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# ‘Three hot drops of salmon oil’: the artist and the self in the aftermath of Chernobyl

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This essay is a transcript of my address to the international conference ‘Remembering Chernobyl: 1986–2006’, held in Marostica, Italy, on 11 March 2006, and organised by the Institute for Research into Social and Religious History. In the context of my contribution to a film marking the twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster (*Heavy Water: a film for Chernobyl*), I deploy my experience both as poet and physicist to open and examine crucial new interfaces between technology, industry and creativity. I reject the defensiveness found in many quarters of the nuclear/non-nuclear debate, in favour of a personal, exploratory, imaginative contact between socio-industrial tragedy and the self. My aim is to show how an artist’s vision and sensibility, far from being merely personal, irrelevant or exterior to the energy debate, can be brought squarely and fiercely to its centre.

David White tells a version of the Celtic story of Finn and the Salmon. Finnegas, an old man, had fished for seven years in a certain pool, knowing that whoever ate this salmon would acquire all knowledge. At last he caught it and, rejoicing, gave his young apprentice (aptly named Finn) strict instructions to cook it just right and not, on any condition, to eat any of it. But, being a boy, Finn grew distracted, staring into the dark woods. The salmon got burned. A blister, the size of his thumb, rose on one side of the fish. Terrified of failing his master, Finn pressed a thumb against the blister, hoping to press it back in. The blister burst. Three hot drops of salmon oil dripped onto the boy’s thumb, which – instinctively – he thrust into his mouth. And so it was that Finn, the boy – not Finnegas, the old man – gained knowledge.

Early in 2002, on a much smaller scale, I had something of a near-Finn experience. The fish, in my case, was an astonishing book, *Voices from Chernobyl*, translated by Antonina Bouis and edited by Svetlana Alexievich. These remarkable women allowed the eyewitness accounts of ordinary people to pass directly onto the page. Peasant and teacher; wife, soldier; fireman and cameraman; the official and the child: common voices, uncommonly eloquent. I found *Voices from Chernobyl* purely by chance; upon opening it, I did not receive instant knowledge – but I was most certainly burned. A key testimony, for me, was that of Ludmila Polyanskaya. ‘Where are our intellectuals? Writers? Philosophers?’ she cried, ‘Why are they silent?’ But, with Seamus Heaney’s warning not to ‘rampage permissively in other people’s sadnesses’ ringing in my ears, I was reluctant to pick up my pen. Again, from *Voices*, Alexandr Renansky reassured me that art, like ‘the plasma of an infected person, can serve to inoculate’. I began to realise that, one way or another, we were all infected by Chernobyl. It was still active. Active in the air we use to speak about it, in the blood we use to think about it. I resolved, as far as I could, to listen. Indeed, writing *Heavy Water* often

felt like taking dictation. Those men and women; their children whose words prise open your heart even as they shatter it: they were so insistent.

*Heavy Water* (Enitharmon Press) and *Half Life* (Heaventree) ensued: a diptych of books, two facets of a single, extended poem. Then, in 2005, I was approached by Bethan Roberts at Seventh Art, an independent film company based in Brighton, UK. The directors, David Bickerstaff and Phil Grabsky, wanted to use the poem as primary material for a film. Overleaf is the text of a brief excerpt from *Heavy Water: a film for Chernobyl*. There was an intensity surrounding the film during its production, partly because we needed to meet deadlines for Chernobyl's twentieth anniversary. It occurs to me, too, that I was keen for my books to be launched, together, on 26 April 2004, to mark the eighteenth anniversary. Strange how we need 'anniversaries' in order to think or feel about such events, to validate them. In the UK, suddenly, Chernobyl's media currency has been strong. It will be so again, one imagines, somewhat cynically, after fifty years. But these calendar units of historical consumption rarely spill over into any significant re-evaluation in a population largely disenfranchised from personal activism; rather, all that is probably achieved through anniversaries (of a difficult kind) is a sense of public resignation mixed with sympathy, or a notching-up of background anxiety levels. What, then, is the point of post-apocalyptic or anniversary art?

