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The Gentle Way in Punishment

—in memory of Manadel al-Jamadi¹

To be torture, punishment must obey three principal criteria: first, it must produce a certain degree of pain, which may be measured exactly, or at least calculated, compared and hierarchized; death is a torture in so far as it is not simply a withdrawal of the right to live, but is the occasion and the culmination of a calculated gradation of pain: from decapitation (which reduces all pain to a single gesture, performed in a single moment—the zero degree of torture), through hanging, the stake and wheel (all of which prolong the agony), to quartering, which carries pain almost to infinity; death-torture is the art of maintaining life in pain, by subdividing it into a "thousand deaths," by achieving before life ceases the "most exquisite agonies." Torture rests on a whole quantitative art of pain.²

THE TRAP OF COLONIAL war is gently closing on the invading forces in Iraq. Like French troops bogged down in an earlier era in Algeria, the British in Kenya, the Belgians in the Congo, the Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau, the Israelis today in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, US armed forces are now realizing that crushing military superiority is not enough to save them from hostage-taking, ambushes, and other deadly assaults. For soldiers on the ground the occupation of Iraq is fast becoming a descent into hell reminiscent of the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt speaks about so eloquently.³ In the meantime, the characteristics of colonial wars are usually arrogance on the part of the occupiers, who believe that they belong to a superior race (more civilized, more advanced), are contemptuous of the colonized, and sometimes refuse to admit that the colonized are even

¹ Manadel al-Jamadi died while strung up in what is called a "Palestinian hanging" (after a practice widely used by the Israeli Army), suspended by his wrists, which were tied behind him.

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Knopf, 1995) 34–35.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1994).

human.⁴ This colonial sense of superiority all too easily leads occupying forces, in the name of some higher sacred mission to civilize—defending good against evil, protecting civilization, standing up for democracy—into disproportionate use of force. April 2003 saw Falluja burning when US forces went in with the intention (and method) to punish those who had murdered and mutilated the bodies of four security guards killed in an attack. The forces bombarded civilian residential areas and killed 600 people, including many children. Jenin (Palestine) was also the stage for another massacre of innocent civilians by the Israeli army in 2002.⁵

In this context of violence and counter-violence the US broadcast network CBS decided to break the media silence. In its program, *60 Minutes II*, on 28 April, 2003, it showed the first photographs of the savage treatment of Iraqi prisoners by US jailers in Abu Ghraib prison where there are 3200 detainees, 700 more than its normal capacity. This is the same prison that the Commander in Chief promised to “to demolish, as a fitting symbol of Iraq’s new beginning.”⁶ These trophy images shocked the world. The report was proof that torture was happening in Iraq. The program was ready at the start of April, but Pentagon pressure delayed its broadcast for three weeks. The chairman of the US joint chief of staff, General Richard Myers, personally contacted the then anchorman Dan Rather and asked him to postpone the program, arguing that it would endanger the lives of the troops in the “battle of Falluja.” There was official pressure to get the broadcast cancelled. Only when CBS heard that the journalist Seymour Hersh, who works for *The New Yorker*, was planning to publish fresh photographs alongside extracts from damning reports prepared by General Antonio Taguba did the network decide to go ahead with the program.⁷ Initially the media had complied with US government instructions that banned pictures of dead US soldiers in Iraq as it had censored such pictures on the basis that they

⁴ Donald Rumsfeld did recently admit that Iraqis “are human beings.” For more on the subject, see Slavoj Žižek, “Are We in a War? Do We Have an Enemy?” *London Review of Books* (23 May 2002).

⁵ For more on the subject, see Edward Said, “J’espère que quelqu’un m’écoute,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (July 2005): 10.

⁶ An excellent rendering of the trial to be found in JoAnn Wypijewski, “Lessons from the Abu Ghraib Courts-Martial,” *Harper’s Magazine* (February 2006): 43.

⁷ Seymour Hersh is a veteran journalist who, in November 1969, reported the My Lai massacre in Vietnam of 16 March 1968; during a search and destroy operation conducted by Charlie Company of the US Eleventh Brigade under the command of Lieutenant Calley and Captain Medina, 300 civilians, women, children, and old people were killed. See www.agonist.org/annes/taguba.htm

were "not very patriotic."⁸ Fox News host Bill O'Reilly said: "By using those graphic images of the torture, CBS has given the enemies of America a powerful weapon. And that's disturbing."

