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Therapy of Distances or Trauma of Exiles? Migration in Gabriel Josipovici's Works

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Introduction

The contemporary author, critic and novelist, Gabriel Josipovici was born in Nice, in France, in 1940, of Jewish parents. Having survived the war period in the French Alps with his mother, Sacha Rabinovitz, he moved to study in Egypt, before immigrating with his mother to England. After completing his studies, he taught at the University of Sussex at Brighton from 1963 until 1998. He started publishing fiction as early as the 1960s and has published numerous novels and critical works ever since. Josipovici's itinerary has thus been marked by migration in many ways, not only through Jewishness, but also through his personal history of emigration. It is no wonder, then, that many of his works explicitly draw on the theme of migration that I would like to examine today.

What I wish to concentrate on is Josipovici's use of movement and displacement in relation to characters in his fiction as a token of the author's attachment to the notion of migration, but also on his treatment of the concept of exile that I wish may look into from a rather philosophical point of view as a general state of necessary distance rather than the sheer act of departure or summon to leave.

On the one hand, as far as the notion of movement is concerned, one can point to two novels that convey a sense of constant bodily mobility, presenting us with characters that keep walking without any specific aim, be it indoors, within closed, confined spaces, as the 19th-century French author's, Xavier de Maistre's, character in *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, or outdoors, within limitless, open spaces. These two novels are *Migrations*, published in 1977, and *Distances*, published in 1987.

The specificity of the two novels is that on top of presenting us with endlessly migrating characters, they also show us mobile narratives, as if the way in which these stories are told was predicated on the characters' mobility and showed us something about migration, less as a form of representation than narrative presentation.

On the other hand, the character and the symbols of exile are rather numerous in Josipovici's fiction, so that exile in relation to movement gives us an impression of works largely dealing with migration.

I Migrations

One of Josipovici's early texts obviously dealing with migration is a novella called *Distances*, published in 1987, in the short story collection *In the Fertile Land*. "Those feelable distances…", used as an epigraph, reminds one of Rilke's idea of the Open, such as it is intimated in Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

The narrative in *Distances* might be described as a minimalist story revolving around two or three extremely simple threads of narrative: a woman walks, a man follows her, her name is sometimes Lisa, sometimes Flora, thus epitomizing a mobile character. We know that two other characters, Alma and Bertie, are her kith and kin, and we know there is the sea, the industrial infrastructures and the urban environment. But that's about all there is to be told.

The most significant event happening in the novel is the woman's walking. In fact, two movements alternate: movement within a closed space – a room –, and movement outside, by the sea. While the former is regulated on the everyday gestures of an ordinary visit, the latter is more chaotic, thus revealing haphazard patterns of migration. In other words, the Open in *Distances* is more akin to the natural space – the sea – opposed to the limited human space of the urban architecture – the port, the gas-works, the stairs, or the room.

The notion of the ordinary is extremely significant – walking, and to an extent, the symbolical migration – occurs as an ordinary gesture, which leads to philosophical overtones. Thus, particular emphasis is laid on Lisa's everyday activities: "Very slowly she takes off her coat, walks to the wardrobe, opens it, takes out a hanger, puts the coat on it, pushes it into the wardrobe, closes the door." (Josipovici, 1987, 139). Moreover, the ordinary gesture stands out as it is anchored within a simple, reduced, but repetitive narrative. Blocks and amalgams of narrative are constantly retold, as though they were short poems, refrains, reminding us of the Japanese haikus:

> The sea.
> Sunshine.
> She walks.
> She walks. (Josipovici, 1987, 123)

The fact that migration and movement should appear as part and parcel of the novel's theme is due not only to the character's ceaseless strolling, but also to the narrative's repetitive patterns foregrounding the movement itself and constantly reminding us that something keeps moving, that there's migration within the very language we are reading.

One might wonder whether the novel aims at suggesting that the same movement – walking as an event – is carried out anew or repeated every time a block of narrative itself is repeated and retold. But what seems to matter first and foremost is the overall sense of infinite evolution within sameness owing to the mobile structure of dozens of similar narrative blocks, which might imply hundreds of false starts, beginnings, and repetitive reprisals. The narrative seems to suggest continuous inchoation, i.e. starting from scratch, all over again, as though the achievement of the narrative were a Sisyphus' task.

The overall structure upon which the novel articulates movement is the cycle. The story begins with the female character starting to walk after having come back from somewhere. Neither the destination of her walks nor the origin of her journey is known. The only thing that we are presented with is open space, an open suitcase on a bed that symbolizes the very liminality of movement: its openness meaning neither complete arrival nor decisive departure. By the end of the novel, Lisa will have disappeared without a trace or will have reached elsewhere, thus bringing us back – through a spiral-like cycle – to the point of departure.

