

That have not been asked: ten dispatches about endurance in face of walls

John Berger

“The worst cruelties of life are its killing injustices.” John Berger on poverty, desire, storytelling, and the future’s gift to the present.

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1

*The wind got up in
the night and took our plans away.*

(Chinese proverb)

2

The poor have no residence. They have homes because they remember mothers or grand-fathers or an aunt who brought them up. A residence is a fortress, not a story; it keeps the wild at bay. A residence needs walls. Nearly everyone among the poor dreams of a small residence, like dreaming of rest. However great the congestion, the poor live in the open, where they improvise, not residences, but places for themselves. These places are as much protagonists as their occupants; the places have their own lives to live and do not, like residences, wait on others. The poor live with the wind, with dampness, flying dust, silence, unbearable noise (sometimes with both; yes, that’s possible!) with ants, with large animals, with smells coming from the earth, rats, smoke, rain, vibrations from elsewhere, rumours, nightfall, and with each other. Between the inhabitants and these presences there are no clear marking lines. Inextricably confounded, they together make up the place’s life.

Twilight was setting in; the sky wrapped in cool grey fog, was already being closed off by darkness; and the wind, after spending the day rustling stubble and bare bushes that had gone dead in preparation for winter, now lay itself down in still low places on the earth...

The poor are collectively unseizable. They are not only the majority on the planet, they are everywhere and the smallest event speaks of them. This is why the essential activity of the rich today is the building of walls – walls of concrete, of electronic surveillance, of missile barrages, minefields, frontier controls, and opaque media screens.

3

The lives of the poor are mostly grief, interrupted by moments of illumination. Each life has its own propensity for illumination and no two are the same. (Conformism is a habit cultivated by the well-off.) Illuminated moments arrive by way of tenderness and love – the consolation of being recognised and needed and embraced for being what one suddenly is! Other moments are illuminated by an intuition, despite everything, that the human species serves for something.

“Nazar tell me something or other – something more important than anything.”

Aidym turned down the wick in the lamp in order to use less paraffin. She understood that, since there was something or other in life that was more important than anything, it was essential to take care of every good that there was.

“I don’t know the thing that really matters, Aidym,” said Chagataev. “I haven’t thought about it, I’ve never had time. But if we’ve both of us been born, then there must be something in us that really matters.”

Aidym agreed: “A little that does matter... and a lot that doesn’t.”

Aidym prepared supper. She took a flat bread out of a sack, spread it with sheep’s fat and broke it in half. She gave Chagataev the big half, and took the small half herself. They silently chewed their food by the weak light of the lamp. In the Ust-Yurt and the desert it was quiet, uncertain and dark.”

4

From time to time despair enters into the lives which are mostly grief. Despair is the emotion which follows a sense of betrayal. A hope against hope (which is still far from a promise) collapses or is collapsed; despair fills the space in the soul which was occupied by that hope. Despair has nothing to do with nihilism.

Nihilism, in its contemporary sense, is the refusal to believe in any scale of priorities beyond the pursuit of profit, considered as the end-all of social activity, so that, precisely: everything has its price. Nihilism is resignation before the contention that Price is all. It is the most current form of human cowardice. But not one to which the poor often succumb.

He began to pity his body and his bones; his mother had once gathered them together for him from the poverty of her flesh – not because of love and passion, not for pleasure, but out of the most everyday necessity. He felt as if he belonged to others, as if he were the last possession of those who have no possessions, about to be squandered to no purpose, and he was seized by the greatest, most vital fury of his life.

[A word of explanation about these quotations. They are from the stories of the great Russian writer, Andrei Platonov (1899-1951). He wrote about the poverty which occurred during the civil war and later during the forced collectivisation of Soviet agriculture in the early 1930s. What made this poverty unlike more ancient poverties was the fact that its desolation contained shattered hopes. It fell to the ground exhausted, it got to its feet, it staggered, it marched on amongst shards of betrayed promises and smashed words. Platonov often used the term *dushevny bednyak*, which means literally poor souls. It referred to those from whom everything had been taken so that the emptiness within them was immense and in that immensity only their soul was left – that’s to say their ability to feel and suffer. His stories do not add to the grief being lived, they save something. “Out of our ugliness will grow the world’s heart”, he wrote in the early 1920s.

