

# Writing in the Shadow of the Bomb\*

Glenn Deer

What followed was a bolt  
 Outside the range and target of the thunder,  
 And human speech curved back upon itself  
 Through Druid runways and the Piltown scarps,  
 Beyond the stammers of the Java Caves,  
 To find its origins in hieroglyphs  
 On mouths and eyes and cheeks  
 Etched by a foreign stylus never used  
 On the outmoded page of the Apocalypse.

—E.J. Pratt, “Come Away, Death” (1941)

As the world’s military powers debate the future of war in the Middle East, Pakistan and India, the ultimate “stylus” of power, the nuclear bomb, has been pondered yet again. The motorized buzz-bomb that Pratt describes in his 1941 poem is not, of course, as destructive as the nuclear one but it did change the nature of war and of the modern condition. The title “Come Away, Death” alludes to a courtly lover’s death-wish in a song from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, but it also locates the origin of contemporary violence in some earlier scene of human social formation. The poem casts death as a chivalrous priest who once “offered sacramental wine” and “closed the eyelids,” but now finds himself replaced by the chilling, heart-stopping moment of silence between the cutting-off of the bomb’s motor and the thunderclap of its explosive impact.

The mechanization of death that leaves priestly *paternosters* crushed under a mechanical “traction tread” does not, in Pratt’s poem, lead us continually forward in time, but backward to an earlier violence that predates “the outmoded page of the apocalypse.” Such regressive destruction that obliterates human memory, freedom, and technological advancement is central in several novels as well, notably Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1959), Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* (1982) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Michael Ondaatje’s *The English*

*Patient* (1992) and his more recent *Anil's Ghost* (2000) are similarly pre-occupied. Regression into the dark ages has also been evoked to characterize the New York ruins of the World Trade Center: as Don DeLillo observes (whose sense of the “medieval” is obviously rather different from Pratt’s), “whatever great skeins of technology lie ahead, ever more complex, connective, precise, micro-fractional, the future has yielded, for now, to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cutthroat religion.”

As an elegiac and nostalgic poem, Pratt’s poem never aspires to halt the apocalyptic (nothing could) but to revive the very funereal dignity that it laments as having been lost to modernity. Yet as we apparently prepare ourselves for international warfare, we also find questions of cultural control, symbolic representations, historical memory and the nature of individual interventions. What are the proprieties that will guide our speaking in the apocalyptic moment? Who can freely offer a vision of the future, without having to participate in “the dance of history” that begins, as John Gray’s *Billy Bishop Goes to War* puts it, when “someone points a gun at someone’s face”? What individual freedom can survive in the face of war?



I ask these questions not only in the shadow of the nuclear threat but in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the subsequent bombing and invasion of Afghanistan, and those moments of bitter dispute between journalists, politicians, international affairs analysts and politicized intellectuals. Canadians have not committed such a large contingent of their armed forces to active duty since the Korean War. The horrible strikes on the Towers, endlessly replayed in video footage on television that captured the moments of impact and collapse from all angles, required that significant action be taken to stop future terrorism.

It is no surprise that the American debate over the events of September has been more divisive, including the identification, and implied blacklisting, of dissenters by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni headed by Lynne Cheney, wife of the American Vice-President. On both sides of the border the pundits have said that September 11<sup>th</sup> brought an end to the age of irony—or perhaps relativism, or postmodernism, or maybe postcolonialism. Stanley Fish, in his October 15, 2001 article in the *New York Times* “Condemnation Without Absolutes,” responded to conservative critics who blamed “postmodern intellectuals” for weakening the American sense of “resolve” (an important abstraction in the present climate): postmodern

relativism is charged with leaving Americans “with no firm basis of either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back.” “Not so,” asserts Fish, for postmodern thinking, while denying universal absolutes, may allow us to see into the minds, motives, agenda and logic of the adversaries. Do not think of the terrorists as madmen, counsels Fish: “The better course is to think of these men as bearers of a rationality we reject because its goal is our destruction. If we take the trouble to understand that rationality, we might have a better chance of figuring out what its adherents will do next and preventing it.”

Fish’s defense of postmodern thinking as having practical military uses is dubious since the prevention of terrorism not only depends on theoretical strategizing, but the commitment of money, time and personnel to do it. Are we to imagine that the CIA will begin recruiting so-called postmodern cultural studies thinkers to its special forces? It is revealing, however, that Fish should find himself compelled to *defend* a cultural concept—*postmodernism*—from the taint of treason. In other words, American intellectuals must declare their patriotism or else be scapegoated for their alleged role in making these attacks possible.