As early as December 2002 *The Washington Post* had revealed that prisoners accused of belonging to Al-Qaida had been held in inhuman conditions by the US at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and had been subjected to the most appalling torture.⁹ Some had died as a result of their maltreatment. Other prisoners had been sent to secret prisons on the island of Diego Garcia or to so-called friendly countries—Egypt and Jordan—known for inflicting torture on prisoners, of conscience or not. Around 600 prisoners, whose identities are still unknown, were sent to Guantánamo Bay, where Red Cross inspectors are still denied access; Guantánamo tested the techniques subsequently extended to occupied Iraq. An officer in charge of the prisoners said: "If you don't violate someone's human rights some of the time, you probably aren't doing your job." In a discussion of the counter-terrorism center, J. Cofer Black, head of the CIA counter-terrorism center, said succinctly: "There was a before 9/11, and there was an after 9/11. After 9/11, the gloves come off."¹⁰ This climate of legitimacy and impunity opened the way to general brutality against Iraqi prisoners. Torturing in a good cause is now seen as a grim exploit that merits souvenir photos. If only to remind those involved that colonial wars are always immoral.

The objection to the remark made by O'Reilly lies in the urgency one brings to bear on the world we live in, a world where we have become to each other as flies are to wanton boys, a world where the US secretly sends its captives to be tortured under a policy known as "rendition," a world where the use of euphemistic language at Abu Ghraib, in Guantánamo, Facility 1391 (Israel), and Afghanistan have led to moral disengagement.¹¹ In this setup it is the insect that must be perfectly still, not the frog. After all, the language of evasion increases the likelihood of cruel behaviour: I am more likely to feel justified in beating someone to a pulp if I know I am arguably within the law or sheltered by a benign definition of what I am doing. This background is also perhaps relevant to the following set of questions: Must we reveal ourselves, or will our graduated cruelty and implausibly rational-

⁸ The taboo was broken on 18 April by Tami Silicio, an employee of the Maytag Aircraft Corporation (subsequently sacked), who provided *The Seattle Times* with photographs of the coffins of soldiers killed in Iraq that had been brought home in cargo planes.

⁹ Dana Priest and Barton Gellman, "US Decries Abuse but Defends Interrogations," *The Washington Post* 26 December 2002: A2.

¹⁰ "US Decries Abuse" A3.

¹¹ See Jonathan Cook, "Facility 1391: Israel's Guantánamo," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (November 2003): 4.

ized measurement of pain unveil us anyhow? Are we seeing evidence for some grotesque flaw in human nature? Could it be that we are in the world described in *Lord of the Flies* where the protagonist proposes that "there are no laws for the prisoner of war who does not belong to our tribe. We can do what we want with him ... cut his throat, tear out his heart, throw him on the fire?"¹² Michel Foucault, on the other hand, tells us that the power of the modern state is always premised on the state of exception and on its ability to dispose of bare life as it sees fit and with impunity.¹³ And finally, how do we explain to the world that 80 to 90 per cent or more of the detainees at Abu Ghraib and hundreds more in undisclosed prison camps around the world are in fact innocent civilians with no significant information of any use to the so-called coalition? The record of the effort to rationalize and legitimate various degrees of pain and suffering as essential to a military need, or as not quite in breach of human behaviour and international law, is quite, quite disturbing.

There is another great danger facing us. We are nowhere near having created a climate in which there might be understanding of one another. On the contrary, it is quite clear that we live dangerously in a climate where official opportunism, devious euphemism, and cynical ambiguity seem to allow for and even encourage extreme brutality, as witness the betrayal of our better selves. If this sounds too extreme then we need only recall how ignorant of each other Christianity and Islam have chosen to be. Christianity simply cannot imagine Islam as anything other than a malevolent fantasy. Islam, while revering the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, finds notions like the Trinity ridiculous. Respectful understanding of each other may even be said to have regressed terribly, as in the Abu Ghraib case, which stands as the most diminishing, the most degrading experience the Arab world has ever publicly witnessed on a global scale. The stark contrast between what happened at the (in)famous prison and the "standard" way prisoners are tortured in the Arab world, an everyday occurrence, whether it be under Mubarak, Ben Ali, Mohammed VI, Gaddafi, or Assad II, is striking to say the least. Over and above the direct, brutal infliction of pain preferred by ruthless Arab rulers, most of them still in business with the full complicity of Western governments, the US Administration focused on psychological degradation. And instead of the secrecy practiced by Saddam Hussein and other Arab potentates from Morocco to Syria, the US military recorded the humiliation they inflicted, even including their own faces smiling gruesomely as they posed behind the contorted naked bodies of

¹² William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (London: Penguin, 2002): 45.

