

# Art for Dishonour – The Suffering of Others and Sympathy’s Education

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...cries of children cries of women cries of birds cries of flowers cries of timbers and stones  
cries of bricks cries of furniture of beds of chairs of curtains of pots of cats and of papers...

Pablo Picasso, *The Dream and Lie of Franco*

But if we consider what emotions would be desirable, it seems too simple to elect sympathy...To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering...is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

We live amid bewildering complexities. Obtuseness and refusal of vision are our besetting vices. Responsible lucidity can be wrested from that darkness only by painful vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars.

Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*

...the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situations upon which his sympathy is founded.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

One may also observe in one’s travels to distant countries the feelings of recognition and affiliation that link every human being to every other human being.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

## Lies and Dreams

In 1941 a Nazi officer visited Picasso’s Paris studio where he saw a postcard of the *Guernica*. ‘Did you do that,’ the officer asked. ‘No,’ replied Picasso, ‘you did.’

In 1971 at an anti-Vietnam war protest in Washington D.C., one thousand veterans threw their medals over a barricade onto the steps of the Capitol building. As a personal protest Charles J. Liteky, a former holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor, placed his medal at the base of the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Accompanying the medal was a letter addressed to President Reagan, rejecting the President’s policies in Central America. Part of the letter reads as follows: ‘Some morning I hope you wake up and hear the cry of the poor riding on a south-west wind from Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. They are crying STOP KILLING US’ (Allen, 1995, pp. 70-71).

In a discussion of utopia and its opposites Terry Eagleton concludes that, ‘those men and women who faced Stalinist firing squads with revolutionary slogans on their lips were hardly contemplating success, at least not for themselves. In one sense, their gesture had all the futility of an existential *acte gratuit*; certainly they could not profit from it, and for all they knew, nor could anyone else either. But in spurning the instrumental in this way they sketched, at the point of death, a utopian gesture that might just, for all they knew, bear fruit for the living’ (Eagleton, 2000, p. 40).

Speaking truth to power—throwing truth into the face of power, and here referred to as utopian inflection—is the central point of art for dishonour. It is the art of protest and rebellion, the art of victims and the suffering, dystopian art that by pointing towards a more humane world is utopian. Art for dishonour

is directed most particularly against the violence of states and their ruling classes. It is a voice seeking to craft a new society and new experience where the development of each is the condition for the development of all. In the genre of art for dishonour an artist's crafted objects are expressions of sympathy; moments of inflected experience—fleeting and gestural as they maybe. By means of content, form, and context the artist intentionally places the duty of sympathy before the spectator. In turn, the attentive spectator undertakes a process analogous to that which the artist underwent when creating the work. Understanding utopian inflection as sympathetic experience in examples of work from the genre of art for dishonour is, then, the focus of this chapter.

To grasp the full implications of Picasso's reply—'you did,'—by detaching it from its original object (i.e., the painting), is to take a step towards grappling with the linkages between suffering and privilege. The ability to take this step is a sign of sympathy's education and the development of a corresponding imagination. Implied in this perspective is the further claim that sympathy's range of vision must be as local and as global as the capitalist civilization that first called out its necessity and expression.

In Chapter x, we claimed that utopia is crafted from everyday things, events and situations. The utopian inflection of the dystopic is a particular case of this crafting, evident when sympathy attempts to reconstruct situations and project alternative meaning—by looking for ways forward, better ways to live, or simply just to survive. Consistent with the concepts of 'coordinated action,' 'habit,' and 'artful experience,' but now translated into the context of the visual arts, utopian inflection is any gestural symbol or formal composition which evokes or hints at a world that is well-formed, integrated, and satisfying. Thus, images that express the discordant and fractured in human experience, as art for dishonour does, aim at this kind of imagination. John Dewey, in *Art as Experience* for instance, captures this sense well: 'A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive whole, which is the universe in which we live...[Art] keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness. It does so by reducing the raw materials of that experience to matter ordered through from' (Dewey, 1934, pp. 202, 138). Utopian inflection points sympathy in the direction of experience that represents the possibility of openness and development. Such inflection, whether actual or symbolic, turns attention away from dominant power, though not forgetting it, towards a world that confirms the everyday concrete efficacy of individuals and their communities. The utopian inflection of dystopia is the craft of sympathy.

Through the process of inflection lived space is substituted for the glittering, abstract (i.e., dystopian) spaces of ruling class ceremony and parade. The abstracted time of state honour, nationalistic memory and the glories of civilization is also inflected; for example, towards the possibility of people being able to engage in democratic life. It is the work of imagination to express the participatory possibilities of such inflections. Typically, because of threat or fear, utopian inflections are not moments of reflection, and they cannot be contrived. When, on December 3 1955, Rosa Parkes took a seat in the whites only section of a Montgomery bus she inflected an element of race segregation in the South. The unvarnished truth she spoke was that in a humane society any citizen has a right to sit down on a bus seat. Martin Luther King's speech of dialectical dishonour and hope on August 28 1963 fused Parke's seemingly unremarkable action together with many other such actions. In doing so he created a fully-fledged utopian dream pointing to habits and ways of world making that are rounded out, fulfilled and artful, in the sense of being crafted by people in free association. King's rendition of Isaiah's prophetic poetry, spoken at the centre of state power, inflected the abstract space of the Washington Mall into a space of hopeful action: 'I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight.' His speech pointed to the mountainous, the rough, and the crooked in racist society.

In the communities of globalized capitalism extreme dystopia is the daily and chronic reality for millions of people; about 1 billion people, one seventh of the world's population, live under conditions of extreme poverty and hunger. A small rise in food prices can almost instantly condemn millions of additional people to poverty and hunger. To take another kind of example, according to UNICEF about 10 million children die each year of preventable diseases: pneumonia, diarrhoea, malaria and HIV/AIDS. Half of these children die

from malnutrition, poor hygiene and lack of access to water. A 1996 report to the UN General Assembly summarily concludes that, 'More and more of the world is being sucked into a desolate moral vacuum. This is a space devoid of the most basic human values; a space in which children are slaughtered, raped, and maimed; a space in which children are exploited as soldiers; a space in which children are starved and exposed to extreme brutality' (Machel, 1996, p. 5). Fifteen years later, Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, quoted this statement with the additional comment that, 'These conclusions hold true today, unfortunately. The "scourge of war" remains a reality for millions of children. It has gotten worse—as conflicts have mutated, as civilians have become direct targets' (Bokova, 2011, p. 2). While children die from hunger and in war, the fortunate ones come and go in the centres of civilized living. These centres and the casual deaths are the obverse and reverse side of contemporary dystopia.