This targeting of internal weakness and dissent has certainly been in the mind of the American leadership which has tried to manage national solidarity by warning dissenters: “You are either for us or against us.” Although such ultimata are designed to close down debate, they did little to prevent American writers, journalists, and academics—including Barbara Kingsolver, Lewis Lapham, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said and many others—from speaking against military retaliation: thus Kingsolver wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 25 September, 2001, “Patriotism threatens free speech with death. It is infuriated by thoughtful hesitation, constructive criticism of our leaders, and pleas for peace.” Not all American intellectuals agreed with her. Marjorie Perloff, a professor of literature from Stanford, was infuriated by what she saw as a blaming of America for the attacks, in letters published in the 4 October, 2001 issue of *The London Review of Books*. The letters, authored by American and British intellectuals like Jameson, Said, Terry Eagleton, Mary Beard and a dozen others, so irked Perloff that she publicly cancelled her subscription and called upon her students and colleagues to boycott the *Review*.

The discourse of bitter accusation that has wracked American intellectual life has also emerged in the Canadian arena. Canadian journalists pilloried Sunera Thobani for daring to speak in October 2001 at a Women’s

Resistance Conference in Ottawa about the violent record of American military interventions. The speech, whose content addressed themes similar to those in Lewis Lapham's later essay, "Drums Along the Potomac" in the November 2001 issue of *Harper's*, erred in its severity of tone. Still, Thobani's fiery address provoked a necessary discussion in Canada.

The Canadian management of dissent has included scathing attacks by Canadian journalist Robert Fulford ("In search of an eternal flame during a period of darkness," the *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 2001, A10) and *Ottawa Citizen* columnist David Warren ("Wave goodbye to the age of conformity," the *Vancouver Sun*, 15 October 2001, A13) on political correctness, university intellectuals, feminists and post-colonial theory. All of these have been blamed for infecting (Fulford actually uses the word "metastasize") Western culture with relativism, moral weakness and the inability to discern and thus combat true evil.

Fulford is especially hostile to anti-racist studies, castigating such activism for allowing "irresponsible" charges to be sustained: "When we discuss racism, we impose on ourselves a kind of moral disarmament: We are cowed into silence or acquiescence by the magic authority of a word" (the *Vancouver Sun* 12 October, 2001, A10). According to Fulford, post-colonial theory is equally to blame because it fosters "The idea of dealing even-handedly with both sides" and makes society "incapable of the one act that has always been essential to survival, distinguishing friends from enemies." "And where did this simple-minded idea of even-handedness come from? It emerged in its current manifestation from the universities, in the form of post-colonial theory" (A11).

This scapegoating of a complex field of inquiry is accompanied by remarkable disrespect for those involved in the work of anti-racism: Fulford, who previously opposed the "Writing Thru Race" Conference organized by Roy Miki in Vancouver in 1994, criticizes the Durban conference held in South Africa because of its unfair treatment of Israel. Durban was obviously flawed, but does this single conference justify a discounting of all efforts in anti-racism? In a climate of international military conflict, is it helpful for democracies to demonize anti-racism movements or intellectuals who study phenomena such as post-colonial society? Post-colonial theorists are a diverse group, who work in a field marked by lively debate and disagreement. They are certainly not a mere gaggle of cultural relativists. In fact, the intellectual diversity and scepticism that characterize post-colonial inquiry are also vital to the democracies of a world that has

been shaken by the hardened orthodoxies of religious extremists.

Without the vigilant work of anti-racism, who could guarantee that innocent people are protected from ostracism and abuse? In the weeks after the attacks on New York and Washington, Muslim groups became the victims of bomb threats and physical harassment. Fortunately, politicians and civic authorities in both Canada and the United States quickly condemned such acts. Because there are multiculturalist policies and protections in North America to educate the citizenry, such backlashes have been contained and will, one hopes, continue to be thwarted in the future. Racism does its nasty work, we know, through the powerful mechanisms of stereotyping and the divisions between privileged groups and Others. These divisions must be overcome if we wish to advance to a post-racial age. It should be added, however, that anti-racism thinkers, including Constance Backhouse in her *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (1999), warn of the dangers of a colour-blind or raceless ideal, an ideal that informs the myth of the Canadian nation as entirely free of racism.

The most progressive anti-racist discourse must, in the words of Paul Gilroy's recent book *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000), move beyond traditional racial hierarchies. For Gilroy, evidence of "the indissoluble unity of all life at the level of genetic materials" together with work in the areas of biotechnology should lead to a radical rethinking of racial differences. His vision of a "planetary humanism" may seem idealistic, but such idealism deserves attention. The fact that all human beings share the limited but miraculous biological foundation is another way of exposing race as a social construct. As Gilroy says, "The human sensorium has had to be educated to the appreciation of racial differences. When it comes to the visualization of discrete racial groups, a great deal of fine-tuning has been required."



Racial difference provides the drama in the concluding chapter of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as it abruptly shifts to the Sikh bomb sapper's realization that the Americans have bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Kirpal Singh's anger provokes Caravaggio to agree: "He knows the young soldier is right. They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation."

The possibility of a nuclear attack on any nation raises urgent questions. Writing in *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (1992),

Peter Schwenger connects the scarred back of a postal carrier, burned by nuclear fire, that appears in Peter Townsend's *The Postman of Nagasaki* (1984) to Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* (1987), a book also preoccupied with the interrupted posting of "letters," with scars, and retrospective knowledge: for epistemology, as Derrida states, "there is only the back, seen from the back, in what is written, such is the final word."

