

Marcin Stawiarski: "Interview with Gabriel Josipovici"

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MS: When did you start writing? Is there something you remember that sparked off your first texts?

GJ: As far back as I can remember I wrote and wanted to write. When Monika Fludernik was going through my papers prior to writing her book about me, she came across a story in the Victoria College school magazine which I must have written when I was 13 or 14. I was shocked and amazed to find that it contained many of the rhythms, themes and attitudes of my later work – it was naïve, of course, it didn't know where it was going, but it was better than much of the stuff I was writing five or even eight years later. It shows there's something there, almost from the start, and who knows how it got there?

MS: Over years, you appear to have given precedence to fiction. Have you given up writing plays? Would you like to have some of your plays re-edited or even staged? May one hope that some of your plays that were recorded on the BBC will be available one day?

GJ: I began writing plays because a new theatre had been built at the University of Sussex, where I was a young lecturer, and the students asked me to write something for them. I always believed – and still do – that one should try one's hand at as many different forms as possible because each will push you into areas you might never have gone to had you not had a go. And I did find that to be the case. But plays much more than fiction seem in my case to need a specific commission. When I was young I did write a few plays simply to try things out and sent a few radio plays to the BBC (they were promptly returned) because I liked what I felt one could do in that medium, but it was only when theatres and the BBC began to ask for work that I felt I could really let myself go in those media. Theatre commissions soon dried up because my work was too 'avant-garde' for large houses and not political enough for the majority of little theatres of the time, and I suppose because I did not push hard enough,

did not have theatre in my blood enough to form a company to put on my plays and do all the other things budding playwrights often do. But things might have been different if some of my early stage pieces, such as *Dreams of Mrs Fraser*¹ and *Flow*² had really taken off. I would still love to be able to work in a congenial theatre environment – such as I enjoyed for many years at BBC Radio 3 when Martin Esslin was in charge of drama there – working first with Guy Vaesen as my producer and then with John Theocharis. I loved that. It was a nice break from the solitude of fiction-writing. But by the 1990s many of the people I'd worked with at Radio 3 had either retired or been pushed out, and a new regime there was basically uninterested in radio drama that sought to extend the medium, and I stopped writing for them. German radio, which has always been much more ready to embrace innovation, went on producing my plays for a while, but the unification of Germany caused a financial squeeze on innovative work and that too dried up. I'd love to see some of my work staged again and published, of course.

MS: You're usually described as a novelist, critic and playwright. Have you ever written poetry?

GJ: Never. I read a lot of poetry but have no idea how it's done. That saddens me. I'd like to at least be competent, as Nabokov and Beckett and Muriel Spark and Pinter all were. But I'm not, so there it is.

MS: You've mentioned a book of yours that you never published – a book of tales or a children's book, was it? Have you ever thought of getting back to the idea of a children's book and writing a new one?

GJ: It's a children's book. It was written to commemorate a beloved cat who had recently died, and I imagined myself reading it aloud to specific children, who are now

¹ See Gabriel Josipovici, *Dreams of Mrs Fraser*, in Gabriel Josipovici, *Steps: Selected Fiction and Drama*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990, 155-173.

² See Gabriel Josipovici, *Flow*, *ibidem*, 174-194.

mothers! It freed me up and allowed me to write *The Inventory*³. I doubt if I could write another, but one never knows.

MS: How would you describe what writing is to you today? How has it changed since the publication of your first novel?

GJ: It never gets any easier, or less exciting.

MS: How do you set about writing? Would you like to be more precise about that? You sometimes have several projects under way at a time. How do you work?

GJ: It's not so much several projects on the go at any one time as never having a blank sheet of paper. I push something as far as it will go and if it seems not to be going anywhere I drop it and go on to something else, pick up something I dropped earlier. Then if I get through that and the itch remains, I return to the thing I dropped and go on pushing. It's always terribly instinctive and uncertain. It drives me mad.