Picasso's prose poem *The Dream and Lie of Franco* makes clear that dystopia is formed from prosaic and broken particulars (corpses, dead animals, traumatised children, blood, chairs, pots, flowers). Utopian inflection is, then, a mode of sympathetic imagination that simultaneously reaches from within and beyond the disorders of social life. This chapter explores utopian inflection through the work of New Zealand artist Michael Reed against a background of Adam Smith's conception of sympathy.

In the second epigraph above Sontag seems to be asking us—when looking at war photographs for instance—to leave behind sympathy which is all too easy to elect, in favour of undertaking a more detached cognitive reflection aimed at sorting out the real linkages of power. In the face of the grim images Sontag rightly wants to cut off the once-over-lightly approach that degrades sympathy into shallow sentimentality and feigned pity. The easy sympathy Sontag is dismissive of is commonplace in a world mostly indifferent to the arbitrary termination of life. At the same time the world is awash with images of war, poverty, and hunger that are tossed together with images of every other conceivable sort of contemporary reality, including advertising and pornography. The images of suffering seem to command no more attention, and very likely receive less attention, than say, pictures of celebrities, or of commodities that we do not need but anxiously want. In making an otherwise acute point about the instant proximity of distant suffering—her example is watching war unfold in all but real time on television—it is unfortunate that Sontag too quickly employs the formula of setting sympathy aside. By doing so Sontag fails to grasp its significance when more adequately conceived. It's as if the familiar vicissitudes of emotion in blasé capitalist culture have bleached sympathy of all colour, except that of transitory feeling. This view is too cynical to be helpful. Sympathy properly understood as a cognitive emotion, is exactly the critical resource that can serve to focus reflection on those linkages Sontag draws our attention to.

Indeed, it is a central claim of this chapter that sympathy is more than a just a resource, though it is that at least. Sympathy is integral to reflection in the kinds of examples covered by art for dishonour. Put simply, sympathy implies a way of seeing, thinking, and imagining—the very opposite of shying away. On this view sympathy is a tough-minded emotion. Perceptively, Sontag notes that it is passivity that dulls the moral sentiments and feelings. Passivity does this in part, not through a lack of feeling, but by a surfeit of morally directionless and destructive feeling. As she puts the point, 'The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anaesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration' (Sontag, 2003, p. 102). It is difficult to conceptualize the kind of reflection Sontag is calling for without seeing that, at its centre, it must entail an imaginative sympathy of a kind relevant to searching out the linkages between suffering, privilege, and action. A sundering of cognition and emotion, in the way Sontag's viewpoint risks doing, would occlude seeing and eviscerate understanding. She is right, of course, to insist that an image is frequently just an initiating spark, but then so also are poems, plays, novels, and pieces of music. Why should we expect anything more from an artist *qua* artist? In any form of politically committed art and art appropriated to progressive action it is for individual viewers and movements to tease out the rest. The spark is just that, a pregnant beginning, and from time to time it will ignite a revolution. Sympathetic spectators understand this and do not pass by on the other side.

Eighteenth century Adam Smith, more attuned to the place of obligation in daily life, than is now the case, took the view that sympathy is a central part of the duty that is owed to others. Smith gives us a good and interesting good reason for taking sympathy's education seriously.

It is not easy to create an initial spark. Martha Nussbaum epigraphically implies that despite the brilliance and clarity of an image the task of understanding is not, by that fact alone, necessarily made a whole lot easier. Sympathy promises to support us in the face of obtuseness and the refusal of vision by assisting us to maintain our attention on the 'scrutiny of particulars.' Because critical sympathy is a means of sustaining and enriching reflection as well as action it is also a form of education. It is a means of widening experience and freeing it from affectation, randomness, and unthinking routine. What is needed, then, is a conception of sympathy that projects utopian inflection as imaginative understanding and experience.

### **The Attentive Spectator**

Sontag, we have already noted, worries that passivity dulls the emotions and their attendant cognitions; in which case passive sympathy may easily obliterate real relations of power that hold between spectators looking at images and those who are suffering. In this case, 'sympathy' would be little more than an affectation—at best, an expression of innocence or impotence, or even, Sontag suggests, an impertinence. Reaching across two and a half centuries Smith provides an answer to this sort of charge by giving us an actively attentive spectator who operates within a cognitively rich structure of sympathy. It is a short step from the disposition of Smith's radically attentive spectator to the kind of attention that is politically committed, though this latter move was no part of Smith's project. Smith implicitly anticipates an element of the problem that Sontag alludes to by acknowledging that the emotions of the spectator will 'still be very apt to fall short of the violence of what is felt by the sufferer' (Smith, 2009, p. 28). One could think of sympathy as a continuum running from (almost) total indifference (e.g., the case of an SS officer who shows a momentary flicker of understanding towards a prisoner), to where it entails a complete understanding of what has befallen the sufferer, and yet further to being a factor in action.

*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* begins with Smith proposing that sympathy (understood as a principle that interests us in the fortunes of others) is a part of our human nature. On the basis of this universal principle, as he rightly understands it, Smith claims that, 'the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it' (Ibid., p.13). Imaginative sympathy is the faculty that allows us to reach beyond the limitations of immediate experience so as to form a conception of other people's feelings and experiences. Throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith employs a broad conception of sympathy as denoting, 'our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever,' though in the context of this chapter the focus is on suffering and death—the standard subject matter of art for dishonour.<sup>1</sup>

A major feature of Smith's theory lies in its detailed and nuanced discussion of the mechanisms of sympathy. As a skilled teacher of undergraduates he was also the master of the pithy, attention-getting example—his first being drawn from subject matter at the centre of art for dishonour, 'our brother on the rack' (Ibid.). If we are at ease, Smith tells us, our senses will simply not register the quality and quantity of his suffering under torture, let alone inform us on this matter. Sympathetic clarity and alertness is an achievement in a spectator's development. Conversely, the capacity for sympathy—as cases of abuse, violence, and psychopathology demonstrate—is easily muted or extinguished.

To get a sense of that part of Smith's view most relevant to this discussion it is necessary to understand the developmental structure of sympathy.

[O]ur sympathy with the grief or joy of another, before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect. General lamentations, which express nothing but the anguish of the sufferer, create rather a curiosity to inquire into his situation, along with some disposition to sympathize with him, than any actual sympathy that is very sensible. The first question which we ask is What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both from the

vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable...Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of *the situation which excites it*...[emphasis added] (Ibid., p. 16).

