

IN A TIME OF WAR

A Babel of Thoughts

by David Betteridge

with cartoons by Bob Starrett



*Until we learn that other lives are equally grievable
and have an equal demand on us to be grieved -
especially the ones that we've helped to eliminate -
I'm not sure we'll really be on the way to overcoming
the problem of dehumanization.*

JUDITH BUTLER

CEMETERIES

We have run out of cemeteries, *said the hospital official in Gaza*, and still the bodies pile up, faster than we can cope with them. We are digging graves wherever we can find ground that is not built on, or under rubble, or under enemy fire. Today we turned a hospital car park into a mass grave for yesterday's dead. It is not only their sheer number that overwhelms us, but also the difficulty we have in identifying many of the casualties, and preparing them for proper burial. Sometimes it is hard to put the correct arms and legs and heads with the correct torsos. We are advising parents who are trapped here in the danger zone, where bombing may occur at any time, to write their children's

names with a marker pen on each major part of their bodies, to make our work easier in the event of the poor youngsters being dismembered when hit, and to do the same on themselves.

FRIENDLY FIRE

I have been trying to imagine, *said the war correspondent*, what kind of men would think to abduct innocent people, including children, and to do so in the same few hours during which they also raped, tortured, mutilated, murdered or abducted scores of others, old and young, male and female, disabled and fit. I can understand rage suddenly erupting into violence, blindly, after long years of conflict and suffering wrong, but not this. This was an evil that was planned, coordinated, and targeted, it seems, by men exercising the whole mind.

After the abductions, we learned that some have died, not at the hands of their captors, but by their would-be rescuers, behaving recklessly. “Friendly fire,” it is sometimes called, a grotesque misnomer.

Pursuing this story, I went to one of the villages in Israel that had been attacked. The security forces were there, engaged in an extensive tidying-up operation, disposing of bodies, scrubbing surfaces clean, putting out fires, rounding up traumatised animals, arranging transport to other places judged to be safe for those who could not bear to stay, and putting up tents for those whose houses were beyond repair, but who had chosen to stay. Reactions differed, opinions differed.

Some people in the village want revenge, pure and simple; others speak of *rooting out* the enemy from the territory that they control, and doing so once and for all, not in revenge, but as a prerequisite for future peace. The old parable of the wheat and the tares comes to mind here, horribly pertinent, the opposing elements being so closely intermingled as to be very hard to separate.

Other people, the optimists, look to the international community to help find a solution, although all past attempts have failed.

EYELESS IN GAZA

Eyeless in Gaza: this phrase flitted into my mind, from some corner in the lumber-room of memory, *said the teacher of English Literature*. Earlier, I had been watching the latest news from Gaza, with thousands dead, and millions bereaved or homeless or otherwise hurt, and with little hope of a future for that devastated strip of land other than one of recurring violence. *Eyeless in Gaza*, yes, I thought, that is a true and descriptive phrase, and so would *limbless in Gaza* be, too; and *rendered deaf in Gaza* by blasts of high explosive; and *rendered dumb* by fear; and *headless*, blown apart, or ground as if between two millstones under ruined infrastructure, better known as buildings, that were once identifiable as homes, schools, hospitals., etc. *Eyeless in Gaza*: yes. Then I remembered: the phrase is from *Samson Agonistes*, being John Milton's description of Samson, that giant warrior of the Israelites held captive by the enemy Philistines. With his eyes put out, and his strength constrained by chains, humiliated, aware himself of his own shortcomings, including lack of wisdom, Samson stands in literature as a deeply ambiguous figure: a man who seems to triumph in the end, when, called on to entertain the Philistines with feats of strength in a pagan festival, he pulls down the pillars supporting the theatre where his tormentors are assembled. With the pillars down, the theatre collapses, and everyone there is crushed and killed, including the strong-man himself.

But is this wrecking of infrastructure the act of a good and godly defender of his people and the true God, or is it the act of a vengeful suicide terrorist? Hmmm. We have food for thought here, as topical today as when Milton was writing his epic in the 1660s, when he himself was a blind ex-hero of the English Revolution, living out his final years in a restored monarchy, in an agony characterised by his bitter experience of defeat.

