Blowing Up
The Media

Harold Pinter

American Football
(a reflection upon the Gulf War)

Hallelujah!
It works.
We blew the shit out of them.
We blew the shit right back up
their own asses.

It works.
We blew the shit out of them.
They suffocated in their own shit!

Hallelujah!
Praise the Lord for all good things.

We blew them into fucking shit.
They are eating it.

Praise the Lord for all good things.

We blew their balls into shards of
dust.
Into shards of fucking dust.

We did it.

Now I want you to come over here
and kiss me on the mouth.

---

Started to write this poem on the plane going to the
Edinburgh Festival in August 1981. I had a rough draft
by the time we landed in Edinburgh. It sprung from
the triumphantism, the machismo, the victory paradise,
that were very much in evidence at the time. So that's
the reason for 'We blew the shit out of them.' The first
place I sent it to was the London Review of Books.
I received a very odd letter, which said, in sum, that
the poem had considerable force, but it was far too
racy that they were not able to publish it. But the
letter went on to make the extraordinary
assertion that the paper showed my views about the US's role
in the world. So I wrote back, 'The paper shares my
views, does it? I'll keep that to myself if I were you, chum.'
I was very pleased with the use of the word 'chum'.

So I sent it to the Guardian and the then literary editor
came on the telephone to me and said, 'Oh dear.' He said, 'Harold,
this is really... You've really given me a very bad headache
with this one.' He said, 'I'm seriously behind you myself.
Particularly personally.' This is my memory of the telephone conversation.

But, he said, 'You know, I don't think... Dick, I think we've
in fact made trouble if we try to publish it in the Guardian.'

Really? I asked incredulously, 'Why is that?'

He said, 'Well, you know, Harold, we are a family newspaper.'

Those words were actually said. 'Oh, I'm sorry', I said.

I was under the impression you were a serious newspaper.'

And he said, 'Well, yes, we've also a serious newspaper, of course.
Nevertheless, things have changed a bit to the Guardian over the
last few years.'

I suggested he talk to some of his colleagues and come
back to me in a couple of days. Because, I said, 'I do believe
the Guardian has a responsibility to publish serious work,
seriously considered work, which believes this to be. Although it is very hot,
but I also think it is slowly. Hot shit!'

He called me in two days and said, 'Harold, I'm terribly
sorry, I can't publish it.' He more or less said, 'It's more than my job's worth.
So that was the Guardian. I then sent it to the Observer...'

---

Which has published your poems previously?

Oh yes, the Guardian has
published me in this past, too... As
incidentally, has the Independent.
The Observer was the most complex
and fascinating web that I actually ran into. I
sent the poem not to the literary editor, but
to the editor himself.

A couple of days later, he called me
and said that he thought it should be published. He
thought it was very strong.

He thought it was going to be quite a lot of flack,
but he thought it should be published, not on the
literary pages, but on the leader pages.

It was a truly political poem. He said,
'So it was delightful to hear that. He sent
me a proof, which he did.'

The next Sunday nothing happened. And then the following Sunday
nothing happened. So I called the editor. He said, 'Oh dear, Harold, I'm afraid that I've
run into one or two problems with your poem.' I called what they were.
In short, my colleagues don't want me to publish it. Why not? He said, 'They're telling me we are

going to lose lots of readers.' I asked, Do you really believe that? Anyway, we had a

rather unlikely chat. He said, 'I want to publish it but I seem to be more or less
lost.' I then said, Look, the Observer, as a serious newspaper, has to publish it.
Quite recently an account of what the US tanks actually did in the desert. The tanks
bombed bulldozers and, during the ground attack they were used as weapons. They
burned, as far as we know, an unknown number of Israeli lives. This was
reported by your newspaper as a fact and it was a horrific and obscene fact. My poem actually
says, 'They suffocated in their own shit.' It is obscene, but it is referring to obscene facts.

He said, 'Absolutely right. Look, I
want to publish the poem. But I'm running into all sorts of resistance. The trouble in
the language, it's the obscene language. People get very offended by this and God's
why they think we are going to lose
readers.' I then sent the editor of the Observer a short fax, in which I quoted myself when I was at the US Embassy in
Amman in March 1965 with Arthur Miller. I
had a chat with the ambassador about war in Turkey prisons. He told me that
he didn't appreciate the complacency of the situation, nor the Communist threat,
the military reality, the diplomatic reality, the strategic reality, and so on.

And I said the reality I was referring to
was that of electric current on your genitals.

Whosepompous the ambassador said, 'Sir, you are a guest in my house,' and turned away.
I left the house.

The point I was making to the editor of the Observer was that the
ambassador found great offense in the word
genitalia. But the reality of the situation, the
actual reality of electric current on your genitals, was a matter of no concern to him.