Smith views sympathy as experience constructed by a spectator who grasps—actually or imaginatively through the mediation of an image, text or performance—the situation of another ('the person principally concerned,' as Smith regularly puts it). By the situation of another Smith means, approximately, a context of causes and effects, means and ends which will not necessarily reveal themselves immediately and which must be worked out. Sympathy is both a means of achieving this and its further outcome. For Smith the deeper foundations of sympathy rest on understanding the situation within which it arises, rather than simply from seeing a passion enacted or experiencing a feeling. Very clearly, Smith is giving an account of both sympathy and emotion more generally that takes seriously their cognitive content and form. He sees their initial upheaval as an invitation to inquiry and dutiful engagement. A failure to go beyond the first expressions and stirrings of sympathy—marked by general and ill-defined sentimental 'lamentations,'—is to stop short of 'actual sympathy that is very sensible.' Without an account of context the development of a sympathetic understanding will inevitably be thin. It is this further step that Sontag is implicitly asking for, though she seems not to allow that sympathy should lie at its centre. The first question of sympathy is, then, 'What is going on here, what is this situation all about?' In matters of sympathy context is everything.

Attention to the facts is a primary requirement in projecting sympathetic imagination. In the matter of art for dishonour it goes something like this: 'Look here,' the artist says, 'take note of this, feel this'—'here is the shape, colour, and form of suffering—use this image so your eye can tell the brain what to see, and your brain tell the eye what to think.' Put pragmatically, the image is an extension of the artist's perceptions and actions. Analogically, the spectator imaginatively undertakes a correspondingly similar range of perceptions and actions. The sympathetic image is a tool to be used in creating experience; it is an active means of viewing the world from a certain point of view, of infusing it with meaning, and attending to it in particular ways. Such is the beginning of sympathy in the visual arts, understood from a Smithian perspective. And the sympathetic image is also an implicit warning against an all too easy election of shallow emotion confined to conventional etiquette and casual observation. None of this, of course, provides a cast-iron guarantee that the warning will be heeded, which is part of the reason that Smith insists on sympathy within the framework of duty. Sympathy, as is commonly known, can be feigned, but then so can any emotion, belief or expression. In any genuine case of sympathy Smith shows that the spectator is far from being a casual observer. In his understanding of sympathy there is rightly a well-defined and necessary objectivity.<sup>2</sup> Sympathy is a way of attending to and acting in the world placed under a certain description; of seeing people and their contexts from the inside, of 'bringing the case home' to oneself, to employ one of Smith's characteristically clear and practical formulations. Throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith repeatedly makes the case that sympathy, while active, is not capricious, and further that it reaches beyond mechanical routine and the mere offering of formal condolences. On the contrary:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. For as to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dullness of the conception [...] In every passion of which the mind is susceptible, the emotions of the bystander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the sufferer (Ibid., pp. 13-14, 15).

The imaginary change of perspective that marks sympathy can be uncertain at first since the spectator may well be concerned about some other matter, and in the case of art for dishonour the thought that the spectator is not really suffering (may never have suffered in war) continually intrudes into the experience. In cases of existential sympathy Smith readily admits as much, but this in no way lessens the need to develop a sympathetic understanding. It does remind us, however, that the maintenance of sympathy is no push over and that it requires critically sustained cognitive-emotional attention. The same point can be made about the viewer in the gallery or the reader of a book where the sufferer's situation is brought before the mind's eye. Initial sympathy may be intuitive and sketchy, even a bit casual, but there is no reason why this should not deepen and be embedded in a context of understanding, reason, and even action. On this, as a goal with regard to getting a grip on the suffering of others, Smith and Sontag are in substantial agreement.

Thinking more widely about the moral sentiments and cognition Smith notes, for example, that it would be absurd to think that the first perceptions of right and wrong are the outcome of reasoning and judgement. By analogy, the same could be said for 'other experiments upon which any general rules are founded' (e.g., the well-known cruelty of the powerful), such as sympathy. The first perceptions are the expression of '...immediate sense and feeling' (Ibid., p. 13). An important role for the artist of dishonour is to construct images so vivid and forceful that they stand a chance of initiating immediate feeling. From there the attention of sympathy begins its educational work, reaching out from the question addressed to any person and/or class who is the victim of power and exploitation, 'what has befallen you?'

Ever the teacher Smith provides lively characterisations of spectatorship in the face of tragedy; such as a mother's unconditional sympathy for a suffering infant. The mother joins to the infant's helplessness, 'her own consciousness of that helplessness, and her own terrors for the unknown consequences of its disorder; and out of all of these, forms, for her own sorrow, the most complete image of misery and distress.' And in the case of sympathy for the dead, Smith sketches out a picture of 'that awful futurity...deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations' (Ibid., p. 17). This sympathy, arising from our capacity to imaginatively project our living consciousness into the bodies of the dead, gives us a foresight of, and an education about, our own inevitable mortality. Of particular interest to any consideration of art for dishonour, Smith also turns his attention to sympathy for the victims of brutal crimes. It is easy for modern readers to imagine parallel contexts of oppression, war, starvation, and death to those that Smith commented on with reference to his own world.

...as we sympathize with the sorrow of our fellow-creature whenever we see his distress, so we likewise enter into his abhorrence and aversion for whatever has given occasion to it. Our heart, as it adopts and beats time to his grief, so is it likewise animated with that spirit by which he endeavours to drive away or destroy the cause of it. The indolent and passive fellow-feeling, by which we accompany him in his sufferings, readily gives way to that more vigorous and active sentiment by which we go along with him in the effort he makes, either to repel them, or to gratify his aversion to what has given occasion to them. This is still more peculiarly the case, when it is man who has caused them. When we see one man oppressed or injured by another, the sympathy which we feel with the distress of the sufferer seems to serve only to animate our fellow-feeling with his resentment against the offender. We are rejoiced to see him attack his adversary in his turn, and are eager and ready to assist him whenever he exerts himself for defence, or even for vengeance within a certain degree. If the injured should perish in the quarrel, we not only sympathize with the real resentment of his friends and relations, but with the imaginary resentment which in fancy we lend to the dead, who is no longer capable of feeling that or any other human sentiment. But as we put ourselves in his situation, as we enter, as it were, into his body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, when we bring home in this manner his case to our own bosoms, we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person

principally concerned is incapable of feeling, and which yet we feel by an illusive sympathy with him. The sympathetic tears which we shed for that immense and irretrievable loss, which in our fancy he appears to have sustained, seem to be but a small part of the duty which we owe him. The injury which he has suffered demands, we think, a principal part of our attention. We feel that resentment which we imagine he ought to feel, and which he would feel, if in his cold and lifeless body there remained any consciousness of what passes upon earth. His blood, we think, calls aloud for vengeance. The very ashes of the dead seem to be disturbed at the thought that his injuries are to pass unrevenged. The horrors which are supposed to haunt the bed of the murderer, the ghosts which, superstition imagines, rise from their graves to demand vengeance upon those who brought them to an untimely end, all take their origin from this natural sympathy with the imaginary resentment of the slain. And with regard, at least, to this most dreadful of all crimes, Nature, antecedent to all reflections upon the utility of punishment, has in this manner stamped upon the human heart, in the strongest and most indelible characters, an immediate and instinctive approbation of the sacred and necessary law of retaliation (Ibid., p. 85- 86).