The world today is suffering another form of modern poverty. No need to quote the figures; they are widely known and repeating them again only makes another wall of statistics. Perhaps as much as a third of the world’s population live with less than \$2 a day. Local cultures with their partial remedies – both physical and spiritual – for some of life’s afflictions are being systematically destroyed or attacked. The new technology and means of communication, the free market economy, productive abundance, parliamentary democracy, are failing, so far as the poor are concerned, to keep any of their promises beyond that of the supply of certain cheap consumerist goods, which the poor can buy when they steal.

Platonov understood living modern poverty more deeply than any other storyteller I have come across.]

5

The secret of storytelling amongst the poor is the conviction that stories are told so that they may be listened to elsewhere, where somebody, or perhaps a legion of people, know better than the storyteller or the story's protagonists, what life means. The powerful can't tell stories: boasts are the opposite of stories, and any story however mild has to be fearless and the powerful today live nervously.

A story refers life to an alternative and more final judge who is far away. Maybe the judge is located in the future, or in the past that is still attentive, or maybe somewhere over the hill, where the day's luck has changed (the poor have to refer often to bad or good luck) so that the last have become first.

Story-time (the time within a story) is not linear. The living and the dead meet as listeners and judges within this time, and the greater the number of listeners felt to be there, the more intimate the story becomes to each listener. Stories are one way of sharing the belief that justice is imminent. And for such a belief, children, women and men will fight at a given moment with astounding ferocity. This is why tyrants fear storytelling: all stories somehow refer to the story of their fall.

Wherever he went, he only had to promise to tell a story and people would take him in for the night: a story's stronger than a Tsar. There was just one thing: if he began telling stories before the evening meal, no-one ever felt hungry and he didn't get anything to eat. So the old soldier always asked for a bowl of soup first.

6

The worst cruelties of life are its killing injustices. Almost all promises are broken. The poor's acceptance of adversity is neither passive nor resigned. It's an acceptance which peers behind the adversity and discovers there something nameless. Not a promise, for (almost) all promises are broken; rather something like a bracket, a parenthesis in the otherwise remorseless flow of history. And the sum total of these parentheses is eternity.

This can be put the other way round: on this earth there is no happiness without a longing for justice.

Happiness is not something to be pursued, it is something met, an encounter. Most encounters, however, have a sequel; this is their promise. The encounter with happiness has no sequel. All is there instantly. Happiness is what pierces grief.

We thought there was nothing left in the world, that everything had disappeared long ago. And if we were the only ones left, what was the point of living?

"We went to check", said Allah. "Were there any other people anywhere? We wanted to know."

Chagataev understood them and asked if this meant they were now convinced about life and wouldn't be dying any more.

"Dying's no use", said Cherkezov. "To die once – now you might think that's something necessary and useful. But dying once doesn't help you to understand your own happiness – and no one gets the chance to die twice. So dying gets you nowhere."

“Whilst the rich drank tea and ate mutton, the poor were waiting for the warmth and for the plants to grow.”

The difference between seasons, as also the difference between night and day, shine and rain, is vital. The flow of time is turbulent. The turbulence makes life-times shorter – both in fact and subjectively. Duration is brief. Nothing lasts. This is as much a prayer as a lament.

(The mother) was grieving that she had died and forced her children to mourn for her; if she could have, she would have gone on living forever so that nobody should suffer on her account, or waste, on her account, the heart and the body to which she had given birth....but the mother had not been able to stand living for very long.”

Death occurs when life has no scrap left to defend.

“...it was as if she were alone in the world, free from happiness and sorrow, and she wanted to dance a little, right away, to listen to music, to hold hands with other people....”