Besides, Lisa seems to have undergone some sort of trauma that brought her to reiterate her daily routine. At any rate, she's tense and obsessive, walking, her fists clenched in her pockets. Where she came from or where she went is not certain – the movement is intransitive, she simply went and came back, and that's about all there is to know. Migration seen through the prism of memory shows something about traumatic disorders and remembrance: "–Where did you go Lisa? Why are you being so secretive about it? –She's not being secretive, the big man says. She just can't remember where she went." (Josipovici, 1987, 136). Trauma remains just as undetermined as the protagonist's destination.

Quite in keeping with the question of indefinite trauma is the idea of lack of certainty that both migration and repetition lead to. The aim of the character is not certain; ellipsis and aposiopesis abound, so that the general pattern lies within the refusal to enlarge or to develop:

> –Go on, he says. […]
> –No, she says. Nothing. Nothing. (Josipovici, 1987, 124)

There is no definite, certain end, teleology is undermined and certainty falters. Just as walking is conducive to uncertainty, so is narrative understanding.

Gradually, migration builds up as a rhizome and gathers versatile meanings. First, there is the question of the body in progress. By dint of walking, her body hurts – her legs, knees, and ankles ache, so that the experience of migration turns into that of one's own body, which constitutes a synecdoche to one's identity. The mystery of walking is raised many a time:

–You must tell me.
–Tell you?
–Why you walk like that.
–What are you talking about? She says.
–It seems to me, he says, that it is a reflection of your inner condition. (Josipovici, 1987, 156)

Walking is hence interpreted above all as an identity quest. Indeed, the protagonist seems to have been grappling with her identity or perhaps even going through some sort of initiation: "What were you trying to prove? He asks her." (Josipovici, 1987, 129). That initiation thus consists in finding one's identity elsewhere, after having to have to migrate: "I thought, she says, that if I could get far enough away, where no one knew where I was, I could be myself." (Josipovici, 1987, 172). Associated with that is the question of the relativity of a stable locus: "[…] why be there rather than here? Or here rather than there?" (Josipovici, 1987, 172), asks the protagonist, which implies the notion of an almost necessary or natural form of deterritorialization.

One obvious subset of questions in reference to migration is related to Jewishness. But then, what is interesting is that the question of Jewish migration – erring and the *topos* of the wondering Jew – should be broached indirectly, and only in passing by Lisa's being confronted with a mirror image of Jewishness. If it is Lisa who keeps walking, it is the stranger that follows her that is the one to be shown to be aware of Jewish dispersal and wondering. It is the stranger who chases Lisa as though he were part of her traditional haunting unconscious:

–You do get around, she says.
–You see, Flora, he says, my people are always moving.
–What people is that?
–The Jewish people.
–Oh God, she says.
–That is what history has made us do, he says. (Josipovici, 1987, 179-180)

It is as though the male character were a mirror-image to her migration that takes on clear Jewish overtones: "He says: –Abraham. My ancestor. He was told to change and he changed. […] He was told to get up and go, he says. And so he did. After him we have always been ready to get up and go." (Josipovici, 1987, 181).

But then migration appears as a vital need that Lisa cannot suppress and that goes farther beyond the Jewish question. In abstract terms, immobility equals death, so that staying alive requires keeping on moving:

> When I stand still I feel dead, she says. I have to be on the move the whole time. I close my eyes and I see myself walking. I open them and I am. […] I'm not talking about change. I'm talking about having to keep moving. (Josipovici, 1987, 196)

This view extends the notion of Jewish dispersal turning it into a more universal question. Being on the move becomes a general theme standing for the human condition. There is, indeed, an urge to move. "I must go […]." (Josipovici, 1987, 129), states Lisa. The need to go is the need to know that something is happening, that there is life out there:

> When I sit here, with you, or by myself, I lose any sense of myself. I am not sure if I have already been here before or even if I am really here now. At least when I walk, she says, I know I am walking. I know something is happening. (Josipovici, 1987, 206)

Seen from this angle, exile is not only a question of identity as it is for the stranger male character who declares "[When I] left I became myself again, he said. And I became a Jew again." (Josipovici, 1987, 181), but it is simply a more general need. Exile becomes vital.

The question of migration in Josipovici is in keeping with his interest in bodily movement, such as appears in his essays, *In Touch*, referring to Luria's theorization of proprioception and restrained bodily movement hindered by accident, as well as Oliver Sacks's description of the difficulty in recovering the bodily instincts in his *A Leg to Stand On*. It is also related to Josipovici's interest in pilgrimage, and the idea of the therapy of distance, that is to say the very act of moving and pursuing itineraries rather than a goal.