In this passage Smith takes us directly up to the front line of those cases of sympathy that happen also to fall naturally within the genre of art for dishonour: cases of abhorrence, aversion, and instinctive opposition; as, for example, illustrated by the incandescent rage of Picasso on April 29 1937 when he first read an account of the bombing of Guernica in *L'Humanité*. This led directly to the first sketches for the *Guernica* two days later on May 1. In such cases the sympathiser variously asks, wonders, speculates, guesses, and hypothesises about the situation that has caused the suffering. He or she begins to find that sympathy 'beats time' with the situation of the victim's grief. 'What can I do,' 'what can I say,' 'what can I think?' Picasso's response to these questions was to pick up a pencil and start drawing. At that moment he began to translate active sentiments of sympathy into images on paper or, to put it more precisely, to discover what these sentiments might and should actually be. Very quickly Picasso enlivened his sympathetic imagination of 'fellow-feeling with his resentment against the offender' (Ibid., p. 85). As is well known from detailed studies of *Guernica's* genesis, Picasso repeatedly asked the equivalent of Smith's question, 'what has befallen you,'— and continued to do so throughout the entire period of painting. The sketches and successive phases of the final work provide insight into a brilliant example of sympathy's education within the visual arts. His sympathy extends across the ordinary details of daily life, such as those intoned in *The Dream and Lie of Franco*: a screaming mother, her dead child, a slain soldier or farmer, an injured horse, a bird, a little flower, an electric light, newsprint, rushing figures desperately trying to cast some flickering light over the destruction. Picasso's attentive and impartial attention to the situation played a major role in developing a sympathy based on 'what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, (Ibid., p. 17). In this way sympathy sustains attention, solidarity, and consequential action. What is good for the artist is good also for the viewer. The 75-year history of the painting pays powerful testimony to sympathy's education among countless viewers.

Smith's theory and Picasso's painting both show that sympathy in its fullness emanates from a lively imagination that reconstructs the sufferer's pain within context, even if imagined and synthesised. After all, *Guernica* is not a picture of the town of Gernika after the murderous bombing. At the same time sympathy is an infusion of meaning into the world of the spectator and it forms part of his or her understanding. The attentive spectator is engaged with the world from the beginning, at grips with its details, its forms, contents, colours and rhythms, as have the victims of the dreadful events alluded to been forced to be. At this point Smith colours his argument with a charged visual language: blood calling aloud, cremated ashes blowing about, horrors to haunt murderers, ghosts calling for revenge; all imprinting the heart with an approbation of retaliation. *Guernica*, Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* and *The Third of May 1808*, and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *The Echo of the Scream*, to take just four magisterial examples of art for dishonour, show what might eventuate when artists, sympathetic to the predicament of victims, take seriously the role of attentive spectator. In the words of Nussbaum and Smith these works exemplify the meaning of 'responsible lucidity'

and ‘the intense scrutiny of particulars’ in which attention is paid to ‘every little circumstance’ in all their ‘minutest incidents.’ Smith’s theory of the attentive spectator provides support for the view that, at its centre, sympathy integrates thought and passion. And it is this integration, properly crafted by the spectator, that mitigates against the fallacy of taking a simple election of sympathy as if this was all there is to sympathy and not just one of its initial impulses. Smith, I think, would applaud the Sontagian notion of reflection that seeks to link on the same map the particulars of privilege and suffering. He would, however, want to insist that it is sympathy impartially constructed that is integral to mapping the linkages between fortune and misfortune.

In the first review of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Edmund Burke described Smith’s literary style as ‘rather painting than writing’ (Burke, 1759, p. 485). This fluid work indeed, is filled with simple descriptions and vivid allusions to judgements in everyday situations where sympathy is relevant. From the few passages quoted in this essay the reader should already have caught a sense of this. Smith stays close to the messiness of facts, things, and situations, to emotions felt, to ordinary habits, and to the common excellence of social duty—all this in contrast to a transcendently imposed ideal of perfection. Sympathy for Smith is, then, something crafted, worked up, just as an artist might do. In being so, it is, like art, a mode of integrative action formed by imagination, gesture, and feeling. It is founded on ‘an imaginary change of situations’ between the spectator and ‘the person [class, community, group] principally concerned.’ By undertaking this imagined change the spectator develops a perspective from best to grasp the linkages of suffering. In art, as in life, sympathy’s education begins as answers are sought to the question, ‘what has befallen you?’ This is Smith’s essential claim.

### **Art for Dishonour**

If there is a standard form of art for honour then it is the medal awarded to soldiers and other citizens in a war. For more than a century it has been commonplace to award medals in the name of the state to those who obeyed, did their duty and who, in the process, were maimed and killed. The *Victory Medal*, to take a well-known example, was awarded to almost all surviving allied combatants and other service personnel after World War I. The obverse side shows the winged figure of Victory with her left arm extended, presumably to the future. Her right hand holds the palm branch of peace. Millions were slaughtered needlessly in the madness that is glossed in the words on the reverse side, *The Great War For Civilization 1914-1919*. These words are framed in a wreath of laurel leaves. Power loves platitudes and yellow bronze medals that are given to the masses in recognition of compliance, dutiful respect, and patriotism.

Medals and other forms of art designed to unmask and stand against state violence invite sympathy for the powerless by ripping away the charades of civilization, and of pretence. At the same time art for dishonour deliberately sets out to deride chauvinism and expose the ‘lunacy of the sane.’ Art for dishonour is a view of history from below, from the perspective of the masses, the working classes, the vulnerable, the discriminated, those raped, tortured, and slaughtered. In the twentieth century the German Ludwig Gies at the time of the First World War, memorably the American David Smith (*Medals for Dishonour*) just before the Second World War and many artists during the last seventy years have all produced medals in this genre. Engaged political medallists such as these belong to a wider tradition of art for dishonour. The boundaries of the genre are not altogether clear, but this hardly matters. What is common to artists of dishonour is an orientation of ruthless criticism directed towards situations of suffering. The tradition treats sympathy as a form of political imagination.