Well, in the case of poetry, there is no doubt that language constantly falls short of experience – but miraculously so. I say miraculously, because language – particularly the heightened language of poetry – can provide a penetrating experience in its own right. Not merely a substitute experience, nor even a parallel one; but a journey towards transformation. In fact, a poem has the ability to alight in the mind, in the heart, not unlike an angel. Was Finn's salmon a water-borne angel; or even a poem? Either way, it is rather in vogue these days to suggest that Old Testament angels were neither sweet nor pure, but more like Jehovah's henchmen. Their plumage came not in white, but in shades of grey. There is something in that, though, because angels – like poems – are agents of difficulty as much as of peace. This agency embodied by poems, their messy grey-scale angelic impetus, is impoverished by post-enlightenment attempts to categorise literature and science as, at best, the most distant of relatives and, at worst, tribal arch-rivals. Science and art are kissing cousins. John Dewey (in *Art as Experience*) signals this when he writes: 'The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind.' I tend to agree. Both the scientist and the artist ask deeper questions of what is superficially observed; in their respective ways, they each pay the world full attention. And awareness, paying attention – that, in the end, is what art is really all about. Through art, a civilisation stays awake.

As an ecologist and lapsed physicist, I sense that interfaces such as those between poetry and ecology/science/war hold key 'alertness nutrients' for our world. This makes me think of potatoes: we know the skins are good for us, and yet we peel them! But I am sanguine about interfaces, those places in the body politic where the skin is thinner, where knowledge can more successfully seep through – as the pulse does, at the wrist. Great poetry, like all great art, can take the complex pulse of a culture. But if art/poetry can deliver a prognosis on society, can it save the patient? Come to think of it, can any government or organisational policy do so? I say this, not to demoralise us, but to remind myself that my first call must be to 'save' the self: that is, to open this self to challenge and



### THE ROOM

This hospital has a room  
for weeping. It has no crèche.  
No canteen. No washroom queue.  
Only this queue for weeping.  
No lost property booth. No  
complaints department. Or  
reception. No office of second  
opinion. Of second chances. Its sons  
and daughters die with surprise  
in their faces. But mothers  
must not cry before them. There is  
a room for weeping. How hard  
the staff are trying. Sometimes  
they use the room themselves. They  
must hose it out each evening.  
The State is watching. They made  
this room for weeping. No remission –

no quick fixes. A father wonders  
if his boy is sleeping. A mother  
rakes her soul for healing. Neighbours  
in the corridor – one is screaming  
*It moved from your child to mine.*  
More come. Until the linoleum  
blurs with tears and the walls  
are heaving. Until the place can't  
catch its breath – sour breath  
of pine. And at its heart  
this room.

support, to empathy and sensitivity – to interfaces. Without that, nothing much is possible, however failsafe my machines may become, however persuasive or creative my organisational response may be. Nuclear energy is evidence of immense creativity; but creativity, we know, has its negative as well as positive incarnations, which come about through failing to engage the entire self. If we respond to Chernobyl personally, positively, only then can sustainable and sustaining collaborations and activities be discovered. I am not suggesting that, if we had Plato's philosophers running the Republic, material entities such as plutonium and nuclear bombs would be inconceivable. All I am saying is that this potency of self-response *is* very real and extremely present – at least potentially – in society. The fuller self of which I speak is not to be confused with a bigger ego; nor should it be dismissed as inappropriate (as it often is) in the context of pragmatics, organisations and committees. As Dostoevsky shows us, humans must have a point at which they stand against the culture and positively assert the self. Art provides interfaces: it can help us to access the self, assist us in transcending formalities so we can operate more powerfully than with intellectual efficiency alone. Art inoculates us against the temptation to short-circuit the self, which is what happens when we sink our responsibility and vitality entirely into the formal, the technical, the industrial response.