¹³ *Discipline and Punish* 123.

the prisoners. When the world saw the notorious photograph of a detainee wearing a black hood, electric wires attached to his limbs as he stood on a box in a ridiculous (Christ like) theatrical pose, the reaction was that this must be a piece of performance art. The positions and costumes of the other detainees suggest a theatrical staging, a *tableau vivant*, which cannot but call to mind the "theatre of cruelty," Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, scenes from David Lynch movies.¹⁴ In this sense, the Abu Ghraib case, by turning into a public scandal, was in some ways a positive sign; in an Arab regime, it would have been hushed up. As a result, it must be deconstructed as an image that has become a signature: a taste of the obscenity that counterpoints the public values of personal dignity, democracy, and freedom. One must therefore trim the "excess" which lies in a handwritten note by Donald Rumsfeld only two months before the scandal was revealed to the world, that the four-hour standing technique is obsolete: "Why is standing limited to 4 hours?" This is the same DR, who was recently revealed, as US military deaths in Iraq were pushing 1300, to have put his seal on all the letters of condolence with a machine signature; the same DR who had created his own intelligence agency, the Strategic Support Branch, designed to operate without detection and under his direct control, without the oversight laws that apply to the CIA, employing "notorious figures" whose "links to the US government would be embarrassing if disclosed," and who are behind the practice of "extraordinary rendition," an operation that kidnaps resistance fighters and flows them to countries known to torture prisoners, or to secret US prisons in Thailand, Afghanistan, Poland, and Roumania.¹⁵ According to his employer, this man's gruff exterior hides a heart of gold.¹⁶ It does not apparently conceal an imagination capable of having any sense of what the body of the Other might be experiencing, as he stands still in threatening conditions under interrogation (with or without clothes, women's underpants, the hood or the electrodes). Why only four hours? Why not ten or twelve, so that not only the bodies but also the souls of the detainees have their fair share of torture. It is easy to be sarcastic, harder to know how else to respond.

There is another sense in which this set of questions may be relevant to the background of the photographs: What goes on in the mind and heart of a man who could write that note? What does it bode for the fate of na-

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "Between Two Deaths," *London Review of Books* (3 June 2004): 19.

¹⁵ For more on the subject of torture, see Sanford Levinson, *Torture: A Collection* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 23–78 in particular.

¹⁶ Quoted in Mark Danner, "Delusions in Baghdad," *The New York Review of Books* (18 December 2003): 45.

tions that he occupies one of the most powerful positions in the world? It was Rumsfeld who approved more forceful interrogation techniques at Guantánamo in December 2002, only to rescind them under pressure from Navy lawyers a month later. In the meantime, various modifications and limited permissions for such obscure tactics as "pride and ego down" and "environmental manipulation" continued to be devised and approved by another no less humane man, Alberto Gonzales, who signed a memo calling some of the Geneva Conventions "quaint."¹⁷ Various items from the menu fathered by the Secretary of Defence and the newly-appointed Attorney General as well as a host of quasi-intellectuals in the Bush Administration were taken up by interrogators in Iraq after the invasion of March 2003. Within the very prison walls, the savage gaol, the recall of the multiple voices that make up Abu Ghraib, Rumsfeld's note invents a sort of cosy public fantasy: a nest-of-boxes pleasure of the secret *within* the man within the administration *within* the republic of fear. The proclamation, however, proved ironically self-undoing. For the triumphalism of the claim that Americanism was the only game left in town reflected the arrogant behaviour of the system itself, which helped to create the backlash of Islamic radicalism. In short, the declaration that all grand narratives of bringing democracy to the Arab world were over, was closely bound up with the launching of yet another one, which pits Capital against *Qur'an*. Or, as far as the latter goes, a fundamentalist misreading of it. It is in this sense that one ought to read the cynicism of the West and *el-hchoum* (shame) in the Arab world. To do so, one must dig out the "shit" of the world and confront its malodorous content.



"The phenomenon of evil deeds," Hannah Arendt wrote,

committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic.¹⁸

Arendt goes on to acknowledge the doer's managerial talents, his bureaucratic cunning, and how he is never merely a cog in a machine. It is the "total absence of thinking" that so appalled her. In the light of this sweet

¹⁷ A brilliant deconstruction of the morbid view that Gonzales holds is to be found in Mark Dannet, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004) 54–79.

