

RIDING AGAINST THE LIZARD – ON THE NEED FOR ANGER NOW

AN ESSAY BY
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ON THE NEED FOR ANGER NOW

'Anger is the political sentiment par excellence. It brings out the qualities of the inadmissible, the intolerable. It is a refusal and a resistance that with one step goes beyond all that can be accomplished reasonably in order to open possible paths for a new negotiation of the reasonable but also paths of an uncompromising vigilance. Without anger, politics is accommodation and trade in influence; writing without anger traffics in the seductions of writing.'

Nancy, J-L, *The Compearance*

How should we describe the extraordinary consensus that existed in this country – a consensus that united us all around core concepts like ‘free markets’, ‘competition is the only way’, ‘private enterprise good, public enterprise bad’, ‘social partnership’, ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘greed is good’, ‘conspicuous consumption’? For a long time we lived inside a bubble. The walls of the bubble were invisible to us, they coloured everything we looked at but everything was that colour anyway so we thought it was colourless. It was, nonetheless, a bubble. What we hear these days, in the media, in conversations, in political speeches and union negotiations is the pop of the bubble bursting. We are faced with an absolute incongruence – between what we have been told and what we see. What this incongruence will tell us remains to be seen, but it makes us strange to ourselves, wakes us from our dream of shopping and eating and enables us to look back at our days in the bubble with at least the illusion of detachment.

Sometime during his seven-year incarceration at the hands of Italy’s fascists, the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci developed a theory of ideological hegemony. It is probable that the idea first occurred to Gramsci during his meditation on another Italian philosopher and political analyst, Niccolò Machiavelli, for that acute political analyst had observed the self-defeating nature of oppression as a political weapon. What Gramsci argued was that in modern democracies the powerful do not maintain their power – their hegemony – by coercion alone. In classical Marxist thought the ruling classes have at their disposal the police and the army, the prison system and the courts, the market and the all-important

threat of destitution. All of these weapons are experienced as coercive by the poor. None of it belongs to them, and all of it, including the law, favours the rights of property and power.

However, it was clear to Gramsci that something else was needed to explain the fact the people voted for, or gave tacit consent to, a system that favoured a very small minority at their expense, actually voted to give power to the people who coerced them. The answer was 'ideological hegemony'.

In Gramsci's formulation, a vast number of actors within a state contribute to the exclusion of hostile ideas. Thus, in a liberal capitalist democracy groups such as the churches, charities, political parties, special interest groups, schools, environmental activists, trades union, etc., all contribute to an illusion of political debate. It is an illusion because all of these groups, though they would like to tinker with the details, are in agreement on the fundamentals. Gramsci called this the 'common sense' position. Genuinely radical voices are treated with contempt, and characterised as foolish and 'ideological' from the 'common sense' point of view, because the ideology of the majority is transparent to those who live within its confines – the bubble of my opening paragraph. Slavoj Zizek puts it succinctly:

[I]n a given society, certain features, attitudes and norms of life are no longer perceived as ideologically marked, they appear as 'neutral', as the non-ideological common-sense form of life; ideology is the explicitly posited... position which stands out from/against this background.

For example, it is a given in Western Europe (a) that what we have is democracy (b) that our 'democracy' is the best form of democracy that can be achieved (c) that democracy and capitalism are inseparable (d) that western-style capitalist democracy is the form of government towards which all other systems are evolving. These propositions represent the 'common sense' view for most people. Nevertheless, in our 'democracy', electoral victory usually goes to the wealthiest; once a party has been elected it never consults its electorate for another four or five years; subsidiary democracy (i.e. elections and votes within parliaments) is considered to be adequate to reflect the will of the people; capitalism regards democracy as the perfect ground for its exploitative activities, and 'democracy' has guaranteed capitalism and awarded it a free reign by providing what is known as 'political stability'. We should really coin some new phrase to describe it, something unwieldy like Competitive Plutocratic Subsidiary Democracy! To point to any of this is to question the god – and to be immediately labelled 'ideological', which in most cases is roughly equivalent to 'crank'.

So where has western democracy (and ideological hegemony) taken us in recent years? It has taken us to war with Islam, to the torture palaces of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, to 'greed is good', to Global Warming, to the wars of Africa, to The New American Century, to peak oil, to the credit crunch and the global depression, to the reduction of Gaza, to financial corruption on a grand scale, to mass unemployment, to blood diamonds, to the super-rich and hyper-poor, the jobbing politician and the cartel. In

the meantime it has given us as consolation professional football, the celebrity spectacle, wall-to-wall television, talk shows, reality TV. The culture of complaint has drowned the culture of dissent. Television has drowned politics. Listening and looking have drowned hearing and seeing. To see any of this as an aberration of capitalism that ought to be corrected in some way is to miss the point: this is capitalism. What you see is what you get.