Conventional art for honour recognises service to the state by subordinates and, as a consequence, it celebrates the *status quo*. Soldiers do not award medals to officers and generals, even the most honoured generals, do not award medals to their rulers. To do so would be insubordinate. By contrast, art for dishonour is designed to reveal delusion and rationalisation by means of parody and direct mocking. In this respect, the genre technically lies quite close to the political cartoon and frequently uses similar figurative techniques, by pushing caricature against the vulgarities of luxury, theatrical offence against smug superiority, and sceptical memory against ritualised ceremony.

Art for dishonour seeks to show the depersonalising effects of power and to expose lies and propaganda. Its thrust is usually achieved through the utopian inflection, real or implied, of a dystopian situation. Utopian inflection does not conjure up a perfect world but it does take a step towards imagining a feasibly different and improved world, and by pointing to the contradictions in the present world. It is an art of sober hope for those who have learned the art of critical sympathetic looking. As the utopian theorist Vincent Geoghegan has commented, ‘...the probing of human society at its most bleak can open up a space where preventive action can take place, and positive possibilities explored. Here dystopia can help generate utopia. Fearlessly contemplating utter hopelessness can be the first step in the recovery of hope’ (Geoghegan, 2003, p. 151). Art for dishonour is best understood as a dialectic of ‘hope lost, hope regained.’

It is in the interplay of criticism and imagination (utopian inflection)—by both artist and spectator—that we find the educational significance of art for dishonour. To see this we turn to Michael Reed, a contemporary artist in the genre. Reed has built up an exemplary *oeuvre* whose principal focus is the arms business and militarism.

### *how everything turns away*

*Military Wisdom*, a medal for dishonour, is a bronze skull small enough to fit into the palm of a hand. At first glance the skull’s aggression seems mostly defined by a crown of missiles and teeth that are cartridge clips from a machine gun. Though the missiles and cartridges unambiguously tie the medal to militarism and war, it is not these alone that principally define its vacuous fanaticism. Conducting a simple experiment allows us to see this. Cover the eye socket and the upturned nose bone. The skull is immediately less sinister and frightening. Now the missiles look like a kind of fascinator, the teeth more like a cartooned mouthpiece. Go one step further and cover the upper and lower teeth. Now one might mistake the headpiece for a poorly designed and over scaled victor’s crown for a general who has saved a city with brilliant tactics

The eye socket is sightless, a black uncomprehending cavity into which light does not penetrate, from which sympathy cannot reach. The upturned nose forms a smaller cavity and gives the whole face a dogmatic and dumbly obedient character. The obverse surface speaks of a disposition which is bullying, unsmiling, malevolently stupid. From the reverse side the mouth evokes the sense of looking through the gun slit of a bunker, and like the eye socket it too is a rotted-out cavity opening to the front of the skull. The surface of the skull and the barely attached jawbone seem to carry fragments of rotting flesh. Reed’s medal is dense, rich in its dystopian content and form. Despite appearances this is intended as a portrait of living, active wisdom employing violence against the powerless; wisdom beyond entreaty or reason. The invisibility of the victims reinforces a sense of helplessness in the face of terror. What are the circumstances of the invisible ones, what has happened?

*One cannot look*, Plate 26 of *The Disasters of War*, suggests an answer to the question. A massacre is about to begin. Goya’s compositional power focuses the moment and concentrates the spectator’s attention. The etching achieves this result, Robert Hughes points out, ‘...by stressing the angularity of poses, creating a bleak and powerful counterpoint of slopes and triangles in the heap. The woman in white, framed by the cave’s darkness, rocks back in despair at the same angle given by the back of the man in the *traje corto*, kneeling, wringing his hands in prayer or despair, his back to the rifles. The triangle of the void between his legs matches the solid triangle of leg belonging to the kneeling man in the foreground’ (Hughes, 2003, pp. 318 - 19). The anonymous soldiers out of view use their rifles to push the victims back into a cave, away from the world. Seeing only the bayonets makes the scene even more terrifying. The clothes of the man at the centre of the image dressed in country clothes suggest pride in old traditions and skills, such as horsemanship. His expression is disbelief, incomprehension in the face of his world being shot to pieces. A woman in the background protects her children, other women try to hide, reel back, faint, fall, and hope without hope for a last second dispensation of mercy. The light that picks out the stabbing bayonets also highlights the collapsing forms of the woman—sympathy and vengeance brought together in the single space is a compositional gift from Goya to the spectator. The man in the centre seems to be imploring, perhaps calling out ‘STOP KILLING US,’ perhaps thinking only of himself. His compatriot, with his back to the

killers, prays as a man from the country might be expected to pray; for a new world where ‘...they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks.’<sup>23</sup> The last residue of purpose and terror wash across the movements of the victims. Military wisdom gives us the bayonets, Goya gives us the human beings, and his compositional brilliance demands our sympathy.

Returning to *Military Wisdom* after *One cannot look* only makes more evident the weakness of character in the former. Nothing seems to point to utopia, no sense of another world is even hinted at, no final act recorded, no arms flung out in supplication like the dramatic figure at the centre of *The Third of May*, no hope of redemption dragged from the cavities of dystopia. But looking again shows that the missile headpiece is held in place by a garland of laurel leaves, barely distinguishable on the skull’s surface. Over the centuries of class society all kinds of monsters have worn garlands of imperial grandeur platted from laurel—noble, evergreen, strong, glistening. At the heart of darkness Reed offers a fragile utopian probe from the ruler’s wardrobe. ‘What right have you to wear the garland,’ the invisible victims demand. The question is a faint signal of utopia, registered in leaves that contradict the horror, like the tiny flower in the fingers of the fallen one, at the bottom, in the middle of the *Guernica*—within the reach of even a child. One might note here a formal similarity with another inflection drawn from dystopia, the juxtaposition of sweet magnolia and burning flesh, in Abel Merepool’s poem *Strange Fruit* (memorably sung in a defiant register by Billie Holiday, itself a gesture of utopian hope).

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!

#### *murdering the innocents*

Type in the search phrase ‘children in wars’ and the internet will spit out reports and statistics of lives lost and bashed, frequently mutilated beyond the ability of any surgical skill to repair—two million and more children killed during the last decade in armed conflict, six million injured, 20 million forced to run from their homes, 300, 000 forced against their will to fight in armies, half of all the world’s refugees and displaced peoples are under the age of 18, and so on. Death and trauma is the principal lesson of life for these children, and for those—mothers, fathers—who could only feebly shield them from the assassins.

