

Facing *Disgrace*: Coetzee and the Israeli intellectual¹

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Recently published in Hebrew in Smadar Millo's very fine translation, JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* tells the story of David Lurie, a professor of modern languages who is constrained by the changing realities of post-apartheid Cape Town to work for his living as an adjunct professor of communication. A sexual encounter with a female student who charges him with sexual harassment sets in motion the decline which leads to Lurie's retirement from the university. The disciplinary committee convened to judge his case demands a public apology from Lurie, but the latter rejects the narrative of self-abasement, purification and restitution which the committee sees it as its task to produce. Lurie refuses to voice his regret, an act which would imbue his dry admission of involvement with metaphysical overtones of transcendence and reparation.

Alongside the failure of the possibility of restitution in Lurie's personal narrative stands the recognition that the collective lives of blacks and whites after apartheid are saturated with the indelible residues of violence. Lurie takes up residence on a smallholding in the Eastern Cape which his daughter Lucy runs with the help of her black neighbour, Petrus. During a violent attack on the farm, Lucy is raped by black assailants while Lurie, who is prevented from assisting her, must live through the consequences of post-apartheid violence. Petrus's links to the attackers, and the victim Lucy's rehabilitation of him after the fact make it impossible to cast Petrus wholly as one of the vengeful black attackers or as a full partner in the shared attempt by blacks and whites to fashion a "new" South Africa. Lucy's insistence on keeping the baby fathered by one of the rapists, as well as her decision to sign her property over to Petrus in return for his patronage/protection, foreground the contradictions inherent in a form of continued existence which disallows the possibility of redemption while preserving intact much of the violence which also characterized apartheid. The South African liberal, Coetzee seems to say, must face up to forces far more potent than any discrete effort to repair a long historical legacy

of injustice and suffering. Analogously, in the text, the animal sanctuary where Lurie volunteers – whose mission it is to put animals down in the name of their redemption – serves as an allegory for the blurring of boundaries between reparation and destruction. In a similar vein, Lucy determines after being raped that guilt and redemption are abstract rather than concrete concepts. Coetzee, who casts a sober and even somewhat cruel gaze over the aftermath of the enormous victory of the anti-apartheid struggle, demands sustained skepticism regarding some of the illusions attaching to "Truth and Reconciliation" in South Africa, particularly regarding the quasi-official notion that treaties and agreements are sufficient to purge the traces of oppression from the deepest tissues of the South African social body.

Read in translation in contemporary Israel, Coetzee's novel is a potentially potent means of encouraging us to move beyond a type of short-sightedness which sees in a peace treaty – however just it might be – the culmination and terminus of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The book charges Israeli intellectuals with the task of looking beyond the occupation within which we are enmeshed without succumbing to the illusion that the

implementation of any political resolution could deliver an all-encompassing, Messianic solution. Coetzee's perspective takes in the formal ratification of agreements in post-apartheid South Africa, slices through the promise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that equality and stability will be the foregone conclusions of truth-telling, and shows instead, time and again, how Messianic visions are disrupted by various forms of violence – the violence of hunger and the violence of revenge; the violence of the vanquished and the violence of gender; the violence of those who reject forgiveness as insufficient recompense and the violence which seeks to eradicate white desire by becoming its vengeful negation. Given these residues, Coetzee determines that the success of reconciliation is not a foregone conclusion, but this does not preclude embarking on its course. On the contrary, the novel appears to say. Not only is it the case that each second of this unfolding process of reconciliation is a kind of phase in its own right, but there can be no certainty that each of these individual phases will lead, teleologically, to the desired outcome. The path of reconciliation – which must be embraced since not to do so would be to court further disaster – does not contain its end in its beginning. Rather, that end is itself beyond the range of our vision, beyond, perhaps, even the range of our conceptualization.

It is out of considerations such as these that Coetzee pits his characters against almost incomprehensible extremities, confronts them with the realization that the end of the conflict in South Africa does not lie in a pseudo-democratic myth of equality and mutual love, but leads through the almost total violation of boundaries, through hybridization, so that it is precisely rape which is the harbinger of the “new” South Africa – whose difference from the old is calibrated not so much in terms of the nature of the regime instituted but in terms of the types of babies born. The redemptive charge here does not lie in a Christian belief in the triumph of goodness, but consists in a kind of containment of violence in frameworks so different from those already known that they are rendered almost incomprehensible. Not only does Coetzee deprive us of the comfort of

reconciliation to the extent that the novel acts out the slippages of formalized procedures of government and rule, he also denies us momentary resting places along the course of a journey whose destination is far from certain for those who embark upon it.