Writing in the Guardian in response to the recent insurrection in Greece, Costas Douzinas said of politics in the western democracies:

Contemporary politics aims at marginal (re)distributions of benefits, rewards and positions without challenging the established order. In this sense, politics resembles the marketplace or a town hall debate where rational consensus about public goods can be reached. Conflict has been pronounced finished, passé, impossible. The convergence of political parties in the centre ground exemplifies this "conflict-free" approach. But conflict does not disappear. Neo-liberal capitalism increases inequality and fuels conflict. When social conflict cannot be expressed politically, it becomes criminality and xenophobia, terrorism and intolerance. Or a reactive violence, the emotional response of those invisible to the political system.

So where do writers stand in all of this?

What our private views are is of no consequence. Maintaining in private a hostile attitude to power is the prerogative of the servant and the prisoner – ‘We two alone will sing like birds in the cage.’ What is important is what we write because, as the legal maxim says, *qui tacet consentire videtur* – he who keeps silent is seen as giving consent.

Two other courses are open to us: we can simply point to the ‘commonsense’, identifying and naming the ideological hegemony that has brought us to this pass, a useful function of art in itself, one of its best works, although tainted by the fallacy of objectivity; or we can take sides in the hope of influencing the outcome and thus become part of the debate. This essay advocates the latter.

The traditional stance of the writer in the twentieth century has been oppositional – even in Ireland. That opposition has been by turns republican, nationalist, fascist, and socialist but, one way or another, it has always been on the side of the counter-hegemony. In the interwar years, for example, Frank O’Connor, Sean O Faoláin, Peadar O’Donnell and Liam O’Flaherty harried the confessional Catholic and right-wing consensus, the latter two from very public left-wing positions. Even an allegedly ‘pastoral’ poet like Patrick Kavanagh could kick against the pricks in poems like ‘To Hell With Common Sense’ or ‘In Memory of Brother Michael’:

Culture is always something that was

Something pedants can measure

Skull of bard, thigh of chief

Depth of dried up river

Shall we be thus forever?

Shall we be thus forever?

But at no time in the recent past have writers been so integrated into the fabric of power and at the same time strikingly powerless as they are now.

Writers, integrated into the fabric of power, I hear you ask, how can that be?

The Arts Council, established in 1951 with Sean O Faoláin as its chairman, was originally conceived as a conduit for state funding for the arts, including grants and bursaries to writers and artists; Aosdána, a national body for writers and artists was established in 1981, its only useful function to disburse a cnuas or bursary to deserving members; two further organisations manage grants for translators of Irish literature and grants for Irish artists and writers to travel abroad. Most – probably all – of the festivals that take place around the country on a regular basis are part-funded by these government bodies; most travel by Irish writers benefits in some way from these organisations; many writers who would otherwise be in straitened circumstances draw an honourable pension from Aosdána. It is, in fact, difficult if not impossible to be a writer in Ireland and not to become the beneficiary of government largesse in some form. And in addition to government funding, most arts organisations draw the balance of their sponsorship from local, national or international business, and, of course, government anyway sees its interests as virtually identical to those of commerce. I do not wish to suggest that a withdrawal of government funding is a good idea – quite the contrary, it is the business of government, among other things, to support the artistic life of the community – rather I am suggesting that it has never been easier for writers to abandon their traditional oppositional stance and cosy up to the political establishment. Of course the political establishment for the most part don't give a damn about them so long as they're not rocking the boat – the day when an Irishman might agonise about whether a play of his 'sent out certain men the English shot' is long gone.

So is there a choice? To be with the hegemony or against it? Most Irish writers would reject the dichotomy. 'We are apolitical,' they say. In the place of Politics Irish writers place politically neutral 'causes' such as Amnesty and other human rights organisations and various charities which give the illusion of being political while studiously avoiding commitment within the national boundaries. I heard the poet Theo Dorgan on the radio some years ago declare flatly that 'no great art is political'. (As Beckett said somewhere, 'Habit is a great deadener'.) But who are we to worry about 'greatness'? Are we to abandon our duties as citizens because future generations won't write theses on us?

To be fair, when a writer makes a political statement of any kind other than the banal he is soundly trounced by the press. Professional pundits with no better qualification than a career in 'opinion' writing are perfectly capable of rolling out the 'why should we listen to a writer anymore than anyone

else' argument, and for the past eight years it has been fashionable, pace the USA, to condemn writers as 'intellectuals', although the gradual realisation that George W Bush and his cronies were particularly stupid took some of the tarnish off intelligence as a term of abuse. But we can as easily turn the complaint on its head and say, 'Why should writers be exempt from the general anger that shakes the people of world, why should we be permitted our private cynicism?'

Nevertheless, the rain of odium that falls on a writer's head when she dares to step outside the common sense view is daunting for a trade that works in isolation often with very little support. Finally, none of this is good for sales, and writers must make a shilling the same as everyone else in this benighted world. 'The times,' as Sylvia Plath remarked, 'are tidy', at least from the point of view of the ruling classes, and there is indeed 'no career in the venture/Of riding against the lizard.'