*Good Grunt* is one of two medals for dishonour that address the theme of maiming children, this time in the zone of real war. Its two sides serve as a round window frame. On the obverse side we see a soldier with an automatic rifle at the ready, looking perhaps for young enemies cowering inside a wardrobe. The background of soft blue wallpaper patterned with yellow lambs suggests a child’s bedroom—soft, innocent, familiar. On the reverse side we apparently look out a window towards a neighbour’s house that is burning while another soldier fires his rifle into the air; to intimidate those inside, to signal victory? On each side there is an inscription: on the obverse, ‘In memory of childhood,’ and on the reverse, ‘From the cradle to the grave.’ The medal hangs on ribbons inscribed with the lyrics of dystopia through which the fragments of mundane utopia are sequentially woven: bomb—the village—kill—people—napalm—the square—do it—Sunday morning—kill—prayer, the bell, the schoolhouse—lock and load—kiddies gather round—mow them down.

Bomb the village, kill the people,  
Throw some napalm in the square,  
Do it on a Sunday morning,  
Kill them on their way to prayer.

Ring the bell inside the schoolhouse,  
Watch those kiddies gather round,  
Lock and load with your two-forty,  
mow them little motherfuckers down.<sup>3</sup>

The village will be razed, soldiers will be stretchered out, bodies counted, the facts added, totalled, and reported to the president who will celebrate a victory. And the grieving families will undoubtedly be told that their sons and daughters died in the cause of liberty. The instrumental rationality of killing recorded in this medal is reinforced by the dull grey of the industrial grade PVC piping that forms its frame. But consider, instead of framing death the pipe might, as easily be a conduit for water, oil or oxygen, or cables for the www—all ways to sustain and expand the powers of children.

Perhaps only a fragment of wallpaper remains of a child's fancy, perhaps only five children survive and then by chance, burning from napalm and running along a road, spared only by an accident, or a whim. A remnant of wallpaper picturing a child's fancy, the house, the bedroom, the last tree; each of these objects in the world functions as an inflection of utopia—points from which children's drawings and memories can begin. As if responding to the soldier's reflex to kill, William Blake (1789) in *Another's Sorrow* responds with a question of utopian intent:

Can a mother sit and hear  
An infant groan, an infant fear?  
[...].Sleep sleep, happy sleep.  
While o'er thee thy mother weep.

The medallist is asked, 'Who did this?' Sifting and ordering the particulars—an artist's work—makes sympathy's answer plain enough and clearly demarcated from the abstractions of official honour.

*Looking Back, Looking Forward/An Award for Manufacturing* is a medal constructed from a tin, in the form of a landmine designed specifically to maim rather than to kill. What is the meaning of looking back, looking forward? Inside the lid of the mine the picture of an African boy (proud, determined, hopeful) is set next to a list of everyday activities, roles and chores: cooking, gardening, collecting firewood, fetching water, goat herding, sweeping, baby sitting, dish washing, clothes washing, soccer, church choir, church service, traditional games, traditional dances, student. The inside base of the mine carries an image of an artificial leg fitted to a victim of one of these weapons. The list appears a second time, as if to remind the reader that they are now extremely difficult or impossible to carry out. A rolled up bandage in the landmine reads, 'THE MANUFACTURE OF FALSE LIMBS IS A GROWTH INDUSTRY IN THE RURAL SOCIETIES THAT WERE EXTENSIVELY MINED. CHILD VICTIMS ARE ESTIMATED TO NEED UP TO FIVE CHANGES OF FALSE LIMB BEFORE REACHING MATURITY.' This list reminds us that a good life, a utopia for child, is made within the life of a community. It is a statement of what a boy or a girl can actually be and do. Dystopia is, then, both an individual and a social catastrophe. Reed's list of activities is, in effect, a framework within which sympathy's education naturally occurs. And as if echoing Adam Smith he reminds us that this is a simple matter, easily understood by a young child, but as easily destroyed.

The meaning of the words on the lid is ambiguous: looking back at a life shaped by war and mutilation, and looking forward to more of the same. Thus understood the image presages a dystopian future. But, looking forward can also refer to a hope that people, disengaged from learning war, will have the ordinary opportunity to learn crafts and enjoy the pleasures of ordinary life. The lamb, the schoolhouse, the tree, the boy, and his daily tasks all denote the retrieval of an innocence realised in a world without war, exploitation and the conflict of classes. Actions we take will decide between either of these possible futures. Unless it is held that dystopia is inevitable, a conclusion the artist of dishonour rejects from the beginning. The craft of

dishonouring artists, to appropriate Gramsci's famous dictum, is rooted in the pessimism of intellect and the optimism of will.

*that awful futurity*

In a set of drapes and runners Reed explores the limits of a dystopian future threatening arbitrary death in all directions. In the *Good, the Bad and the Ugly* a sketched white-skulled cyclops, framed against a black void, stares out in search of profit and victory. But the question of profit and victory for what is not asked and cannot be answered. The pitiless black eye looks like a gun barrel viewed end on within whose sight line the viewer is caught. The work is a portrait of blind, infuriated power whose only 'justification' is the arbitrary exercise of yet more power. Cyclops reverses the Quaker advice by speaking power to truth. This dystopian vision is framed with a statement (from President George W. Bush) referring to 'outlaw regimes that seek and possess nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.' These regimes, we are told '...could use such weapons for blackmail, terror and mass murder.' 'Only these regimes?' the image asks. Interleaved through the lines of presidential wisdom are a number of other statements for example, as follows:

The first casualty of war is truth. (H. W. Johnson)

You've got to forget about this civilian. Whenever you drop bombs, you're going to hit civilians. (Barry Goldwater)

All they that take the sword shall perish by the sword. (Saint Matthew)

This war, like the last war, is a war to end war. (David Lloyd George)

War is capitalism with the gloves off. (Tom Stoppard)

The viewer is left to ponder a future, apparently without hope or relief. A quotation from Edward Herman, 'one of the most durable features of the US culture is the inability or refusal to recognize US war crimes' sets a question for the viewer, which might be put like this: 'in what ways is my society complicit in advancing the dystopian world before me?' The question encourages the viewer to imagine linkages with the victims of terror perpetrated by any military culture of one-eyed vision and purpose. The image as a whole explicitly decentres the viewer's perception and emotion by forcing an imaginary change of position, a first step in the education of attentive sympathy, as Smith would understand it. Simply by posing the question a potential shift is made from dystopian acquiescence towards utopian possibility.

