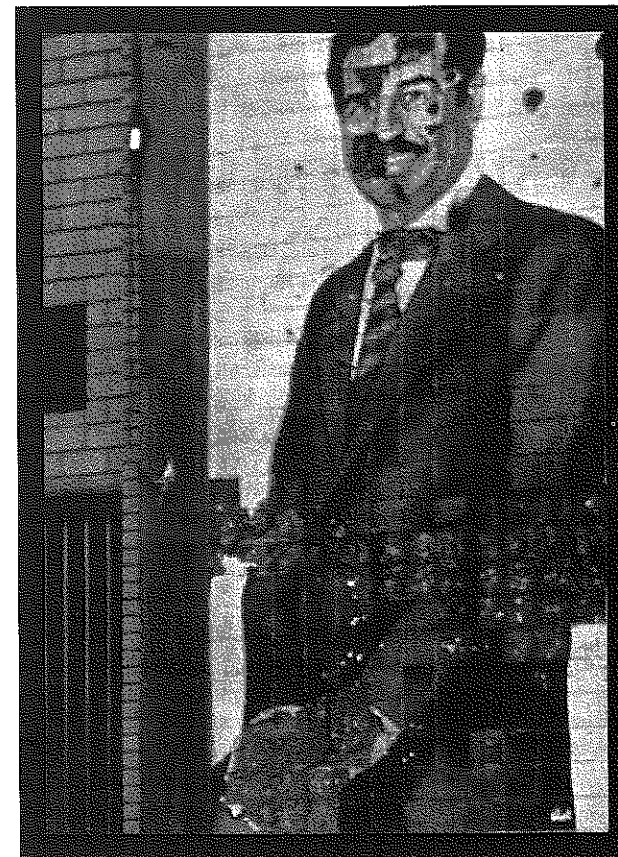
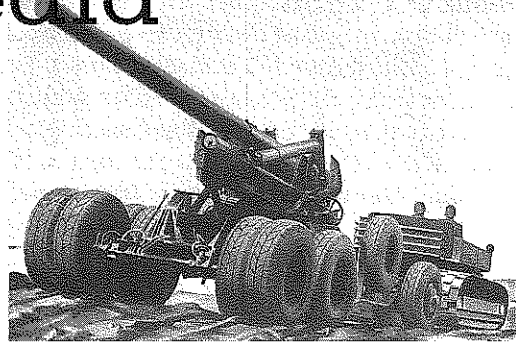


Blowing Up The Media



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 ass

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.

**Harold Pinter
August 1991**

I started to write this poem on the plane going to the Edinburgh Festival in August 1991. I had a rough draft by the time we landed in Edinburgh. It sprang from the triumphalism, the machismo, the victory parades, that were very much in evidence at the time. So that is 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 for that very reason that they were not able to publish it. But the letter went on to make the extraordinary assertion that the paper shared my views about the USA's role in the world. So I wrote back. 'The paper shares my views, does it? I'd keep that to myself if I were you, chum,' I said. And 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 entirely behind you myself, speaking personally.' This is my memory of the telephone conversation. 'But,' he said, 'you know I don't think ... Ooh, I think we're in for real trouble if we try to publish it in the *Guardian*.' Really, I asked innocently, 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're also a serious newspapers, of course. Nevertheless things have changed a bit in 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 I believe this to be. Although it is very hot, I also think it is steely. Hot steel ...'

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 the 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 testing. Probably going to be quite a lot of flack, he said. But he thought it should be published, not on the literary pages, but on the leader page. It was a truly political poem, he said. So I was delighted to hear that. He'd send 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 asked 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 quite amiable chat. He said, 'I want to publish it but I seem to be more or less alone.' I then said, 'Look, the *Observer*, as a serious newspaper, has in fact published quite recently an account of what the US tanks actually did in the desert. The tanks had bulldozers, and during the ground attack they were used as sweepers. They buried, as far as we know, an untold number of Iraqis alive. 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 is the language, it's the obscene language. People get very offended by this and that'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 Ankara in March 1985 with Arthur Miller. I had a chat with the ambassador about torture in Turkish prisons. He told me that I didn't appreciate the realities of the situation vis-à-vis the Communist threat, the military reality, the diplomatic reality, the strategic reality, and so on.

I said the reality I was referring to was that of electric current on your genitals. Whereupon 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 offence in the word genitals. But the reality of the situation, the actual reality of electric current on your genitals, was a matter of no concern for 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. As 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.' Recently an *Observer* columnist spoke of his paper's rejection of the poem and referred to his editor's concern 'for its shortcomings as a piece of verse. This was

not of course true. The editor showed no such concern – to me, at least.

I then sent the poem to the literary editor of the *Independent*, saying I hadn't sent it to him in the first place because I did not think the *Independent* would publish it. But now that everybody had turned it down, the *London Review of Books*, the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, perhaps I was wrong about the *Independent*! To cut a long story very short, the literary editor wanted to publish it but he felt he had to show it to the editor. The editor sat on it for a few days and then made no comment except to say the *Independent* was not going to publish the poem. And I've never had any explanation. Nothing. It was simply, No.

The *London Review of Books*' letter was dated 24 September 1991; the *Guardian*'s rejection came in a conversation on the telephone at the beginning of October. The letter from the editor of the *Observer* was dated 6 November, and that from the *Independent* was dated 9 December.

In conversation earlier, you said you would rather not write down the record of this poem yourself, because it would sound as if you were whingeing. But there is an issue here beyond the complaint of the rejected poet. This poem has been dropped by the mainstream press, which would normally have snapped up anything written by Harold Pinter.