¹⁸ "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38.3 (Fall 1970): 417.

violence, I intend to read, more deeply and with new eyes, the humiliation at Abu Ghraib prison where torture was not bureaucratic rationality in a synchronic, Weberian, structural sense, but a crazy assault on our sense and sensibility, decency and intellect. The technical apotheosis of the barbarians (we have yet to determine who is and is not barbarian in this case), the terrible march of mechanized orang-utans, armed with all the technology of the twenty-first century—all that means more than a threatened and terrorized world seems to realize. For at Abu Ghraib, the Western mind, or some variation thereof—capitulated out of weakness, out of sloth, out of apathy, out of lack of imagination. It is our task to establish the reasons for this capitulation. Indeed. If words—hundreds of millions in our sources for the Iraq War—still leave us shocked, photographs (one step closer to reality, it is said) leave us perhaps more disgusted still. They may not give us a better understanding of the historical event, but rather remind us how the world has been ordered since then. Of course, we need to ask the same sorts of question of photographs that we ask of other sources: Who made them and for what purpose? With what restraints and under what influences, cultural and material were they made? What is their provenance; what are they of; what came next and what came before; what do they mean? But all of this is very much more difficult with respect to photographs because they are so lonely; so isolated in time (their famous non-temporality, their instantaneity); so detached in space, cut off from what is behind or in front or to the side; so divorced from conversation; so dependent on the eye, the technical skills and the tools of those in control and indeed of their gaze.

At Abu Ghraib, the pictures are harrowing—that goes without saying. The men in their nakedness still pissing themselves in fear as if in a horrible liminal moment between life and the grave. Transmitted over the Internet, the digital photographs from Abu Ghraib made the public cringe while jolting the international perception of torture. They also signalled a sea change in the representation of war through image-making technology in that their existence has become iconic, to stand for something outside themselves. For in addition to traditional media coverage, society is now capable of seeing the Iraq assault through the eyes of the men who planned and executed the invasion in cold blood—Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney. This is especially pertinent in the US after September 11, as it has become hard to write the history of recent times, and still harder to write the history of the continuing present. The moral obscenity that was wreaked on New York and Washington ushered in a new world of maximum damage, a world where fantasy cavorts with the Real, and death is the message, a world where the known and the unknown overlap and at

times intersect, therefore reminding us of Lacan's notion of *anamorphosis*.¹⁹ Individious commentary about the two has made it popular wisdom that they are connected. For who can forget the Department of Defence news briefing in February 2003, when Donald Rumsfeld pondered the relationship between the two: "There are known knowns," he pontificated.

There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.²⁰

What the delusional secretary forgot to add was the crucial fourth formula: the "unknown knowns," things we do not know that we know, which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the "knowledge which doesn't know itself" as Lacan would have it.²¹ Rumsfeld thought the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq were the "unknown unknowns," the threats from Saddam Hussein that had not been foreseen. The claim may be a legitimate one, but in approving the use of special interrogation techniques in Abu Ghraib, he refused to disclose, publicly or to the Senate, what the approved special techniques were; that much is known. We also know that the interrogations have had some tragic consequences. The Army has admitted that at least thirty-nine prisoners in Iraq died while being questioned.²²

The impression that emerges is of a vast network, animated by vague scraps of a militarist ideology and a monstrous punishing machine, that reported to one deranged top man with little or no scruples about engaging in shady methods to win an illegal war and subdue a people at any cost.

¹⁹ An *anamorphosis* is a deformed image that appears in its true form when viewed in some unusual way. Holbein's "The Ambassadors" contains a famous anamorphosis. For Lacan, however, however, the term has a broader and more metaphorical significance: the change of perspective that interests him is a matter more of attitude than of spatial orientation, and may be initiated by the object rather than the observer. The key element for Lacan is the shift of perspective that occurs when something that had once seemed to be merely a potential *object* of the subject's attentive gaze is suddenly revealed to be itself a *subject*, typically a threatening subject who takes the first subject as its own object. This is the moment when "Reality" turns into the "Real." For a penetrating analysis of the subject, see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 45–56; Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) chaps. 3 and 5 in particular.

²⁰ A superb view of the sadistic role played by Donald Rumsfeld in the war in Iraq is to be found in Rowan Scarborough, *Rumsfeld's War: The Untold Story of America's Anti-terrorist Commander* (New York: Regnery, 2004). The entire essay is a must. See also Mark Danner, "Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story," *The New York Review of Books* (7 October 2004): 44–50.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955) 832.

²² See Danner, "Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story" 45.