In *Thinking on the Job* the artist allows moments of self-doubt and naïve questioning among agents of terror to suggest the dystopian-utopian dialectic. The drape consists of a series of red panels, each set against a background that looks like a battlefield firestorm. A wide-eyed soldier (perhaps an unwilling conscript) asks a series of questions that are repeatedly trumped by the peremptory answers of his cynical partner (articulate, but unquestioning). These two soldiers engage in a ritualistic dance in which the same movements are, it seems, endlessly repeated. The drape's formal structure emphasises in turn the repetitious rhythm of dystopian dogma and power. Though the startled inquirer is clearly not expected to think, he does so nevertheless, in an innocently radical way. We are reminded that in contexts of power the 'mere' fact of asking a question is subversive, and frequently invites a repressive response. The questioner looks out from the image as if addressing each question to the viewer, thereby inviting an engagement in finding an answer that will rupture the cycle that he is just beginning to grasp. As it is, the instant and derisive answers always come from the soldier who does not see the viewer and who speaks only the language of war. His responses protect indoctrination and attack truth seeking. The duty of opposition, of envisioning a process towards a transformed world, of asking how circumstances and practice might be unified is put directly before the spectator in this work. An interplay of questions searching for a way to inflect the dystopic field, together with the spectator's self-questioning is the initial spark pointing towards sympathy and solidarity. It is also worth noting that the two figures are, with the exception of the eyes, identical. Perhaps the attentive spectator is to understand from this that he or she could be either; in which case a choice needs to be made by those complicit in the policies of war, namely the citizens of democratic societies, who generally are not permitted

to participate in decisions about whether or not to go to war. But the work also invites a more literally Smithian response for it asks the viewer to consider if it is true that, ‘how selfish soever man may be supposed, [are there not] principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others?’ The questioner hints at a world ordered in terms of mutual self-interest, though not, it should be insisted, selfish interest. Self-interest is the moral sentiment that Smith assumed to be necessary for a well-ordered society. The alternating positions from which the questions come and the question marks themselves are signs of a redeemable life. The curved stem of the questioner’s speech bubble, as opposed to the gun-barrel straight stem of the responder also suggest a stance of utopian possibility *contra* dystopic dogmatism and fatalism.

*Q:* Is the seed of revolution repression?

*A:* Who gives a shit! Cry havoc and let slip the running dogs of capitalism

*Q:* If man shoots does God guide the bullets?

*A:* Yeah right! You are a divine tool.

*Q:* Is it all about right, might and profit?

*A:* You’ve got it! Power corrupts and absolute power is pretty damn cool.

*Q:* Do you fear that boredom and inertia may lead people to follow a deranged leader?

*A:* Look, in starting and waging a war it is not right that matters but victory.

*Q:* Love each other or perish...is love the only rational act?

*A:* Get real and grasp the truth! Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.

*Q:* All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword?

*A:* Bull-shit! God is on our side and justice is ours!

In two other works from a series entitled *Drapes for Real Men*, the viewer confronts the globalization of an arms industry, nestling and establishing connections everywhere. *Money Mob International* is a luxurious and formal drape that might well serve as an altar reredos in a cathedral for international capitalism. In addition to silver it uses blue and gold which in the western ecclesiastical tradition are the celebratory colours of advent and the miraculous birth. However, the advent celebrated in this drape is unrelentingly dystopic. Three great floral stems, like candelabra, define the decorative structure. The left and right stems are silver, the middle one gold. Each stem carries the buds of new growth in the form of a bomber; at the base are stealth bombers. And the ornate flowers at the top are intricate and beautiful compositions made from weapons and yet more bombers. The liturgical formality of the drape tells us that authority is still in control and that these flowers are not fashioned from swords and spears beaten into tools for farmers and orchardists to use. The central stem has the repeated image of a cyclopean skull, though now the ruthlessly calculating eye is golden, with a black dollar sign as its pupil. Each skull is set inside a roundel above a banner ribbon—MONEY MOB INTERNATIONAL. The roundels echo the landmine that maimed the boy and the window of the child’s bedroom, and even, perhaps, the disingenuous wreathes on the *Victory Medal* and *Military Wisdom*. We know, then, what the dystopian eye sees and tells the cyclopean brain. Each cyclops might be seeking or buying divine guidance, praying for victory, or offering a hymn of praise. Each utopian seeks for some hope in the round forms which imply completion and good order.

*Collateral: Top Ten* is a drape that most directly answers the question ‘did you do this?’ The answer, like Picasso’s reply to his Nazi visitor, points to the merchants of death, this time listed in ranked order: UNITED STATES RUSSIA GERMANY FRANCE UNITED KINGDOM SPAIN CHINA ISRAEL NETHERLANDS ITALY. Lines of dollar signs border the main body of the drape. Down the middle, above the names of each state a roundel frames a pattern of anthropomorphic swastikas—each a mechanical dwarf constructed from what might be high-speed rotary blades, ready to shred the enemy. This is a picture of militarists in pursuit of profit—arms dealers, statesmen, diplomats, secret agents, and generals, and then

all the way down to frightened soldiers, the peasants of imperialism. At the centre of each swastika is a grimacing face; the extensions are legs and arms. The hands hold either a gun or a bomb. Between the central motifs and the border of dollar signs are two sets of figures, men, woman and children modelled from on an Indonesian *hinggi* cloth. Each figure stands in the classical and ritualised pose of a supplicant. Small dollar signs, like burn marks, blotch the bodies. Most of the figures are injured. The two groups of civilians are divided from each other and each is vulnerable to attack from those who hold the centre, and who can attack from the safety of impregnable positions. The unarmed, undefended victims are caught in a corridor of profiteering and state repression on a global scale. The hard circles of economic and imperial power where faces are hidden, contrast with the recognizably human figures lined up as if to welcome visitors to their towns. The arms are welcoming—the attack helicopters arrive from over the hill. Anonymous power *versus* hapless victims is once again shown to be the central drama in art for dishonour.

In Reed's art for dishonour—as also in works from Goya to the present—utopian inflection and hope find fragile, but by virtue of that fragility, powerful foothold in those whose looking is attentive. A gesture of supplication, for instance, is an earnest and serious request stated on the sole ground of being a human being. Supplication in this context is the last resort of humane expression, of resistance against overwhelming, even impossible odds. It is an attempt to keep alive the belief that it is people who make history.