Samson says an interesting thing when, in the course of Milton's tragedy, he makes a self-critical comment that could as well apply to those who came to triumph over him,

and indeed could apply to *all* warriors, whether Philistines or fellow Israelites, or their latter-day successors:

*O impotence of mind in body strong!
But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom?*

KILLING

Killing is no murder, *said the military spokesperson*, provided the killing is done in self-defence. International law clearly allows for this; and self-defence can be extended, we contend, to include pre-emptive strikes in cases where we think that the enemy has it in mind to attack us sometime. It would be the opposite of self-defence for us to hang about waiting, giving the enemy the advantage of surprise.

It is also stated in international law that any action should be proportionate. Yes, our self-defence is always proportionate, despite what hostile commentators say, or naive liberals, when they point accusingly to the number of civilians and other people of protected status who are killed in collateral damage. It is a shame that such casualties are often quite high, but it is not our fault. It is rather the fault of the enemy, who cynically build hospitals and schools and dwelling places on top of their bunkers and command centres, positioning babies in incubators and old folk on life support machines there, using these innocents as human shields. Such is our concern for these victims, that, before dropping bombs on our target areas, we drop leaflets advising them or their minders to evacuate to places of safety. It is for the enemy to provide such places, unless or until we attack them, too. Our exercise of military might is always right, we make sure of that, being by definition self-defensive. You see, our people are under attack from those who present an existential threat to us, always.

The principle of proportionality cannot be reduced to simple Arithmetic, tit for tat, an eye for an eye, a life for a life. No, it goes beyond equations. In the real world of military engagements, we have to go on hitting the enemy when we have the advantage over them, until we reach the point

when we can be sure they can no longer do us any harm, and they know it. It may be that the Loss Exchange Ratio goes up to 5 to 1, or higher, or even much higher. Our killings are still needful, just, and proportionate. So be it. Such is life.

SHOCK-YOU-BACK

Shock-and-awe, *said the military historian, addressing the militarist*, perhaps that is that how you characterise your strategy of rapid dominance, as others have done before you, as at the time of the Iraq War? Have you not observed that historically, the strategy rebounds on the would-be dominator? Shock-and-awe plays out as shock-and-enrage, which soon becomes enrage-and-radicalise, which becomes radicalise-and-mobilise, which inspires in your intended victims a strategy of shock-you-back, with no greater concern for international law and humanitarian values, and maybe with less.

FUNERALS

Funerals are sad occasions, of course, usually, *said the Scottish poet with a particular interest in songs*, but they can also be consoling, even beautiful, when the conditions are right, which is more likely to happen when you are not being shot at or bombed. I think of Herbert Howells, to take one example from the world of music, burying his young son, who had died of polio, in 1935. "Take him, Earth, for cherishing," he wrote as an epigraph for the choral requiem that he later composed in the boy's memory, a lovely work that is quite often performed; and I think also of the example of the crew of the scallop fishing boat, the Solway Harvester, all drowned off the coast of the Isle of Man in 2000, and then all recovered from where they were trapped in their sunken vessel, lying fathoms deep on the sea-bed. It was a long and difficult operation, and an expensive one, but it was deemed by the Manx and Scottish fishing communities to be an essential mark of respect to the dead - three of them, as it happened, were known to me - and an act of kindness to the bereaved families.

How different are the funeral arrangements for many, or most, of those who die in the midst of war crimes and a humanitarian crisis. My friend Jim Aitken has written a fine elegy for one of these, Uday Abu Mohsen, who lived only one day before being killed during the Siege of Gaza, 2023. He was no less cherished than Herbert Howells's son, or the seven fishermen who went down with the doomed Solway Harvester, and no less to be remembered; nor are those who die, the unknown, the uncountable, whose remains are never found in the welter of war:

*He would have been welcomed with fear
and would have known little of the blast
that ended his one-day old life, mayfly Uday.
Yet he leaves behind much more than a name.*

*He leaves behind the insanity of surgical strikes,
the criminality of collateral damage, the nonsense
of precision bombing, the lunatic costs – and profits –
of warfare set against the massacre of the innocents.*

*Uday's death certificate was bizarrely issued before
any birth certificate arrived...*

(Culture Matters, 6 November, 2023)

DEFYING SENSE

An angry and despairing poet complains, in verse, about the latest evidence that Clausewitz was right, when he stated that: "War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means."