MS: What are your projects right now? At one point, you said you were done with writing about modernism. No more essays then? What about new creative works?

GJ: I'm at work on a novel – one I dropped to write *Infinity*⁴ but have now gone back to. I do go on writing criticism, often in response to invitations to give a talk or introduce a book, or even to write a long review. It's part of the process of living, thinking, working for me. I merely said that the whole business of modernism was something I really felt I had written out of myself. If I haven't persuaded sceptics of my views on that by now I never will.

MS: What are your interests in other fields or sciences? There's music, of course, and the arts many of your essays deal with. But what would be the other areas or subjects that you're particularly interested in?

³ Gabriel Josipovici, *The Inventory*, London: Michael Joseph, 1968.

⁴ Gabriel Josipovici, *Infinity: The Story of a Moment*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012.

GJ: I loved school but had a terrible education, particularly in maths and the sciences. Like many people I love reading good popular books on those topics but feel, sadly, that it will remain a closed field to me except in the most instinctive fashion.

MS: What is the international scope your works have reached so far? You have close links to Germany and you've had more links with France of late. Some of your books have recently been translated into French. Do you think translations will be continued? What about other countries like Eastern Europe, for instance? Do you have any projects related to that?

GJ: It's such a strange world, publishing. In the last two years *Moo Pak*⁵, which came out in England in 1994 and disappeared without trace, like all my books, has been translated into German, French, Spanish and Catalan, and published in Germany, France and Spain to enthusiastic reviews. But so many of the foreign publishers who took a chance on me and seemed genuinely to like my work have gone bust that I ought perhaps to warn any prospective ones away. I won't, of course, and hope my work does go on being published abroad.

MS: You were born in France, migrated to Egypt, and grew up in England. And, you say you're neither French nor English. How significant is migration for a writer? Do you think this sense of oneself as being a migrant ever evolves? Has it evolved in your case?

GJ: I'd love to be inward with a culture, as Muriel Spark was with English and Scottish and Thomas Bernhard with Austrian – but one has to play the cards one is dealt. And in my case once an immigrant always an immigrant.

MS: How do you feel about the languages you speak? Has English become your first language? How do you feel about French? French is actually your native language, isn't it? Have you ever written in French? What impact has it had on your writing in a language that's not originally your own? Do you feel that shows in any way in your writings?

⁵ Gabriel Josipovici, *Moo Pak*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994.

GJ: I once tried to write in French but it didn't come naturally, so I'm saddled with English, not my first language, but the only one I'm comfortable with. What effect this has had on my writing is for others to decide.

MS: It would seem that Jewishness has been a more affirmed aspect in your creative work in recent years, as a general condition. Would you agree? How would you describe it? Why wasn't it the case before?

GJ: I've just been to Berlin to see the great Kitaj retrospective at the Jewish Museum there. It was very evident, going round the show, that Kitaj was a much better painter, and perhaps a much better Jewish painter, when he did not think about himself as A Jewish Painter. I've never thought of myself as A Jewish Writer and hope I never will. I was not brought up in any Jewish tradition, but, because we were in France during the war, where I was born, and I talked to my mother a good deal about those years, I've always had a strong sense of myself as Jewish – one of those Jews who are aware merely of how important it is to cross between cultures and to avoid nationalism like the plague it is. I come from a very different Jewish tradition from the East European or German Ashkenazi tradition that dominates talk of Jews and Jewishness, especially in England and America, so I look at that tradition from the outside, much as I do native English and French traditions. I love many Jewish writers like Kafka, Agnon, Shabtai and Appelfeld, but no more than non-Jewish writers like Eliot and Stevens, Sterne and Virginia Woolf. I have given more thought though in recent years to questions of Jews and Jewishness, and to the disaster that the establishment of the state of Israel is turning out to be.

MS: In one of your essays you criticise excessive attitudes towards memory issues, especially *voyeurism*. Could you be more precise? Do you think there's excess relating to memory?