In the dystopic literature of nuclear annihilation, voices speak to us from across an abyss of shattered time and burned visions, in letters that never quite reach us, unable to avert another disaster, shredded paper sent back to our time: "Within this complex postal system," writes Schwenger, "what role can be played by literature, that postcard that claims the completeness of the letter? Does literature have the capacity to leave its stamp upon time, or to ensure the continuance even of the concept of time, beyond the nuclear age?"

The limits of the thinkable, the compulsive return to scenes of childhood loss and to symbolic mastery, and the body as the burned site of nuclear violence also preoccupy Dennis Bock's recent novel, *The Ash Garden*. Bock explores the complex effects of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima through several different perspectives, including that of Anton Böll, a German nuclear physicist who switches allegiances mainly to pursue his own research with the Americans; his wife, Sophie, a Jewish-Austrian refugee whose youth and linguistic isolation bind her to a distant and unfeeling husband who in 1943 helped her escape the miserable conditions of a Quebec immigrant camp; and Emiko Asai, a Japanese documentary filmmaker who survived the bombing of Hiroshima but must endure disfiguring burn wounds, painful reconstructive surgery, the loss of her family and cultural displacement. The marriage of Anton and Sophia is haunted by the bombing of Hiroshima, although Anton is fully convinced that the bomb was an ethical necessity to end the war: "It was as if neither of them had been able to escape the shell of that burnt city. The memories played themselves out over and over again under their sleeping eyes like a looped newsreel. . . ."

The power of Bock's style derives from its complex handling of time, its evocations of the patient wards in Hiroshima, the desert test ranges in New Mexico, the Jewish refugee camp on the banks of the St. Lawrence. Bock favours the free indirect style to articulate the ambivalent motives and perceptions of characters, often showing their profound alienation from the events around them: "With the passing of years it began to seem that their

lives had happened not to them but to other people . . . when they did remember, it was never the event or memory in question they saw or felt but simply a snapshot of themselves from that time. . . .”

Anton and Sophie are separated by their different experiences of the war: Anton is consumed by his work on the development of the bomb in the desert test ranges of New Mexico, and later by his filming and tending of the burn victims in the Hiroshima wards; Sophie is left in New York and finds temporary comfort through an affair with Stefano, an Italian butcher. Anton’s filming of the burn victims displaces his emotional connection to his wife: intending to send her personal greetings and tourist footage of himself “having a nice time on one of those islands,” his silent films preserve images of the hospitalized victims that he views compulsively when he returns to America, but conceals from others until he is confronted by Emiko. As he helps in the hospitals and records the wounds of the victims, he is haunted by the constant taste of ash in his mouth, a “grey cloud” taste that wakes him in the middle of the night and coats his tongue during the day.

Anton’s “old films” draw Emiko, the director of “Yellow Crane Films,” to Anton. Her relationship with him presents the twists and turns of ironic power reversals: who is the film-maker and who is the documented subject—the pursuer and the pursued? Emiko’s personal narration both opens and concludes the novel. The opening image shows her drawing a mud picture of her grandfather on her brother’s back. Emiko’s face, burned in the moments after she completes the picture, will eventually be reconstructed by the grafting of skin from her own back when she is sent to America nine years later. The motifs of the body, the bomb’s injurious effects and the limits of language are poignantly extended when Emiko’s communication with her dying brother is reduced to sign language. As they both lie side by side, on their stomachs, in the hospital, his thumb presses into hers when he approves of her stories, and she touches him reassuringly on the only unburned portion of his body. Emiko becomes the subject of public attention when she is brought to America for facial surgery with a group of other Japanese girls. Veiled in order to mitigate the shock of her real scars, she embodies America’s contradictory forces of destruction and reconstruction. She is even a living example to those Americans “who want to help ensure that the bomb will never be used again.”

While other victims of Hiroshima are burned with patterns that follow the dark and light areas of their clothing, some have buttons and zippers

blasted deep into their flesh. The outlines of incinerated people are scorched on the ruined walls of the city, atomized ghostly presences that are filmed and photographed by the stunned American investigators who are recording the effects of the destruction. The body of Anton's own wife, Sophie, also develops an almost clairvoyant sympathetic connection to the bomb victims: when she hears the news of the Hiroshima bombing in New York, she instantly develops a butterfly-shaped rash on her face, an early symptom of the lupus that will cripple her.

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The lessons of *The Ash Garden* speak directly to the pain of the victims of war and the conscience of those who would wield weapons of mass destruction. All can be scarred by such military engagements, whose punishing effects ripple out across the decades and root themselves in the bodies of the future.

*\*Postscript: As this issue is about to go to press 600 Canadian troops have just returned from six months of dangerous duty in Afghanistan. While the Canadian military commitment has abated, the Americans continue, at least at this point, to prepare for a strike against Iraq. The concerns over intellectual freedom, racial profiling and human rights raised by this editorial were composed in the tragic aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> but these have continued to be relevant and troubling in the current international scene.*