ON THE PRESENT (AND NEXT) WAR

*This is a war that none can win.
This is a war where sufferings for all begin.*

*A hostile word, or door or mind shut tight,
sets in train for years
a war-provoking, fear-continued strife.*

*Attack, decry, pre-empt, avenge...
A politics of hate drags on,
with no sure end.*

*Who but a madman
in a wood-yard in the summer's heat
starts a fire he cannot beat?*

*Who, when the killing fire begins to spread,
fans its flames,
and brings destruction on his head?*

*This is a war that leaves intact its rooted cause,
defying sense, debasing laws.*

A PRACTICAL WISDOM WRIT LARGE

In primary school, on Friday afternoons, we used to be treated to a short film-show, projected on to a precarious screen by a loudly whirring machine. *This is an old philosopher speaking, thinking of Time's arrow.* Sometimes, to amuse us, and himself, the teacher who worked the projector would re-play a selected sequence from the week's film, but in reverse. So we got to see runners running their race backwards, milk ascending from milkmaid's pail to pulled teat, a frenetic artist removing pigments from a completed picture, with many a rapid flick of the brush, until a blank canvas was revealed, and, most satisfying of all, a demolished chimney-stack reassembling itself against the force of gravity, clearing the air of all its dust and debris in a single sucking-in; et cetera.

I sometimes think that political ideologies and their promoters and summarisers and sloganisers believe that similar reversals can be achieved in real life, undoing history - undrawing lines on political maps, sending ships back to their ports of origin, returning plundered resources into the ground, breathing life back into the multitudinous dead, restoring the sabotage of cultures, mollifying ancient hatreds, and so on. No, real life insists that all such historical wrongs and their present-day consequences remain to be addressed, in a politics that resembles fixing a

space capsule while orbiting the Earth, or performing surgery on your own brain. We need a new politics greater than that adumbrated by philosophers of restorative and distributive justice. We need the kind of practical wisdom and practical courage shown by millions currently struggling to survive against the odds, cooperating to help others do the same, helped along by such outside humanitarian relief as gets to them, but *writ large, with political agency*, transcending national boundaries.

OUR HUMAN BEST

A poet of classical bent looks back to the mythic past for inspiration. He conjures up an image of the goddess Athene, focusing on the characteristics that enabled her, supposedly, to give the city of Athens the new start that it needed to establish a new social order, after generations of internecine blood-letting:

THE OLIVE BRINGER

*Great reasoner, great justicer,
your qualities are needed now,
now as never.
Bereaved, bereaving,
in the world's long round
of hydra-headed hate, we are bleeding
in our tribal wars, or wasting day on day
in self-inflicted famine, flood, or drought.
Goddess of the bridle and the look-out post,
the map, the rudder, and the keel,
you are our olive-bringer, tamer of furies,
inspirer of envisaged commonweals.
You know the places where true wisdom lies.
With your familiars you go down deep.
As through timber with a sharp-edged heavy axe
you cleave through habit where it counsels wrong,
checking us, restraining the rash first deed.
Projection on divinity of our human best,
Athene, kindly one, sustain us,
and instruct.*

CREON AND ANTIGONE

If the goddess Athene represents the virtuous face of civic decision-making, inspired by wisdom, with the notion of justice at its centre, then the tyrant Creon, as portrayed by Sophocles in his Theban plays, represents its vicious and homicidal face. *This is a student of South Africa's apartheid years speaking.* It is interesting to note that Nelson Mandela chose this part when, imprisoned on Robben Island, and denied access to any books deemed political, the ANC freedom-fighters turned to classic literature such as this for sustenance, seeing it as relevant to their own times and concerns. Mandela also played the part of Antigone, Creon's adversary, wanting to explore both sides of their lethal dispute.



It is also interesting to note, in light of recent news from today's war-zones, that the dispute between Creon and his niece Antigone had at its heart the burial - or rather the non-burial - of a casualty of war. Creon, recently instated as ruler of Thebes, in an act of symbolic violence, decreed that Antigone's brother, Polyneices, was to be left to rot where he had fallen in combat in the course of the ongoing civil war. He was a traitor, said Creon, and for that reason was to be made an example of, as was anyone who attempted to defy his ruling. The penalty for disobedience would be death. Antigone, appealing to a different set of norms and values, did just that: she defied her uncle, with

predictable results. Here is how Mandela interpreted Sophocles's portrayal of this epic and tragic conflict:

Creon will not listen to Antigone, nor does he listen to anyone but his own inner demons. His inflexibility and blindness will become a leader, for a leader must temper justice with mercy. It was Antigone who symbolized our struggle; she was, in her own way, a freedom fighter, for she defied the law on the grounds that it was unjust.