GJ: How can one not be fascinated by memory? It's what makes us what we are and it's the subject of much of the greatest art. On the specific issue of excess, I was asked to give a paper at a symposium on Memory and the Holocaust and I tried to explore the ways in which there is such a thing as false mythic memory, the sort of thing invoked by demagogues everywhere, from Begin in Israel and Milosevic in former Yugoslavia to Loyalists and Nationalists in Ireland. I wanted to see if one could distinguish between genuine 'folk' memory, genuine family and personal memory, and this kind of demagogic simplified memory.

MS: One of your critical books deals with the Bible. You've also written a number of articles on biblical aspects. How important is the Bible for your own creative work? Are there links you could point to?

GJ: The narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible are amongst the great narrative masterpieces of the world. They seem to me so much more 'modern' than most novels published in the past decade. I love the spare prose and the way dialogue, not psychological analysis, drives the stories forward. I'm so pleased I learned enough biblical Hebrew to be able to read them in the original, for, as always, they lose so much in translation. But it has been no more important 'for my creative work' than any other piece of writing I admire.

MS: One might say that there's a sense of both stylistic and thematic cohesion throughout most of your works. It might seem obvious that there're links between your early works such *Words*⁶ or *The Present*⁷ and more recent novels such as *Everything Passes*⁸ or *After*⁹ and *Making Mistakes*¹⁰. To what extent is such continuity and such division something you've been trying to uphold?

⁶ Gabriel Josipovici, *Words*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1971.

⁷ Gabriel Josipovici, *The Present*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1975.

⁸ Gabriel Josipovici, *Everything Passes*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006.

⁹ Gabriel Josipovici, *After and Making Mistakes*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

GJ: I hope each work is utterly new – but of course it never is. I am never quite sure whether to feel pleased or distressed when I discover that it is only a variation on something written earlier – pleased because it shows consistency, distressed because it shows a narrow set of themes and forms, compulsively returned to.

MS: When speaking about *Moo Pak* in an interview with Tewfik Hakem¹¹, you underline the lack of achievement and the idea of failure. How important are these themes to you? Could you be more precise?

GJ: I've often commented on the fact that reading Proust as a seventeen-year old helped me grasp that success in art often means not overcoming problems but recognising that the problems are perhaps themselves the theme.

MS: “Modernism is with us to stay”, you said in an interview with Ramona Koval¹². You were asked to comment on the paradox between telling and not telling stories. You seem to imply that the two aspects can be reconciled. But hasn't there been a clear-cut split between those works that *do* tell a story and those that don't, between forms of realism and other sorts of fictional worlds? To what extent do you define yourself as a Modernist writer then?

GJ: I don't 'define myself' as any sort of writer. But I do feel an affinity with writers, such as Kafka and Bernhard who recognise the human need to tell stories but doubt whether they can do it or even if it can or should be the aim of the writer who wishes to be truthful to do so. I am as little interested in writers like Ricardou in France or Barth in America, who are quite cynical about story-telling, and writers like Roth or Ishiguro, who go on doing so, even while seeming vaguely to feel that they are doing so in bad faith. I love *Tristram Shandy*,

¹¹ Tewfik Hakem, « Entretien avec Gabriel Josipovici », *A plus d'un titre, France Culture*, 19 mai 2011, <<http://www.franceculture.fr/personne-gabriel-josipovici.html>>, accessed 10 November 2012.

¹² Ramona Koval, “Who reads Proust? Gabriel Josipovici”, 29 November 2010, “The Book Show”, *ABC Radio National*, <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/who-reads-proust-gabriel-josipovici/2967952>>, accessed 10 November 2012.

which is about someone desperately trying to get the story of his life written and constantly failing. Very funny and very profound.

MS: In your interview with Christine Jordis¹³, you say that to be able to write you need two things: on the one hand, the feeling that something must be said; on the other, the feeling that it's impossible to say it. So that that very impossibility becomes the subject of your work. Is it a form of a writer's block? Or is there more to it than that?