It was the use of the word that was offensive, but not the act. I said I was
drawing an analogy between that little exchange, and what we were now talking about.
This poem uses obscene words to describe obscene acts and obscene attitudes.

But the editor of the Observer wrote to me and said he couldn't publish, with
great regret. 'I've been giving serious thought to the publication of your poem on the
Gulf War. A you know, my first instinct was in favour, despite warnings by senior
colleagues that many readers would be
offended... I admit to having cold feet. Indeed on an Observer columnist's page of
his book reviewing his son's book I read that this was

---
I wonder what would happen if your poem were to be re-submitted now, as an exercise. People and editors change. Perhaps it would be an exercise worth pursuing. The reactions seem to be final for the strong reasons: 'family paper', or 'offending readers'?

Oh no. I have no intention of re-submitting it or anything else— to any of these newspapers. Unless I decide to write nursery rhymes.

At a time when we have become far more accustomed to strong language in print, it is almost amazing to find sensitivities expressed in this way. Perhaps it reflects this very peculiar political period we are living in. There is a rather coy and false reaction to matters and events, which are 'strong' in themselves. Brunt language is shunned as a way of avoiding brutal issues.

I think that is a valid conclusion to be drawn. It was well known and has been often asserted that the sanitisation of the Gulf War was popular. The actual nature of the horror was barely ever aired, or seen on TV. Such a thing as this poem, for me, is opening up a current which many people would prefer to see rerouted closed. And it is in the interests of government that the curtain, that roll, is forever driven over the nature of reality.

Every war has its share of blood and dripping guts, and bodies blown to pieces, but barring one photo published by the Observer, as it happens, of a carbonised figure above a tank, this was the best description of the language, when it is about the body, sado-erotic, sexual, or whatever. We have overcome the years when you had to put a series of dots in place of an 'F' word. The objection to your poem was justified by your use of some strong words.

This may be because it is a formal piece at work, and perhaps that is where its strength lies. It is a deliberate piece of work. So in essence, now, I'd like to say on the point, that I regard it as a very full poem. It is necessarily full of language to the point where it is shocking.

But nobody said we don't think this piece as good enough. It is not a successful piece of work. Nobody has ever said that.

I feel particularly sensitive about the language. I am the editor of Index on Censorship responsible for listing Index an annual general meeting of Index at which we consider this word 'fart' in an article in our special issue on women. Breaking the silence ([9.30]) I thought the word, though strong, was in context. However, although I do not know the exact details, one funding organisation obviously took exception.

This piece has been reprinted courtesy of Index on Censorship (Vol 21 No 5, May 1992) London, England.

---

**CONTRIBUTED BY INDEX ON CENSORSHIP**

---

**Rebel Intellectuals turned their attention to youth subcultures in the 1970s as a way of challenging their conservative colleagues in sociology, education and media studies. Many of these investigators and writers had personal affinities with the subcultures they studied. They steamed up, listened to the same music and read the same outsider books. They were more comfortable with thumb-up copies of Ganet than with sociology textbooks. However, from American sociology came Howard Becker's flip books on outsiders: jazz musicians, dope smokers, and others. Becker paid attention to how the media, the police and the courts could create a moral panic about specific outsiders, turn them into deviants and result in harsh prison sentences for relatively minor offences. From England came a series of books by radical sociologists who met at radical conferences aimed at understanding the worlds of groups like British Roc soccer fans who were the subject of sensational reporting in the national press. The new discipline of Cultural Studies cut its intellectual tooth with a series of studies of studies of British youth scenes: Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, Punks, and others. To criticize such books as Dick Hebdige's Subculture: The Meaning of Style because they ignore highly politicized youth is in part to miss the point. Hebdige was trying to show that there was an unspoken politics in styles of dress, music and dance. It was not organized resistance to capitalism, racism and sexism but it was resistance through ritualised everyday culture. As a low point in working-class consciousness in Britain, it seemed that the political weakness of the hegemonic system was in reproducing itself. At least some of the youth were visibly opsping out. The Toronto Teenagers exhibition, curated by Grant McCracken at the Royal Ontario Museum, is at least indirectly influenced by these intellectual traditions. However, it is also critically situated in the traditions of material folklore and anthropology. The idea here is to attempt to uncover the cultural meaning of styles of clothing and material artifacts. The first section of the exhibition presents male and female clothing typical of teenagers from the 1930s to the 1980s. Even though these displays resemble those of department store windows, they do have an intrinsic interest for today's teenagers. Videos screen brief extracts from interviews which explain the cultural significance of the changing styles. Very much in the British tradition of Cultural Studies, the second part of the exhibition gives space to five subcultures: Preppies, Hippies, Punks, B-Boys and B-Girls, and Rockers. Here the focus on material artifacts becomes a real...**

---

**EXCURSIONS**