"Animal House on the night shift" as James Schlessinger cleverly put it. This alone would be good reason for understanding how the Abu Ghraib scandal shows where the real dangers are: in the "unknown knows," the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, although they form the flip side of public morality.²³ Nowhere has the volatility of this process been more apparent than in the serendipitous postmodern way, all in fragments with an eerie coherence, of exhibiting on April 30, 2004 lurid snapshots of naked Iraqi prisoners being abused and/or tortured (we have yet to be clear on this) "just for the fun of it" by American administrators of the prison, images apparently so unambiguous that the supreme commander himself admitted to finding them disgraceful.²⁴ The irony is that before the photographs came out it had been almost impossible to find in the US images of dead or suffering Iraqi prisoners, who were made to writhe on their bellies, urinate on themselves out of fear of dogs and dog handlers, stand on boxes for long periods of time while others were chained to the floor for hours, alone; deprived of sleep for up to seventy-two hours and forced into stressful positions for up to forty-five minutes.²⁵ These photographs are pornographic in a very specific form in that they trade on the unconscious association of torture, sex and death.

One does not have to accept Freud's vision of the mob, burdened as it is with all the stereotypes of bourgeois fear, to notice that he has drawn a line from perversion to truth. Civilization is unjust; our most venerated social institutions are evil; by way of pointing the finger at the individual who disgraces us, since we are all of us perverts in our dreams. "How we have fallen" or "This is not the America I know," to cite the commander-in-chief, is a claim at once simplistic and hypocritical insofar as the Bush Administration *modus operandi* resembles that of a corrupt monopoly (publicly owned but privately managed), much of its domestic and foreign policy can be understood in terms of the hidden and therefore unknown surcharge. In this context, one may find consolation in Freud's "The Disillusionment of the War," which teaches us that in "reality, our fellow citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen as high as we believed."²⁶ This is not, finally, a narcissistic lament but a gruesome reality we must face up to no matter how painful the outcome is. Other

²³ Slavoj Žižek gives a breathtaking portrait of what he calls "American values" of torture. See his "Between Two Deaths" 19.

²⁴ Quoted in Dannet, "Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story" 46.

²⁵ See Wypijewski, "Lessons" 39-52.

²⁶ Freud, *Complete Works* 611.

pictures capture events that the rest of the world has become accustomed to: equivalents of the famous Vietnam photo of a girl running screaming from a napalm attack that is thought to have done so much to affect the hearts and minds of Americans during the war. The parsimonious use of a few images of the horror of shrivelled corpses, boiling and congealed blood, a new underworld of bloated rats and flies, and of the manner of death itself continues to legitimate an unlawful invasion of a sovereign country by an overburdened President who not only highjacked the 2000 election and forced his way into the White House but who also ran (and won!) the 2004 election on a platform of existential negation and a connection between Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein that even he, when pressed, has since had to disclaim.²⁷ Derrida has written perceptively of the degree to which "they" are already "us"—trained by us, often previously supported by us—so that the attack of the Other is also significantly an attack by the Self, an aggression that can be seen as coming from "them" only by a political rhetoric committed to improbable absolutes. The pictures of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which mingle "them" and "us" in unpredicted and startling ways, are worth more than a thousand words, but words must accompany them. If this is indeed the society of the spectacle (think of Janet Jackson's ornamented nipple and how it was digitally effaced in subsequent news broadcasts on 1 February 2004, after its initial exposure during the Super Bowl, its primal scene, so to speak)²⁸ then mere exposure to more and more images of torture will not of itself guarantee any meaningful sympathy with and for the Other, who can never rest. Always impelled to further misrepresentation, he is degraded, de-sanitized, and annulled. A case in point is the plight of the victims of torture at Guantánamo prison who are denied the most basic fundamental protections that guarantee all of us our humanity.²⁹ In the Abu Ghraib case, the photo-documentary task is not an end in itself, but it is a beginning. We will never know whether we are already numb, or need to numb ourselves, before images of torture, duress, and death unless

²⁷ Lewis H. Lapham goes on to add: "A *CBS/New York Times* poll taken in May 2003 (i.e., twenty months after the collapse of the World Trade Center and eight weeks after the invasion of Iraq) discovered 38 percent of the respondents refusing to regard George W. Bush as the legitimate president of the United States, a finding that accounts for a good deal of the rancor in this autumn's election campaign." See his "Straw Votes," *Harper's Magazine* (November 2004): 7.

²⁸ Another example is that of US censorship, which removed pictures of Saddam Hussein in chains from the footage, as well as the legal submissions of eleven of his senior lieutenants during his first appearance in court.