But the threat of the unknown does not, in itself, afford us the luxury of not making a stand. Interestingly enough, Coetzee's call for a perspective which takes its bearings from the distant horizon is necessary precisely in the interests of a better engagement with the here and now. In the Israeli case, it seems that this joint strategy of deferral and confrontation is all the more urgent given our failure, to date, to ratify transformative social treaties or peace agreements.

Israeli society is currently caught up in the death throes of the occupation. Coetzee's lessons are crucial for us – the road is very long, and its outcome far from guaranteed. But it is equally the case that the illusion of our occupation of the West Bank and Gaza being somehow natural, legitimate and normative, can no longer be sustained. The increasing severity of the violence we are experiencing will only exacerbate the process of dissolution of the occupation. For this reason, our situation involves a certain historical inevitability. The precedents provided by other liberation struggles against the yoke of colonial domination over the course of the twentieth century guarantee this. But precisely here, a surprising paradox emerges. It is the very simplicity of the historical framing of the end of the occupation as a foregone conclusion which circumscribes the role of temporality in comprehending the course of the historical transformation in question. Since consensus holds that the outcome of the Palestinian struggle is somehow foreknown, the historical field is flattened, is rendered spatial – as if stripped of its development over time. The observer is thus lured into adopting an ahistorical perspective on current realities, one which renders the historical process static.

This ahistoricism makes the task of the committed intellectual relatively easy in some respects, but enormously difficult in others. It is easy to the extent

that there is little need to factor in shifts and changes. The intellectual positions herself in a spatial field whose contours will seemingly not be radically altered by the progressions incrementally involved in its realization. In this virtual space, two situations are laid out side by side – the occupation in all of its atrocities, and the negotiated political settlement which will put an end to the occupation. But it is precisely the flattening or dehistoricizing momentum which makes taking a stand enormously difficult: an unequivocal stand is, however, a necessity, but this very necessity reduces the possibility of enunciating a critique in the spirit of Coetzee – one that is sceptical of a messianic investment in formal political process and which cannot be indifferent to the precise manner in which one reaches the seemingly foregone conclusion of liberation from the occupiers' yoke. The inevitability and urgency of the historical process – in its present unfolding – comes into conflict with the realization that the process is, in fact, an unending one. Both realizations are extremely potent; each demands a clearly articulated response. The spatializing or ahistorical perspective dictates one of two outcomes – either the intellectual must resist the occupation and support the political negotiations that will end it, or he must support an occupation which, having lost its facade of legitimacy, now appears as the sheerest exertion of illegitimate power.

The tendency to become complicit with the dehistoricization of the process precipitates its observers into a binarity which only intensifies the

polarization which already exists within Jewish Israeli society. Observers on the right of the political spectrum engage in fantasies of a violent *coup de grâce* (“The Israeli Defence Force must be allowed to win” as one popular slogan has it) although, even on the right, it is clear that so-called “retaliation killings” will only lend impetus to what is euphemistically called “the cycle of violence” – as if the violence were ever symmetrical. On the left, things are even more difficult. The seemingly static nature of the arena, as outlined above, compels the left-wing intellectual into a dramatic form of self-positioning which is derived from seemingly universalist principles. The latter has no choice but to oppose his own nationalist or particularist interests and to join forces with the other side, the “enemy”, in a war of conflicting nationalisms.

At a certain level, the El-Aqsa Intifada is perceived as the Israeli people's nationalist struggle against the Palestinians. At yet another level, it is seen as the Palestinians' war of liberation from Israeli conquest. Israelis who recognize the universal justice of the Palestinians' claims and who oppose the occupation cannot now be part of the war that Israel is waging against the Palestinian people. They must adopt a position that allies them with their opponents. Those Israelis who recently signed a petition expressing support for the call of Palestinian intellectuals for an end to the occupation and for a negotiated settlement which recognizes the fundamental demands of the Palestinians indeed found themselves in such a position. Precisely in order better to

serve her people, the Jewish Israeli intellectual must abandon her people. This entails acts of affiliation which the Israeli right has already labelled “treachery”. Given this complex interaction of forces and counter-forces, what, one may ask, should the position of the intellectual be with regard to the Intifada which she is required, at some level, to judge? For Jean-Paul Sartre, the critical position of the intellectual will always locate the latter's particularist positioning in conflict with her universalist affiliations. For the Israeli intellectual, the contradiction is located in the conflict between her belonging to the Jewish people, and her universalist commitments which render the demands of the Palestinians just and worthy of support. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict entails ongoing bifurcation between those who choose to remain loyal to the particularism which renders Israelis and Palestinians national enemies, and those who support the Palestinians and are prepared to justify their recourse to violence.