The reasonable thing to do in the circumstances is to adopt a 'reasonable' posture; to be critical where criticism can be voiced in safety; to be neutral where commitment can do damage; to support causes where those causes are respectable. Neutrality was the chosen position of Ireland's most famous poet, Seamus Heaney, for example. His most famous political statement was to claim Irish nationality as a reason for not accepting an honour from the queen of England. Terry Eagleton, in his witty review of the Beowulf translation, placed Heaney firmly within the confines of 'cultural colonisation'. Heaney's quietism, his solemn genuflection towards what Eagleton called 'eirenic liberal pluralism', has become the high tone of neutral Irish poetry. Novelists and playwrights tend to follow suit. The market rewards the neutrals handsomely. There are vast sums on offer for faux-fiction (or pseudo-fiction, if you will), shortlistings and prizes for fictionalised biographies, carefully balanced or revisionist historical fiction, clever flights of fancy or books set in exotic locations. Poets celebrate the pastoral, the private, the perverse – anything but the Political. Revivals dominate the stage, gaining the longest runs, the tours and the best houses. Despite honourable exceptions, this is the tone of contemporary literature in Ireland.

Probably the most successful of recent Irish novels is Colm Tóibín's *The Master*. Terry Eagleton described Tóibín as 'tight-lipped' and a master of 'extreme verbal evenness' (in an extremely positive assessment of *The Blackwater Lightship*) but *The Master* is, as Hermione Lee called it, 'an audacious, profound, and wonderfully intelligent book'. It won the 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, was shortlisted for the 2004 Booker Prize, won the Los Angeles Times Novel of the Year, the Stonewall Book Award and the Lambda Literary Award, and was listed by The New York Times as one of the ten most notable books of 2004. It explores the psychology and creativity of Henry James in prose worthy of the man himself. Part of its attraction, for heterosexuals at least, is the fact that Tóibín, as an openly gay writer, clearly identifies with James who most probably was secretly gay or at least a repressed homosexual.

The Master, in fact, is a highly accomplished and successful piece of fictionalised biography. What it does not do is challenge the reader – either in her view of how a writer thinks, or in terms of prejudices towards homosexuality. On the contrary it advances an image of the 'safe', celibate gay man, to-

gether with an image of the writer as a private intellectual with no significant contribution to make to the polity other than the grace of his art. Indeed, in Henry James, Toibín chose a man peculiarly hobbled by neurotic invalidism and repression, paralysed by a fear of sex, the epitome of the suffering obsessive writer. The public loved it, and Toibín, a fine raconteur and personally charming, can discourse wittily and learnedly about his subject at interview and in readings. The book has all the qualities that the public loves: its tone is high-melancholy; its subject is safely dead; the writing is undeniably elegant; there are no challenging ideas – either structural or in terms of subject matter; finally, it is a classic-by-association, being concerned with a canonised writer. In general terms, the book has many of the qualities that have made the poetry of Seamus Heaney so popular. In its own way it is equally eirenic, liberal and pluralist.

Needless to say, art, graceful or otherwise, is always a public good, but in terms of ideological hegemony, *ars gratia artis* is really art for the status quo, and inevitably (especially now that the status quo has become status quo ante in the collapse of free-market globalism) it must be nostalgic. But we need a poetics of anger not of nostalgia for, as the Palestinian poet Mourid Al-Bhargouti observed in another context, nostalgia is no more than a form of ‘romantic impotence’. Iconoclasm, not nostalgia, must be our watchword now. Anything else is unconscionable.

Anger is the spectre that haunts all of this ‘eirenic liberal pluralism’ because the first law of The Commonsense is there shall not be anger. Citizens may complain as much as they like, and there are organisations that deal with complaints and procedures for remedy, albeit slow and costly ones, but an angry citizenry is a dangerous entity. The planet is burning; the capitalists have stolen the world, including our land, water and air; health, social services, education are battered and impoverished; unemployment is at an unprecedented level; oil-wars blight the lives of millions. Nevertheless, reasonableness, quietness, calmness, meditateness, are continuously advanced as terms of affection by literary critics when the world calls for anger, savagery and satire. Where is our Jonathan Swift, our Shelley, our Saramago, our Neruda, our Orwell, our Huxley? It may well be that ‘poetry makes nothing happen’ as Auden would have it, but that is no excuse for not trying. ‘Language implies boundaries,’ Loren Eiseley wrote, ‘[a] word spoken creates a dog, a rabbit, a man. It fixes their nature before our eyes; henceforth their shapes are, in a sense, our own creation.’ Thus it is possible to call into being our own reality in opposition to that of the market. Guy Debord’s startling insight in the 1960s, that we no longer saw the spectacle but inhabited it has proved true, but the spectacle itself, capitalism incarnate, has this very year presented us with the one terrible chance of our generation to interrupt. It will take more than reasonableness and quiet meditation to shake the structure. So let us begin at the first step, the simple process of naming our enemy.

Firstly, a taxonomy of rapine, a genealogy of avarice.

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Unfortunately I haven't been able to get my footnote system working with the programme I use for making PDFs as yet, but anyone who wants to check out the original text will find the above works cited in context, together with one or two additional notes at www.threemonkeysonline.com where the original essay was published.

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