²⁹ Michael Ratner and Ellen Ray, *Guantanamo: What the World Should Know* (London: Chelsea Green Press, 2004) chap. 3 in particular.

we see them in broad daylight. To speak of Hollywood in relation to images of the falling towers, for example, is in an obvious way tasteless, and yet it does not seem impossible that such a connection should have shaped the fantasies of terrorists able to malignly conjure up the emergency number (nine-one-one) with the anniversary of Allende's assassination in 1973, the US invasion of Honduras in 1919, of the beginning of the British Mandate in Palestine in 1922, and of the defeat of the Ottomans before the gates of Vienna in 1683.³⁰

It is the "transformative experience," through the pain of the prisoners and the ecstasy of their torturers that renders pertinent the images of naked Iraqi men piled up in human pyramids. The trouble began when the photographs were pixelated in *The New York Times* and on news broadcasts, so that buttocks, genitals, and other body parts were fogged. Such interventions ironically indicate that the sight of the exposed body can cause even more offence than the revelation of torture.³¹ Still, there is more than enough to see. Worse, we cannot know what kinds of pictures we have not seen, what tortures were not photographed. That some of the participants were young women produces its own shock effect, interjecting the atmosphere of a frat party into a Sadean orgy of violence and abjection. This is what Foucault ironically termed the "gentle way in punishment,"³² except that punishment in this case is held in a trembling balance of dualism, to-ing and fro-ing between the darkness of ignorance and illumination of vision. It is dictated by the grim events of an unjust war, which, like Kafka's penal settlement, blur the distinction between the observer being both predatory explorer and innocent witness, voyeur and victim, oppressor and oppressed.³³ Even so, discretion is the rule in news journalism. This is because the serving up of the visually horrific—blood, gore, mutilation and humiliation—is the task of the entertainment industry, not the news media. In reality, however, taboos about the body or about the dead both belong to that segregated domain designated as obscene—etymologically defined as what is, or should

³⁰ See "Harper's Index," *Harper's Magazine* (November 2004): 11.

³¹ There is an excellent argument made by Anthony Lewis in "Making Torture Legal," *The New York Review of Books* (15 July 2004): 12–14.

³² *Discipline and Punish* 104–31. Foucault distinguishes between what he calls the "body of the condemned" and the "spectacle of the scaffold" on the one hand and "generalized punishment" and "the gentle way in punishment" on the other.

³³ It is of note how at the end of *In the Penal Settlement*, redemption is achieved through a kind of inverted justice in the awful suicide of the officer who succumbs to the horrific, almost malevolent, malfunction of his machine. See Franz Kafka, *In the Penal Settlement: Tales and Short Prose Works*, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (New York: Secker and Warburg, 1973) 45–67.

be, off-scene. The fetish, for Freud, is that which plugs an intolerable gap; and exposing our sexual parts has itself now become the greatest fetish of all. For all its carnivalesque cavortings, body talk is thus our latest brand of repression; and the postmodern cult of pleasure, not least in its American variants, is a very solemn, high-toned affair. If the libidinal body is *in*, the labouring body is *out*. There are mutilated bodies galore, belonging as they do to a bit of the globe beyond the purview of the world. In Abu Ghraib, the shift is one from the body as relation to the body as object. It is also the shift from Merleau-Ponty to Foucault. For the former, the body is "where there is something to be done"; for the latter, the body is where something—gazing, imprinting, regimenting, torturing—is being done to you. For Lacan, the body articulates itself in signs only to find itself betrayed by them.³⁴ The reservists saw no real distinction between the human body and a banana. Both, after all, are material objects, except, that is, in this context, one needs a language which seeks to capture what differentiates the human body from the things around it. Fethi Benslama makes the point I am trying to explain with admirable acuity: "At the same time, there is no hesitation in proclaiming the destruction of the essence of the *Other*, in wanting to take it away from him and from his own humanity and thereby reduce him to a skinned carcass."³⁵ It is in this sense that the Iraqi prisoners' bodies were reduced to jam jars and elastic bands. In the process, they stopped being creative. And because they could not be objectified, there was no question of relationship between them and their torturers. The system which lays them open to torment and laceration is also the grounds for all possible breakdown of communication. The truth does not lie somewhere in between, but in the impossible tension between "us" and "them," in the photographs articulating themselves in signs only to find themselves betrayed by them.³⁶

Humiliation is a central component of torture. In Abu Ghraib, the humiliation is targeted deliberately at the Islamic sense of decency, sexual decorum and pride. Behind the humiliation lies a carefully thought-out policy of psychic abuse. "The purpose of all coercive technique is to induce

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002) chap. 2 in particular; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 12–44; Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 25–26. For a cogent deconstruction of the body, see Gilles Deleuze, *L'Île déserte et autres textes: textes et entretiens 1953–1974* (Paris: Minit, 2002) 45–67.