There are too many Creons at large in the world, and always have been. Their tyrannies stink to the heavens, like the unburied bodies of the multitudes killed, often randomly.

"WEAR THY SWORD..."

Living as I do in a quiet street, *said the pragmatic peace-lover*, and living as I do in a relatively safe corner of the Europe, personally untouched by racist or genocidal threats, and never driven from my dwelling place, nor bombed or shot at directly or dispossessed, as so many have, so I admit that it is all too easy for me to preach a pacifist message, while others do the dirty work of defence, often behind the scenes, deterring violations of my safety, or, in the event of a violation, defusing a dangerous situation by getting in close and overpowering hostile others, at risk to themselves. But I must point out that my pacifism is not absolute, and it does not apply fully to the here-and-now. It is aspirational and step-by-step, to be achieved in a future age, if others agree, and lend support.

If we were to insist to our governments that only wars that are *just* are to be waged in our names, and to be waged only according to the hard-won rules of The Hague and Geneva, that would be a good thing. The governments would still get to have people killed, but only combatants would die, not civilians as we see happening today on an industrial scale, such is the technology of high explosives and missiles and the extremism of leaders who go unchecked.

If military minds would learn from such historic precedents as Harry Ree's precision sabotage against enemy assets in France, in World War Two, then that would be another step along the way to peace, or at least another step away from war.

It was with the cooperation of French workers forced to work in Nazi-run factories that Harry Ree, an SOE agent, was able to place small charges of high explosives in carefully chosen components in the factories' assembly lines. A small *boom*, and the factory was out of action. By showing Churchill's war government that he could do this, with French agreement and with not a single loss of life, Ree saved his French targets from aerial bombardment by the RAF, who would otherwise have gone in, flattening the factories holus-bolus and almost certainly killing civilians in the process.

Ree, whose actions shortened the war in Europe by several months, according to historians, started off, by the way, as a conscientious objector. His son Jonathan, a philosopher, has written an account of his Father's life, well worth studying by those brave souls who fight fire with needful fire.

There is a third step towards peace that can be recommended, called, by those soldiers in the Israeli Defence Force who practised it, *Yesh gvul*, meaning There is a limit. This is a form of selective strike action against military service, when the action in question is deemed to be unlawful or immoral, as in 1982 when IDF soldiers refused to serve across the border into Lebanon. It is a high-risk form of war resistance, calling for the highest courage. Your actions can be construed as mutiny, and leads to court-martialing and punishment. I came across further, more recent examples of such actions in a compilation of testimonies called *Breaking the Silence*, led to its website by the Irish author Colm Toibin. One good thing leads to another, I find, often in unexpected directions.

There is a civilian version of the same sort of refusnik resistance, as we saw in 1974-78 in East Kilbride, when engineering workers at the Rolls Royce factory took strike action against servicing and repairing engines for planes belonging to the Chilean Air Force. That was during the rule of the fascist Pinochet regime. A film made by Felipe Bustos Sierra tells this magnificent story, called *Nae Pasaran*.

George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, had expert knowledge of power and violence, bearing scars from both, picked up in the course of his wanderings, preaching a gospel of democracy and peace. On the subject of carrying arms, and being prepared to use lethal force, he

had an interesting - in fact, a *cunning* - answer for William Penn, who asked about his i.e. Penn's, continued carrying of a sword. "I advise thee to wear it as long as thou canst," said Fox.

A NEW DIVIDE

The very notion of "sides" needs looking at, *said the radical optimist, outnumbered and outargued by others*. As the human cost of each next war mounts, and no final reckoning can be seen, only more costs, and as mad divisive rhetoric fills the airways, and humane values are torn up and trampled, so it cannot be long, surely, before a new divide opens up between suffering citizens, who are full of questions, and their governments, who cannot answer them.

