Belgrano Blood Hunger".

Comment [s12]: Tabloid newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch well-known for its large headlines in bold type.

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 charrer 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:

Comment [s13]: The "Desert Rats" was the name given to the British 7th Armoured Division in North Africa during the Second World War, commanded by General Montgomery.

Comment [s14]: "Desert Storm" was the name given to the military campaign of the US against Iraq in 1991.

Comment [s15]: In the voice of an advertiser.

Comment [s16]: During the 1991 war, the Iraqis fired 39 Scud missiles into Israel in an attempt to draw it into the conflict. The missiles resulted in some damage and a few casualties.

Comment [s17]: Notice the direction that the charred Iraqi is facing – away from Kuwait and the conflict, towards Baghdad.

Comment [s18]: The sacred mosque of Mecca.

Comment [s19]: The ark of the covenant, sacred to the Jews

Comment [s20]: Christian and Muslim symbols respectively.

Comment [s21]: The retreating Iraqi army set fire to Kuwaiti oil plants before leaving. The result was immense clouds of smoke from burning oil.

Appendix: the “Highway of Death”

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

— **Major Bob Nugent**
Army intelligence officer



Photo © 1991 Kenneth Jarecke / Contact Press Images

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.

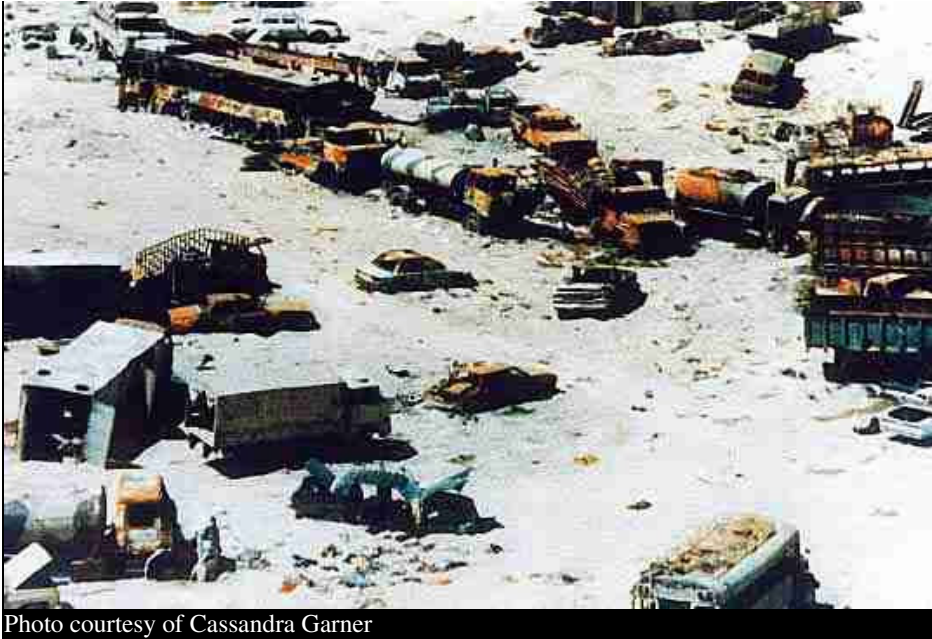


Photo courtesy of Cassandra Garner

“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 Chediak**, Report presented at the New York Commission hearing May 11, 1991