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Disdain and Dignity: An Old (Anti-Imperialist) Story



Photograph by Joshua Frank

One good comes from Assange's arrest, as many have noted: Wikileaks revelations are in the news. We hear the sneering at "dead bastards". We *hear* the disdain.

There are truths which, if understood intellectually, are not understood fully. Imperialism is one. We know it intellectually without knowing it. In the Wikileaks video (2010), we *feel* it. Death is another such truth. Everyone knows everyone will die but no one believes *they* will. If they did, they'd live differently.

It happens to Pierre in *War and Peace*. He is lined up to be shot and is spared. The young man before him dies. Pierre wanted meaning but now "this sought-for purpose of life ... did

not and could not exist.” Its absence gave him “awareness of freedom which ... constituted happiness”.

He’s Napoleon’s prisoner, a rich intellectual, walking with bloodied broken feet. The freedom Tolstoy refers to is known in many traditions. It’s about thinking. You don’t think clearly, about the world, driven by self-importance.

Or disdain. It’s why José Martí, in his famous “Our America” (1892), warned Latin Americans not to respond to US disdain with “futile hatreds”. He knew that disdain. So did others: *independistas*. They wrote about it. It wasn’t merely intellectual.

“The disdain of the formidable neighbour”, Martí wrote, is “our America’s greatest danger”. But the response is for “our America to show herself as she is”. He urged Cubans toward “a discreet and unswerving pride, for its dignity as a republic”.

Dignity is valuing oneself *as human*. It is another idea – like death – that needs experiential, not just intellectual understanding. Some truths must be *felt*. The reason is: What is *felt* transforms, and when that happens, we see differently. Perspective changes. We see what we didn’t see before.

North American feminists know this. Audre Lorde describes “how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing”.^[i] Through the body, we can go “beyond the encouraged mediocrity” limiting imagination.

It just won’t do, Lorde insists, for feminism to offer “a shift of characters in the same weary drama”.

Lorde convinced me, in the 80s, of feminism’s radicality. Poets Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde aimed for re-envisioning what it means to be human, not just what it means to be a woman.

That vision is elusive. A new book by radical feminist, Eve Ensler, shows “how to be free”.^[ii] It is an account of abuse: shocking and moving. About healing, though, it is a “shift of characters in the same weary drama”.

It is a letter from Ensler’s father, dead 31 years. In imagination, Ensler gives him “the will and the words to cross the boundary ... so that I can finally be free”. It is a “most thorough accounting” of abuse.

The abuser tells his victim her “trust, her force of light, her goodness, her beauty, were too much for me and so I violated, invaded, smashed and disfigured”. It is true that confessing, as Raskolnikov does in *Crime and Punishment*, is ultimately freeing. But Raskolnikov confesses *his own* deeds.

Stories about abuse must be told. However, there is also a story about freedom that involves control. We control adversity like Ahab tried to control the whale: The individual stands tall, against the wind. Brecht found that image everywhere in European theatre. It's seductive. But it's not the only way.

Martí knew this story of individual freedom. He warned Latin Americans not to be “slaves of Liberty!”. He didn't reject it for moral reasons. He rejected it because it's not a way to know the world. He likened it to an oyster in its shell, mistaking the shell for the world. You build a story about yourself for an entire lifetime and when the story coheres, and fits your expectations, it's called healing.

It doesn't work for “dead bastards” sneered at from sophisticated helicopters. The abusers' “most thorough accounting” can't be imagined by the disdained because the abusers have no words for the disdained. They're non-persons.

But that's not the point. It is, instead, that such a view of individual freedom promotes ignorance. Ironically, from the realm of death, Ensler's father has “nothing but the reflection of what lives inside me. What is hell? Hell is oneself”. So said countless philosophers, who cared about freedom, including Sartre, whose existentialism convinced many they only need to choose – *whatever*– to be free.

It doesn't work, not even for the powerful. “Everything is outside, everything, including ourselves: outside, in the world, together with others. It is not in I don't know what kind of retreat that we discover ourselves”.^[iii] And it is not by looking inside finding words we want to hear, giving them to others.

It feels good. Philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes human flourishing as fullness: Life feels “fuller, richer, deeper ... more what it should be”. But Victor Hugo described the same feeling as “darkly radiant”. Hugo cared about freedom. He knew we feel “fuller, richer” etc. by ignoring truths: about ourselves and the society that makes us.

“Whoever doesn't weep doesn't see”, wrote Hugo. He and Martí shared a commitment: truth.

So, when the father apologizes: “Let me risk fragility. Let me be rendered vulnerable. Let me be lost. Let me be still”, he might speak for all. Martí urged Latin Americans in such a direction: Truth about the human condition and what that means for how we know others.

It is not by imagining words we want them to say. We want truth, not dreams, said Martí. For freedom: of Tolstoy's sort. And Adrienne Rich urged activists to “imagine and claim wider horizons . . . rather than rehearse the land-locked details of personal quandaries or the price for which the house next door just sold”.

Maybe North American feminism can get back to that. Maybe Assange will help.

Notes.

[i] “Uses of the erotic”, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984).

[ii] *The Apology* (Bloomsbury, 2019). [Review](#) (May 9)

[iii] Cited in Mészáros, István, *The work of Sartre*(Monthly Review Press, 2012) 98.

Susan Babbitt is *author* of *Humanism and Embodiment* (Bloomsbury 2014).

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