What will your victory in war look like, these citizens will ask, as some have already asked, with what benefits that are unobtainable by any other means? What will your enemy's defeat entail for those who supported that side, and for the wider world, and for you yourself, for that matter? For how long will the peace hold that comes after your victory and their defeat?

Imagine what a powerful force for peace an alliance of citizens across the war-contested fault-lines of history would constitute! Imagine them refusing to be led into new rounds of mutual slaughter! *Not in our names*, they will say, as others have said before them. Imagine them calling instead for *peace and justice*, the one principle informing the other as should have been the case already, long since.

How I wish that such an alliance would spring up, or a thousand of them! How I wish they would show to us a vision and strategy whereby to work back from a feasible settlement with our enemies, or supposed enemies, back to the demands that such a settlement would make on present-day actions. Maybe we can already see the beginnings of such a collective in such brave groupings as the Israeli-Palestinian Combatants for Peace, nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 and 2018.

A BASELINE OF HUMAN CONDUCT

A pandemic of inhumanity has taken hold, *said Karim Khan, Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court.* Too many are dying and too many are being injured. It is intolerable to see the bodies of young children being dragged from the ruins, baked in dust, being rushed to medical facilities that may not have the means to treat them. It is not tenable for these civilians to remain trapped under the weight of a war they cannot escape.

We cannot allow ourselves to be anaesthetised to this level of anguish. We cannot accept that the brutal nature of war is some kind of *fait accompli*. And we cannot and must not lose sight of the fact that there are laws that govern the conduct of these hostilities. There is no blank cheque, even in war. There remains a baseline of human conduct, of humanity, over which no individual may trespass. We must cling to a law that represents the heritage of all countries and peoples. It's our collective duty to do so.

*Speech delivered in Cairo, on 29 October, 2023,
following a visit to the Rafah Crossing.*

SPIDERLIKE

An optimistic poet affirms a commitment to a restorative and distributive response to war's catastrophes, taking an idea from Adrienne Rich's poem, "Natural Resources":

*Building & rebuilding
over & over where unmaking reigns,
always from love, for love,
how we labour
to remake the ravelled world a home,
& how in anger we relearn,
always & again from scratch, the need
for love, requiring justice
and informed by it,
as every home that we build up
repeatedly is smashed
until somehow, someday,
jointly with our erstwhile enemies
we learn, at last*

& & & & & &

GIANTS IN THE HISTORY OF CIVILISATION

“Hope,” said Martin Buber, in a lecture that he gave in 1952, in the Carnegie Hall in New York, “depends on the hoppers, ourselves, not on politicians and journalists who promote difference and division.... dialogue is all.”

They will be giants in the history of civilisation who ever achieve such a politics of hope and dialogue and justice, says the compiler of these testimonies, echoing Buber, and looking to the future. The young among these hoppers will look back on the past, including today’s present, and learn from its horrors. The old, knowing these horrors already, and being wounded by them, will look hard into the future, imagining what William Morris, looking into his future, in a different context, namely a socialist one, called “The Change beyond the Change”.



DEDICATED CONSCIOUSNESS

Culture matters; poetry counts; words make a difference, or they should, if well chosen. They help us think and feel aloud, so to speak, and to do so in the company of others; and they help us try things out in the imagination first, creatively and critically, before we lumber into difficulties and probable defeat in the world of fact. In Edward Said’s words:

We can not fight for our rights and our history as well as our future until we are armed with weapons of criticism and dedicated consciousness.

Let us end this babel of thoughts on war and peace with an attempted summary in verse, on the usefulness of poetry:

A SAFE SPACE

What,
for the common good,
can poets do, in dark times
such as these,
when love and light fall sick,
and with them hope,
and there are fewer hearts
where they can find a home.

What can we do?

We can keep in time and touch
with those who dream of more,
and plan for better.
We can speak with them,
and learn from them.
They are our source, and riverbed,
and stream.

We can make a safe space
for our shared thoughts,
expressing them with care,
using the words that we hold dear,
keeping them warm:
thoughts and words that otherwise
might change their sense
or lose their charge.

From them,
we shall fashion arguments
and rally troops
that are inimical to the enemies
of justice and of peace,
for want of which the world starves.

*David Betteridge
Glasgow
21 December, 2023*