³⁵ Fethi Benslama, *La Psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* (Paris: Le Point, 2004) 93.

³⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London/New York: Verso, 2003) 129–36.

psychological regression Regression is basically a loss of autonomy." The manual (*Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual*, produced by the CIA for Honduras in 1983) is an updated version of the *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual* of 1963, according to which such regression has to be traumatically induced:

There is an interval . . . of suspended animation, a kind of psychological shock or paralysis. It is caused by a traumatic or sub-traumatic experience which explodes, as it were, the world that is familiar to the subject as well as his image of himself within that world. . . . At this moment the source is far more open to suggestion, far likelier to comply.²⁷

This is almost exactly the scenario laid out by the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas in "The Structure of Evil," which describes the "psychic death" or "radical infantilization" that the serial killer imposes on his victim:

With the total collapse of trust and the madness expressed by sudden dementia of the real, the victim experiences an annihilation of adult personality structures and is timewarped into a certain kind of infantile position, possibly depending now for existence itself on the whim of incarcerated madness.²⁸

"Incarcerated madness" will do nicely for Abu Ghraib. Crucial in both cases is that the subject/object is made to regress to a state of childlike dependency, at the same time losing all the reference points that would allow him to find himself even in this regressed, infantile world. The key, as the CIA manual puts it, is "loss of autonomy." Far from raising the world to heights of civilization, the ruling powers of the early part of the new century seem to be spending a lot of energy trying to turn not only their citizens but also their so-called enemies into children. So it is that the dream of freedom can quickly sour to nightmare, as the defiant boast of the modern ("I take value from myself alone!") dwindles to a cry of anguish ("I am so lonely in this universe!"). On this score, the paradox of freedom is that it severs you from the world in which you practice it. Once again, self-realization involves self-estrangement. The price of liberty is eternal deception, which was acted upon a year after President Bush's triumphant strut aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln (May 2003) under the banner "Mission Accomplished!" In April 2004, to be precise, the pictures of torture were released into our now, our present. Conforming to what Roland

²⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual* (1963; Washington, DC: Parabellum Concepts, 2005) 45.

²⁸ Christopher Bollas, *The Mystery of Things* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 45–46.

Barthes described as the specificity of photographic imagery, its evidence of the event or object "having-been-there," it would seem that there are instances when photography, like a lightening bolt, illuminates past and present, makes vivid and unforgettable what might otherwise be managed or domesticated.³⁹ Had there been no pictures, it is unlikely that the torture of Iraqis would have ever come to light. Susan Sontag may be wrong when she speaks about the narrative poverty of the photographic image in that without the photographic evidence, the Abu Ghraib case would not have been discovered in the first place.⁴⁰ It is thanks to the camera lens that an image of the underworld in Iraq under a cruel occupation was cut, printed, transmitted, broadcast, and reproduced.



In the upshot, unless we have the courage to stand up and think for ourselves, there will be no limits to the folly of men, as witness the "bitch in the box": a normal procedure the US Army use when they want to soften up a prisoner. The practice consists of stuffing the detainee in the trunk of a black Mercedes for a while and driving him around. One can imagine how inhuman the sweatbox in Iraq, in August, when the temperature hits 120 degrees must be. Or the 50/10 technique, which is brought into play to break down EPWs (enemy prisoners of war) and make it easier for the HET (human exploitation teams) to get information from them. The 50/10 technique is a favourite: its aim is to make the detainees stand for fifty minutes of the hour for ten hours with a hood over their heads in the heat.⁴¹ Add to this orgy of torment, the death of more than 250,000 Iraqi civilians in appalling conditions, the culture of routine beatings, starvation, killings and torture of the most grotesque kinds; the 1,500,000,000 bullets the US military had purchased for use in the coming year, which represent roughly 58 bullets for every Iraqi adult and child. Perhaps the 1100 bodies

³⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981) 22–24.

⁴⁰ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003) 94–99.

⁴¹ Other techniques include throwing food in the toilet and ordering prisoners to eat it, forcing detainees to bark like dogs while MPs spit and urinate on them, sodomizing prisoners with police sticks while female MPs watch. One detainee was actually sodomised with a broom by a female soldier; standing on a box with a hood on the detainee's head while simulated electrical wires are attached to his hands and penis; forcing prisoners to masturbate while photographs are taken, covering detainees with faeces and inserting bananas in their anuses; stripping them of their clothes and forcing them to wear women's underwear on their heads.

that were brought to the Baghdad morgue in one month (June 2005), many with hands bound and a bullet in the head, too disfigured to be identified, are a firsthand open acknowledgment of a war that dare not speak its name; a war that is costing the American tax-payer \$195 million a day and that the cost had already exceeded by \$50 billion US expenses in all of World War I.⁴² Irony of ironies, \$195 million would provide twelve meals a day for every starving child on earth.