I did incidentally, send it to the *New York Review of Books*, just as a laugh. The editor thanked me warmly for sending the poem, but said he was afraid they couldn't use it. So I finally did not waste any more time. I heard that a magazine called *Bomb*, a very well-produced publication in the West Village, might be interested, and indeed they published the poem.

It was also finally published in Britain, in January 1992, by a new newspaper called *Socialist*, with a limited circulation. But as far as national newspapers go, in Holland it was published in one of the main Dutch dailies, *Handelsblad* – in no uncertain terms, too, with an article about the rejection in England, written by the editor. And it was published in Bulgaria, Greece and Finland.

It is interesting, isn't it? At a time when papers are not too troubled about the severity of the language, when it is about the body, scatological, sexual, or whatever. We have overcome the years when you had to put a series of dots in place of an 'F' word. Yet the objection to your poem was justified in your use of some strong words.

This may be because it is a formed piece of work, and perhaps that is where its strength lies. It is a deliberate piece of work. So it alarms more. I'd like to say, as the poet, that I regard it as a very ugly poem. It is necessarily ugly. Its reference is to the grossest ugliness.

But nobody ever said, 'We don't think this poem is good enough. It is not a successful piece of work.' Nobody has actually said that.

I feel particularly sensitive about the language. I am the editor of Index on Censorship responsible for losing Index an annual grant of £7,000. Somebody objected to the word 'cunt' in an article in our special issue on women, *Breaking the Silence* (9/1990). I thought the word, though strong, was in context. However, although I do not know the exact details, one funding organisations obviously took exception.

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 wrong 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 amusing 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. Brutal 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 palpable. The actual nature of the horror was hardly ever aired, or seen on TV. Such a thing as this poem, for me, is about opening a curtain which many people would prefer to see remain closed. And it is in the interests of government that the curtain, that veil, is forever drawn 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 war had no dripping guts.

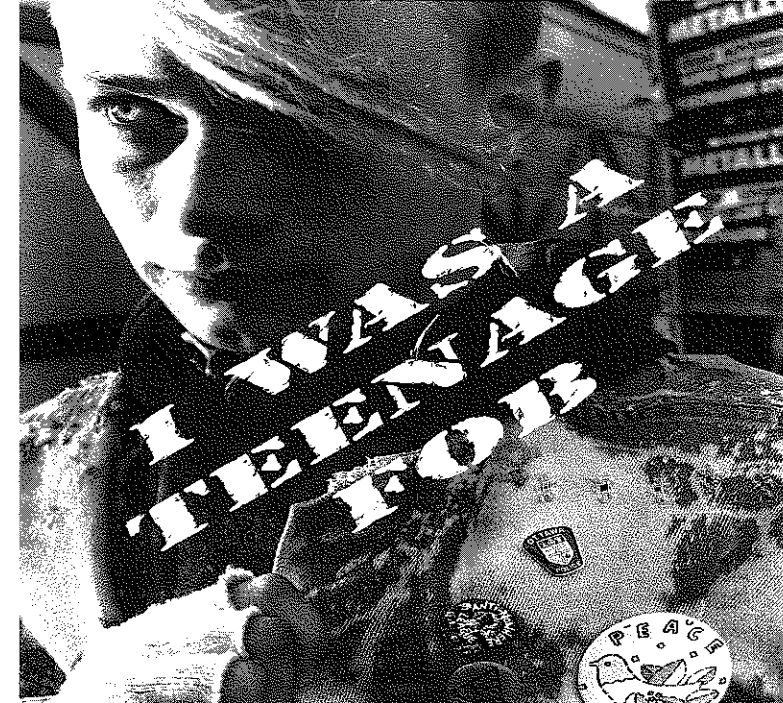
None of it then, and none of it wanted as a reminder now. You can trace the history of the present state of affairs to a series of events through the 1980s, which I am quite clear about. I'm talking of the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, the 'low intensity' war against Nicaragua, the invasion of Panama in 1989, followed by the Gulf War. I do believe this is what I represent in the last line of the poem: 'Now I want you to come over here and kiss me on the mouth.' It refers to who is the boss, who is in charge, who is the master.

But the behaviour of the media is crucial in all this. It has been confirmed that the number of deaths in Panama approached 4,000. But at the time the media talked in hundreds.

Do you remember the revolution in Romania in 1989? The TV was full of statements saying 80,000 people had been killed, especially around Timisoara. The true figure, as I understand it, is about 1,000.

So we are really talking about a controlled media. What the Western media actually does is blow up or exaggerate certain facts in its own interests – or in its government's interests – and ignore and suppress other facts. The dead in Iraq and the continuing deaths in Iraq are hardly front page news.

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



TORONTO TEENAGERS: MAKING CHOICES IN THE 1990s

Exhibition curated by
Grant McCracken
at the Royal Ontario Museum
May 30-September 7, 1992

by Alan O'Connor

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 smoked up, listened to the same music and read the same outsider books. They were more comfortable with thumbed-up copies of Genet than with sociology textbooks.

However, from American sociology came Howard Becker's hip 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, turning them into deviants and resulting 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 soccer fans who were the subject of sensational reporting in the national press.

The new discipline of Cultural Studies cut its intellectual teeth 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 unstated politics in styles of dress, music and

dance. It was not organized resistance to capitalism, racism and sexism but it was resistance through ritualized everyday culture. At 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 opting 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 centrally 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. Video screens play 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