Konrad Lorenz wrote: 'I believe I've found the missing link between animal and civilized man. It is us.' This is nowhere more evident than in our love-hate relationship with 'industry'. I am narrowing my eyes, of course, in the direction of the nuclear industry – but not that industry alone. David Bohm, the great philosopher and radical scientist, has written: 'We now have the entertainment industry, and practically have a culture industry and an education industry; similarly, we . . . have the nature industry.' Yes, the environment too is becoming an industry. To address Chernobyl, or our environment, without first unravelling this preoccupation with industries is rather like entering the Minotaur's labyrinth without Ariadne's thread. Britain (impelled by James Lovelock) is hurtling towards a vision of nuclear stations studded along its coasts, black as flies around a rind, whilst remaining as much in thrall to oil as the Neanderthals were to the first cudgel or campfire. Through all this – in spite of what we believe as individuals or groups, or even what a Prime Minister may say seemingly to the contrary – industrialised and industrialising nations still behave largely as though the environment were 'out there'. Even Einstein's promising definition of the environment as 'everything that isn't me' is, on closer inspection, flawed. Let us say instead: 'The environment is everything, *including* me.' Perhaps the only global organisation able to take decisive action on the environment will be the planet herself. Gaia – however you interpret that concept – is set to become our greatest revolutionary. Many of us will have mixed feelings about revolutions. Gaia's is unlikely to be a bloodless one.

Some of these concerns may seem, at first, peripheral or distracting to the core subject of Chernobyl. But Bohm reminds us: 'Studying the distractions is part of the process.' Moreover, what most industries have in common is *their* ability to distract us from the central issue: the empowered, engaged self. Indeed, some industries have taken on the quality of the new priesthood or religion. See how their proponents and experts defend their credos against anything but the most irresistible tide of evidence or social will, while their advertisers constantly assure us of paradise, albeit an earthly one. True, certain sections of the anti-nuclear lobby can be just as forcefully partisan. I am reminded here of Quentin Crisp's visit to Northern Ireland, where he declared himself an atheist. A woman

in the audience instantly stood up and asked: 'Yes, but is it the God of the Catholics or the God of the Protestants in whom you *don't* believe?' The energy debate is similarly locked into sectarianism, a nuclear/non-nuclear dichotomy which allows the deeper, more pertinent issues to lie unaddressed.

There is a danger, I am afraid, of creating a Chernobyl industry too. One of the best antidotes to this, perhaps, is the act of 're-remembering': effectively, the putting back together of sundered or broken parts. This is a civilised and civilising act, even when understanding or focused activity are in short supply. For Chernobyl, how else to honour those who were unable to speak, who were rendered see-through by political, social or intellectual neglect, than to remember them – first and foremost – through and with the self? Opposite is one fragment of that remembrance, related through a mother and her son.

I must speak, too, of imagination. There is no such thing as a 'detached' machine, or instrument: each object we create, whether fanciful or rooted in cast-iron physical-mathematical precepts, is an extension of our imagination. Industry and commerce are every bit as adept at creating powerful myths as the bard, novelist or film-maker. In a profound sense, then, Chernobyl is not merely something that went wrong or that happened *to* us, but a material expression of the collective human self, of what makes us *us*. Which is why the quantification of Chernobyl and its after-effects, crucial as it is, can never become our sole aim. Chernobyl stands to remind us that knowledge is as much qualitative as quantitative. One of the chief outcomes of Chernobyl will be what we allow it to tell us about ourselves, as an expression of our negative imagination and its myths. Why, for instance, do so many countries insist on nuclear power regardless of the complex levels of defence required to render it 'safe'? As John Steinbeck said, 'An animal which must protect itself with thick armour . . . is on the road to extinction.' Let us not imagine he was referring merely to organic or military shielding.

In understanding Chernobyl, intellect can therefore only ever provide one tool. Einstein said: 'We should take care not to make the intellect our God; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality.' I would extend his warning to rhetoric. Politicians and experts are too easily tempted by it. As for the artist, to play the prophet or rhetorician in the streets, or in books, is merely to lose one's head. But if not intellect or rhetoric, then what? At the risk of saying what I really mean (and an even greater risk of sprouting the visionary rhetorician's beard as I say it), I believe it a fundamental truth of our species that suffering – and a genuine empathy with suffering – serves to reorient us in a better direction. Chernobyl is far more than a scientific mistake or a folly of Soviet zeitgeist; more, too, than yet another increment in our capacity to generate tragedy and environmental stress. On some plane – one that is more instinctive, and felt, than arcane – exists the chance to transform Chernobyl from wound to opportunity, to move from scientific progress measured scientifically to human progress whose values are rooted firmly in compassion.