GJ: No, it's very simple. Most of the important feelings we have are too deep and complex for words – the feeling of loss, for example, or elation. Or ordinary little things like the effect of sunlight on a brick wall as one walks by. If one is struck by something like that – a big thing like the loss of a loved person, a small thing like sunlight on a brick wall – one wants to find a way of expressing that. It's not easy. But it's the only thing that interests me.

MS: “Experimental is a word I'm really against”, you said to Christine Jordis, only to go on to redefine experimentalism, envisaged as a sort of rewriting. But then, the conclusion would be that all authors experiment. Is experimentalism a condition you unavoidably find yourself in as a writer then?

GJ: I never think about it. I write what I can, because that's what something in me wants to do.

MS: “This is my character and not me who speaks”, you insisted when interviewed by Christine Jordis. Yet, is it a matter of the sometimes paradoxical boundary between the narrator and the author? Is it also a question of boundaries between fiction and life? Where precisely do you draw a line? Perhaps, your idea of authority has something to do with it?

GJ: Of course it's more complicated than I made out, but I was incensed that Christine Jordis was talking about the protagonist of my short book, *Everything Passes* as though he was me. If he was anyone, he was Schoenberg, but of course he's a composite. In some

¹³ Christine Jordis, “Entretien avec Gabriel Josipovici”, Rencontres internationales du livre à Montpellier, 31 mai, 1, 2, 3 juin 2012, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xrsrw9_entretien-avec-gabriel-josipovici_news>, accessed 10 November 2012.

novels, such as *Moo Pak* and *Infinity* I suppose I take pleasure in giving the protagonist some of my views as well as some pretty unsavoury and very reactionary views. Certainly not what I think. What I feel? I doubt it.

MS: You seem to reject *symbolical* readings of your works. When Christine Jordis asked you whether *Everything Passes* should be understood symbolically, you answered it shouldn't. Does it mean you conceive of your works as liberated from symbolical interpretations? Why?

GJ: I've never understood what symbolism and allegory mean. I think of myself as a realist if I think of myself at all.

MS: There's no doubt that other media and other arts are part and parcel of your work. I myself have been interested in music in your novels. You've written two fascinating books that draw on other arts: *Goldberg: Variations*¹⁴ and *The Big Glass*¹⁵. Yet you seem to keep art at bay, as it were. You write that your novels are "only loosely based" on art and artists. Could you be more precise about this aspect? Is it a form of play with the reader?

GJ: When I wrote a novel that took off from the relations of Bonnard to his wife, I didn't want to write 'a novel about Bonnard', mainly out of respect for Bonnard – I wanted to be free to use what I wanted about that relationship and about Bonnard the painter, and to shed the rest. So I called it *Contre-Jour*¹⁶, in homage to the painter, and subtitled it 'A Triptych after Pierre Bonnard' – which I hope gets it about right. And the same has been true for the two other works I've written which 'took off' from artists, *The Big Glass*, after Duchamp, and *Infinity*, after the Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi. I hate all those books about van Gogh's ear and Michelangelo's love-life and Goya's deafness – which suggest that their authors have privileged access to great artists – they remind me of Benjamin's wonderful remark about Max Brod's biography of Kafka: 'Brod's attitude as a biographer,' says

¹⁴ Gabriel Josipovici, *Goldberg: Variations*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002.

¹⁵ Gabriel Josipovici, *The Big Glass*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1991.

¹⁶ Gabriel Josipovici, *Contre-Jour: A Triptych after Pierre Bonnard*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1986.

Benjamin, 'is the pietistic stance of an ostentatious intimacy'. I wrote my novels 'about' Bonnard and Scelsi partly to celebrate their resistance to such intimacy.

MS: You've written quite a lot about walking in your novels. Do you like walking?

GJ: I love walking. And I love writing. I can't imagine life without both of them and they feed off each other – writing is helped by walking and walking becomes even more pleasurable if the writing is going well.

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