If this sounds too extreme, we then ought to remind ourselves of the carnage that took place in Fallujah where the US had employed white phosphorous munitions, an incendiary device, known among soldiers as "Willie Pete" or "shake and bake," which is banned as a weapon by the Convention on Conventional Weapons. Similar to napalm, it leaves the victim horribly burned, often right through to the bone. "US forces have used them very sparingly," a State Department spokesman said, "for illumination purposes. They were fired into the air to illuminate enemy positions at night, not at enemy fighters."⁴³ Yet at the same time, we are introduced to a program dubbed "sleep management," a polite term for one of the types of sensory deprivation that are considered torture under the Geneva Conventions. Old soldiers with long memories argue that during the Korean War it was exactly this tactic used by the Chinese, causing American POWs to suffer psychotic breaks, that fed theories of the ruthless Oriental mind. Elements of the US military, intelligence, and prison establishments have studied and employed sensory deprivation at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. The plans, intended to scramble a person's sense of day and night, time and place, were drawn up by an interrogator and given each night to MPs (Military Police) to execute. The prisoner is kept alone without light or ventilation, without water or clothes, in a cell either very hot or very cold, with music or screaming all around at different times.⁴⁴ In the meantime, the culture of brutalization (Alsatian dogs are used on a daily basis to terrify prisoners and then "maul" them, various indignities are devised using human faeces; men are forced to sodomize one another; they also have soft sand, hot pepper, and filthy water stuffed in their anuses; one had his testicles cut off, and was then made to eat them) continues as more harrowing photographic evidence of sexual abuse, torture, and humiliation by the British Army this time

⁴² A perspicacious view of this matter is to be found in *Harper's Index* (February 2006): 11.

⁴³ Wypijewski, "Lessons" 46.

⁴⁴ Eliot Weinberger, "What I Heard About Iraq in 2005," *The London Review of Books* (5 January 2006): 7.

whose ugly record of gulags, ethnic cleansing, and atrocities in Malaysia, Kenya, Aden, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland speaks for itself, come to the surface. Confronted with the evidence, one is tempted to ask the simple question: How far removed is the enlightened West from the promise of restoring democracy to the rim of the world whether it be Iraq, Palestine or Afghanistan? The brutality of occupation is endemic in what David Anderson has aptly called the "culture of impunity" of the period; which in itself gives the lie to a benighted West whose fear of Islam continues to fuel the art of state terror. It is a sterile, exultant existence, at once the last word in freedom and the final despair.

As far as being able to name our situation goes, it may not be true that the moment of recognition is always the most vital. If, as some believe, one transcends the tragic in the act of articulating it, then those who have lost the power to name their condition, or who never had it in the first place, may well be considered the most lamentable of all. Perhaps President Bush goes to his bed every night cocooned in just this kind of grandiose self-deception wrapped in a superb *coup de théâtre*.

I'd say I spend most of my time worrying about right now people losing their life in Iraq. Both Americans and Iraqis. I worry about my girls. I used to worry about my wife, until she hit an 85 percent popularity figure. Now she's worried about me. You know, I don't worry all that much, other than what I just described to you. I attribute that to—I've got peace of mind. A lot of it has to do with my particular faith, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that a lot of people pray for me and Laura. I'm sleeping pretty good. Seriously. I get asked that. There's times when I hadn't been. I've got peace of mind.¹⁵

In this sense as in others, the aesthetic and everyday sense of the word "worry" are constantly at loggerheads. It may be that Beckett adumbrates a future in which the concept of "peace of mind" will indeed cease to have meaning; but in the meanwhile it lives on in the grief which springs from knowing that we can no longer even bestow a dignified title on our wretchedness, view it as part of some predestined order, or discern in its very terror the shadow of transcendence. Without a sense of *value*, such sorrow would be meaningless. And as long as there is *value*, there can be tragedy. But how tragic is the tragedy that is unfolding before our very eyes? One might ask. Perhaps the ultimate tragedy is to have lost the capacity, except in a fantasy *à la* Bush, to feel for others—all those innocent Iraqi victims, most of whom are poor civilians caught in the cross-fire. That is indeed *tragic*.

¹⁵ "What I Heard About Iraq in 2005" 9.