How should truth be spoken here? What is the attentive spectator's response? Art for dishonour, in whatever medium, gives these questions and, thereby, the duty of sympathy an imperative force. They confront the viewer with a dystopian-utopian dialectic in which criticism is coupled with hope. The educational meaning of this art form is revealed in this coupling. At the same time a kind of limit is reached.

### **The Next Step**

In *Photographs of Agony*, John Berger addresses this limit, the same limit felt so keenly by Sontag. His analysis, like hers, is an attempt to understand the effects of war photographs that portray moments of intense agony and grief. They metaphorically stop us in our tracks and arrest our attention, and what Berger claims about the war photograph can, *mutatis mutandis*, be made about any relevant image of agony across the full range of art for dishonour.

Berger wonders what effect these images have for people who see them. A standard assumption is that such images wake us up, remind us of and make us see or imagine lived reality. They are commonly understood as, 'printed on the black curtain which is drawn across what we choose to forget or refuse to know...[thus serving] as an eye we cannot shut' (Berger, 1980, p. 38). Try the following experiment by taking some images of dishonour and watch yourself at the moment of perception; note how you look, metaphorically speaking, into the eyes of the victims, at the broken bodies, the blood, the terror. Such images 'bring us up short. The most literal adjective that could be applied to them is *arresting*' (Ibid). But then the moment comes when you must make the transition back into ordinary, that is to say, normal life. Berger notes that, 'as we do so, the contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have just seen.' (Berger, Op. Cit., p. 38). The reason for this is that the viewer's despair or anger in response to the portrayed suffering has no purpose.

If this is the first moment of sympathy Sontag fears that it might also be the first moment of a path towards moral and political disregard. And if that, might it not lead further to what Stephen Eisenman (2007) has called the 'Abu Ghraib effect.' It is at this moment, in Sontag's view, that sympathy fails too easily, even impertinently, thereby resulting, perhaps, in blasé disregard. But here, argues Berger, is the rub, 'such moments, whether photographed or not, [or represented in some other way] are discontinuous with all other moments. They exist by themselves.' In Berger's view the image is violent in a double way; first, in its reference to an actual or imagined experience, and second in being an image that isolates the event, the space, and the moment from all others by framing it. And with the realization of this as the viewer resumes normal life, the sense of shock, so apparently solid a moment ago, melts into air. The perception of agony and the accompanying emotions of sympathy, despair, and indignation threaten to transform themselves into

forms of alienation. In the face of this discontinuity the viewer may well be more impressed by a lack of personal moral and political adequacy, than by the situation the image evokes or points to.

One or other of two kinds of response is typical at this moment: either the whole horror is shrugged off—‘that’s just the way the world is,’ or the viewer undertakes some kind of penance, like making a donation to an international charity. ‘In both cases,’ Berger notes, ‘the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticized. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody’ (Ibid., p. 40).

Sontag thinks of sympathy as something we extend to others caught by the terrorism of war that should be set aside in favour of understanding the linkages between the privileged and the suffering. But sympathy as understood here is not something that is extended like a handshake. It is a way of understanding particular human predicaments to the fullest extent, and in a way that locates them on a common map. On this view the map of suffering is an integral part of sympathy’s response in locating ‘every little circumstance of distress.’

The sufferings of the poor, quite as much as the privileges of the rich, though not in the same way, are based on oppression, and frequently on military terror across state boundaries. The images of art for dishonour may well be initial sparks or an invitation to look and to ask questions—including, as Sontag notes, the following: what is the rationalization, what is the cause, whose responsibility? But the suggestion to set sympathy aside is to go a step too far by thinking of emotion as mere feeling rather than as a richly and necessary cognitive emotion.

Recognizing the concrete materiality of political economic time and space Berger gives the following answer to the putative aporia of sympathy’s education. And he does so by showing that the full significance of an image for sympathy turns on rather more than simply and momentarily registering the shocking fact on the surface of the retina. ‘Confrontation with a photographed moment of agony can mask a far more extensive and urgent confrontation. Usually the wars that we are shown are being fought directly or indirectly in “our” name. What we are shown horrifies us. The next step should be for us to confront our own lack of political freedom. In the political systems as they exist, we have no legal opportunity of effectively influencing the conduct of wars waged in our name. To realise this and to act accordingly is the only effective way of responding to what the [image] shows. Yet the double violence of the photographed moment actually works against this realization’ (Ibid).

Sympathy, understood broadly in ways that Smith’s approach encourages, is an essential element in unmasking and recognizing the circumstances causing the distress of the suffering. And among these circumstances is the lack of freedom that leaves citizens—in societies commonly called democratic—excluded from exercising any real voice in or influence over decisions to execute war against others. Echoing Marx’s *Third Thesis on Feuerbach* circumstance and self-understanding stand on the edge of effecting a kind of coincidence in the experience of the viewer. If the double violence of the image runs the risk of working against the realization Berger refers to, it is equally true that the coincidence just noted can sustain and deepen a wider sympathy; and who can say with what effect? Aided by the generous conception of sympathy that Smith analysed and celebrated, the attentive spectator will, in the words of Aristotle, ‘observe the feelings of recognition and affiliation that link every human being to every other human being.’

Practice—confronting our own lack of political freedom by speaking truth to power—is a form of utopian inflection and, therefore, a moment in the education of sympathy. Practice without sympathy is empty—sympathy without practice lies unredeemed. Art for dishonour, then, plays its part in sympathy’s education by first making the image and then asking that we look.

### **Post Scriptum—Runners for the Corridors of Power, Carpet Bombing**

‘They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for

those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth...is not a pretty thing when you look into it.' Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1902.

'The dead surround the living. The living are the core of the dead. In this core are the dimensions of time and space. What surrounds the core is timelessness.' John Berger, *Twelve Theses on the Economy of the Dead*, 1994.

## Notes

1. Smith distinguishes pity and compassion from sympathy in terms of their relative scope, as follows: 'Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever' (Smith, 2009, p. 15). In this essay 'sympathy' is taken as the generic moral sentiment and therefore as covering pity and compassion.
2. In Smith's words, 'Sympathy, however, cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle. When I sympathize with your sorrow or you indignation, it may be pretended, indeed that my emotion is founded in self-love...When I condole with you...in order to enter into your grief, I do not consider what I should suffer...but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you...How can that be considered as a selfish passion?' (Ibid., p. 373).
3. Petty Officer Charles Anderson of the US Navy remembered this chant, which was used in training camps prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. He appeared in Patricia Foulkrod's documentary, *The Ground Truth: After the Killing Fields*. Source: A review of the movie by Clare Hurley, 25 October, 2006, *World Socialist Website*, [www.ws.org](http://www.ws.org).

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