They are accustomed to living in close proximity with one another, and this creates its own spatial sense; space is not so much an emptiness as an exchange. When people are living on top of one another, any action taken by one has repercussions on the others. Immediate physical repercussions. Every child learns this.

There is a ceaseless spatial negotiation which may be considerate or cruel, conciliating or dominating, unthinking or calculated, but which recognises that an exchange is not something abstract but a physical accommodation. Their elaborate sign languages of gestures and hands are an expression of such physical sharing. Outside the walls collaboration is as natural as fighting; scams are current, and intrigue, which depends upon taking a distance, is rare. The word private has a totally different ring on the two sides of the wall. On one side it denotes property; on the other an acknowledgement of the temporary need of someone to be left, as if alone, for a while. Every site inside the walls is rentable – every square metre counted; every site outside risks to become a ruin – every sheltering corner counted.

The space of choices is also limited. They choose as much as the rich, perhaps more, for each choice is starker. There are no colour charts which offer a choice between one hundred and seventy different shades. The choice is close-up – between this or that. Often it is made vehemently, for it entails the refusal of what has not been chosen. Each choice is quite close to a sacrifice. And the sum of the choices is a person’s destiny.

No development (the word has a capital D as an article of faith on the other side of the walls) no insurance. Neither an open future nor an assured future exist. The future is not awaited. Yet there is continuity; generation is linked to generation. Hence a respect for age since the old are a proof of this continuity – or even a demonstration that once, long ago, a future existed. Children are the future. The future is the ceaseless struggle to see that they have enough to eat and the sometimes-chance of their learning with education what the parents never learnt.

“When they finished talking, they threw their arms around each other. They wanted to be happy right away, now, sooner than their future and zealous work would bring results in

personal and in general happiness. The heart brooks no delay, it sickens, as if believing in nothing.”

Here the future's unique gift is desire. The future induces the spurt of desire towards itself. The young are more flagrantly young than on the other side of the wall. The gift appears as a gift of nature in all its urgency and supreme assurance. Religious and community laws still apply. Indeed amongst the chaos which is more apparent than real, these laws become real. Yet the silent desire for procreation is incontestable and overwhelming. It is the same desire that will forage for food for the children and then seek, sooner or later, (best sooner) the consolation of fucking again. This is the future's gift.

10

The multitudes have answers to questions which have not yet been asked, and the capacity to outlive the walls. Trace tonight her (his) hairline with your two fingers before you sleep.

The quotations in this article come from:

- Andrei Platonov, *Soul* (translated by Robert Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler and Olga Meerson; Harvill 2003)
- Andrei Platonov, *The Portable Platonov* (translated by Robert Chandler; Glas, 1999)
- Andrei Platonov, *The Fierce and Beautiful World* (translated by Joseph Barnes; NYRB, 2000)

A renowned novelist, essayist, painter, filmmaker, dramatist and critic, John Berger is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential British writers of the past 50 years.

He won the Booker Prize in 1972 for the novel *G*, and was also awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for the same novel. His latest book of essays is *The Shape of a Pocket* (2003). His most well known book is *Ways of Seeing* (1990), which was turned into a television series by the BBC.

John Berger has written for openDemocracy on the issues of poverty, storytelling, the Iraq conflict, the 2004 US election and Michael Moore's controversial film *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

John Berger's career began in art, where he attended the Central School of Art and the Chelsea School of Art in London, going on to teach drawing in the period 1948-1955. His art has been exhibited at the Wildenstein, Redfern and Leicester galleries in London. Berger has continued to paint throughout his career.

Born in London, he has lived for the past 20 years in a small village in the French Alps. Fascinated by the traditions and endangered way of life of the mountain people, he has written about them both in his fiction and nonfiction. Berger is a diverse and prolific artist and his commitment to democratic and open exchange is constant across all genres and throughout his work. He cites the idea of collaboration as central to his creative identity.

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