Just as knowledge of the eventual outcome of the present phase of conflict – that is to say, the firm belief that it will usher a Palestinian state into existence – does not relieve us of the task of examining its preconditions, so our inability to predict what form exactly the final product of the peace process will take does not relieve us of the necessity of embarking upon it. Beyond the practical, pragmatic benefits of changing the nature of the social relations between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, the intellectual must embark on this course out of commitment to a universalism whose present form is one of

identification with the oppressed. But in order to fulfil this task with a Coetzee-like sobriety; in order to adopt a perspective which considers the moment in order to look beyond the moment in full awareness of the conflictual and irresolvable aspect any given moment might wear; in order to do justice to the radical uncertainty and foreignness of future prospects from the perspective of the present, it is necessary to be liberated from modes of thought conditioned by the notion and reality of the occupation. For a certain fixation on the occupation is shared by both the Israeli extreme left and right-wings. Each of these poles, like all of their variants in between, bases its political resolutions on a dichotomous opposition between the presence – or removal – of the occupation, whether “removal” is conceptualized in terms of autonomy/separation, annexation, or a bi-national state. The dichotomy between occupation as absolute evil, on the one hand, and the “solution” as unequivocally “pure” and “just” – as Messianic – is shared by both the left and the right. It matters very little from a certain perspective, whether the Messianic impulse seeks to cleanse the Jewish people from contaminating contact with strangers and to bring about the establishment of the Third Temple, or whether it seeks to eradicate the differences between Palestinians and Israelis so that they might be absorbed into one social body – whatever the case, each of the opposing scenarios is uncompromisingly utopian. It bestows absolution on those who have sinned, holds out the promise of reparation and has the virtue of a clearly delineated shape – if only we could realize it ...

The legacy which channels the solution to territorial violence through Messianic leanings is as much the inheritance of the Israeli left as it is of the right. Zionist culture is saturated with Messianic manifestations, and this saturation marks non-Zionist, post-Zionist and anti-Zionist solutions alike, through their adoption of the stark binarity: occupation versus its removal; problem versus its solution. Therefore, the very act of proposing an all-encompassing solution, whether annexation or a bi-national state, encodes the same expectation of an instantaneous phase shift –

one period will end and another begin; evil will cease and good ensue instead.

This being the case, the task of the intellectual is to free himself from bondage to the concept of the “occupation”. But ending the occupation, that is to say, Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories and the establishment of a Palestinian state, must not be perceived as a Messianic solution, precisely because – as Coetzee shows – the resolution, the “end”, of the struggle is only a point along a continuously unfolding trajectory. Hence the intellectual must continue to engage in criticism and to resist the desire for an unequivocal picture, for the bold outlines of the “new” reality, the “final”, much anticipated, denouement. He must continue, proactively, to point to the provisionality of the “solution” – whose inadequacies will become visible not when the “agreement” or “treaty” is formally ratified, but precisely through its quotidian experiential manifestations. The intellectual can only conduct this work of diagnosis from a vantage point which is not constrained by nationalist particularism, but which adopts a relativistic universalism – a universalism that does not reify but evolves, instead, in response to changing conditions to create a complex and mutually correcting interplay between the universal and the particular, the present and the future.

The gaze which has liberated itself from its conditioning by the occupation must also internalize the duality of a state of affairs where the evils of the occupation and the unfolding of a “solution” coexist simultaneously. Such a gaze does not take its bearings from the mechanical chronological progression of historical time – the moment when the occupation ends, and its ending instantly ushers in liberation – but rather strives for a perspective which contains simultaneously, the evil of occupation and the pristine purity of its removal, or which contains neither. It is for this reason that the intellectual must ally himself with the most radical interim solutions, without expecting them to guarantee a Messianic unfolding.

This type of liberated gaze internalizes both the duality of the present state of affairs as well as the

tension between Messianic particularism and a shifting, situated and responsive universalism. From the vantage point of contemporary Israel, this liberated gaze can encompass, for instance, recognition of the full right of return of Palestinian refugees given that the issue no longer needs to be seen as an index, for example, of the Messianic resolution of the conflict. Rather it becomes the implementation of a universalistic claim – unfolding at a given moment in time – that causes the individual to identify with the rights of the oppressed. Such a standpoint acknowledges that it

is occupation-derived thinking which would see the Palestinian right of return as restitution and purification, whereas the alternative would be to see in the acceptance of the right of return, for example, a stage in the creation of a basic structural shift which cannot be cleansed, in advance, of the failures and contradictions which will attend it.

Endnote

- 1 Translated from the Hebrew by Louise Bethlehem.