This, I realise, is all very easy to say – particularly in such vague terms. And please, do not think I treat lightly the various ways in which Chernobyl has already stirred up many people to challenge a merely technical response. Nor is it lost on me that I am among the world's beneficiaries of industrialism. I also admit that I am sometimes sceptical about my own arguments. As a long-term stumbler on the *via negativa*, I have often doubted whether that warm April night in Pripjat was anything other than a horrific instance of needless suffering, scheduled for repetition, over and over, in the future. At least some of you, I feel



## BREATHING

They had to teach me  
from scratch. Teach me

to breathe. As though  
I had fallen out of space or

up from water and breath  
was labour – each breath

a pang to draw me back  
from the brink. In. Out. In

this world life is indifferent.  
You must will it in. Will it

out. I look at my son –  
those white cheeks that

tight frown and  
I wonder how I can

breathe. He says – *Mama*  
*when you go to sleep to-*

*night please don't forget to*  
*breathe. Please.* He is

not allowed to run. Or  
jump. Like that boy who

hanged himself with a  
belt. I watch him. And he

watches me – when I doze  
on the red sofa he rests a

hand to check the rise and  
fall of my chest. Tells me he

will teach me in his dreams –  
will teach me to breathe if

I teach him how to fly. *If*  
*you go with Grandpa* he

says – *will you be able to*  
*breathe?* He says this and

his cheeks run wet and  
he runs short of breath so

we sit once again to  
teach each other how —

deep and slow. *We are*  
*flying* I tell him. *We are*

*breathing* he replies.

sure, will identify with those doubts. But what has changed for me, recently, is that I am now willing to apply that scepticism more consistently: that is, to be sceptical, too, about my doubts. Perhaps, in this narrow corridor of ‘doubt doubted’, a door – several doors – may open.

One such door leads to vulnerability and, with it, honesty – particularly with ourselves. This doorway feels draughty and uncomfortable. And not without reason, given the way vulnerability is often greeted by our institutions. But the story of knowledge is, in the end, all one story. *We* are all one story, together, as individuals, organisations, nations – even as industries. We can allow Chernobyl to demonstrate the supremacy of negative imagination, or we can repossess our potential to meet it with wisdom and growth. This is nothing like a bland acceptance of facts, saying some stoic ‘Yes’ to past or future Chernobyls. As Karl Barth reminds us (via Seamus Heaney), the immense ‘Yes’ of Mozart’s music has potency precisely because it encompasses and overwhelms a ‘No’. Barth’s is the kind of Yes I mean. We have both that Yes and that No within us. In the words of Montaigne, ‘I have never seen a greater monster – or miracle – in the world than myself.’ Our species is not here merely to service the ‘Noes’ of industrial or economic growth but, surely, to overwhelm them, transcend them, to fully engage the Yes of the human spirit. Easier said than done. As Eric Hoffer points out, ‘every new adjustment is a crisis in self-esteem’. This is where one of the great insights of psychotherapy might help us. Namely, that if you act *as though* you were well, you start to *become* well. So, let us at least act as though we were beginning. We can voice a Yes, even if we are not quite sure, yet, what it represents. There are appalling events throughout history against which we cry that No of: ‘This must never happen again.’ Truth is, without thoroughgoing openness and a deep re-membering, without that Yes, it *does* happen again. If we refuse to transform, we have silently made that choice.

Einstein, when asked how he worked, replied: ‘I grope.’ We are a young and groping species – artists and industrialists alike. Science, including nuclear science, tells us we have caught the big fish of knowledge: all we need to do is prepare it properly, then consume it. But, through Chernobyl, we find ourselves in the aftermath of a terrible blunder. For me, it represents the largest and most scalding drop of the threesome it makes with Windscale and Three Mile Island. I hope, here, the notion of Finn sucking his thumb will conjure for you not an image of bungling childishness, but of childlikeness. Either way, we have been left in charge of the salmon. Whether by accident or design, we have pressed our thumbs firmly onto a hot blister. Have we the courage to put it in our mouths?

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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