In his early novel, *Migrations*, Josipovici stages a man walking in his room and erring along the streets of a town, falling down, resuming his walk. The plot of the novel is limited to movement: "The man walks up and down the room, from the door to the window, from the window to the door, endlessly, endlessly." (Josipovici, 1977, 7). Just like in *Distances*, the narrative is composed of short blocks and limited threads of plot that are ceaselessly retold by a third-person narrator using the present simple tense. The character's erring gradually turns into an everyday routine: "He knows the route by heart now. Unless his gestures grow too wild he can pass within inches of any of the little tables and upset nothing." (Josipovici, 1977, 61). Migration becomes a multifarious symbol. It is first and foremost predicated on the notion of flow, as is constantly recalled by the recurring motif that punctuates the narrative: "Silence flows away from him in dark streams." (Josipovici, 1977, 203). Migration is the flow of the body not only through walking and bodily movement, but also through mutation: "Our jaws have migrated". But bodily mutation has an impact on language: "Words replace food. Our jaws have started to change, to adapt to the new function." (Josipovici, 1977, 182). The

overarching symbol – the one that permeates both the narrative structures and the symbolic themes – is that of constant evolution:

> Everything moves, all the time. Shifts. Do you understand? Even the organs we are born with are on the move. Changing all the time. Taking up new positions. Nothing disappears. Nothing goes forever. It just migrates. We try to grasp it we try to hold it everything migrates everything shifts it's all [...]. (Josipovici, 1977, 179)

In its turn, migration comes to symbolise time through allusions to Heraclitus' notion of time flow, but also to the parables of Lazarus and his resuscitation and Lot and his wife:

> But we can't go back so we go forward. But as we rush bits of us drop away so that when we finally get there we've lost ourselves on the way and if we stop to look for the pieces then we're dead. (Josipovici, 1977, 181)

But it also shows us something of the need to move, but a need that counters the teleological fantasy of stability and certitude in settling down:

> We live in that grave, in those clothes, in the pressure between nothing and everything, we live by perpetual movement from place to place but we want oh we so much want to escape to say it all to come home at last to the right place our rightful place our rightful space. As if that was possible [...] (Josipovici, 1977, 220)

The "ports of call of [my] migrations" (Josipovici, 1977, 223) – that is, one's home – are never permanent, because "[...] none of them is the real place. You can settle in none of them. You always have to move on to the next." (Josipovici, 1977, 224). Migration's teleology is thus undermined, so that permanent deterritorialization is the only outcome and the sole solution, both to meaning – for since "[E]verything is slippery, we can't catch it, can't hold on." (Josipovici, 1977, 181) – and to one's grasp of one's identity, now appearing as the need of a vital movement rather than exile.

II Exiles

That the question of the relationship between migration and exile should characterize the protagonist in Josipovici's latest novel, *Infinity: The Story of a Moment*, only goes to show how ever-present and crucially important this issue remains for the author today.

The border-line musician and composer Pavone, based on the Italian composer, Giacinto Scelsi, stands out in *Infinity* as an eccentric nobleman, focusing on one-sound compositions, resorting to mysticism, trying to come to terms with a double musical tradition extending from East to West. Hence, of crucial importance is Pavone's liminality that symbolically derives from spatial configuration of transitions, that is his dwelling within a liminal abode:

> […] this is Rome. Rome is the boundary between East and West. South of Rome the East starts, and north of Rome is where the West starts. This border-line runs exactly over the Forum Romanum. This is where my house is, and this explains my life and my music. (Josipovici, 2012, 26)

Pavone's liminality goes hand in hand with his definition of himself as a necessary stranger:

> I am a Sicilian, which means I am a stranger everywhere on earth. Sicily has rejected me, he said, and nowhere else has welcomed me as Dante, when he was exiled by his native city of Florence, was welcomed by Can Grande della Scala, the ruler of Ravenna. (Josipovici, 2012, 26)

Pavone even feels rejected by the earth itself, which only emphasizes the question of exile as an unavoidable, intrinsic, fundamental, or even universal condition:

> I felt that the earth in those places rose up and rejected me. I tried to make a place for myself on this earth, he said. I married and had a beautiful house and entertained glamorous visitors. But all the time I felt the earth rising and pushing me away. Away, it said. Away. But away where? A man is born on this earth and if the earth rejects him where is he to go? (Josipovici, 2012, 29)

It is in music, through what Pavone defines as inner sound, that a home-space can be found, as though exile translated into the inability to come to terms with one's identity: "You have to turn to your inner ear. You have to find a space within yourself. You have to make your music in that inner space." (Josipovici, 2012, 28-29).

This is precisely the main theme in the short story called "Exile", published in the collection *In the Fertile Land*. A first-person male narrator tells the story of his sister's visit. They have lived apart for many years and now something has changed and the sister's coming to impart on him what is reported as some vital news. The news is that he is free now.

It is thus from snaps of narrative, from subjective personal impressions relating to the visit, that the readers might reconstruct the crux of the character's exile. What is to be understood is that it is a sort of authoritarian regime that had had the protagonist imprisoned: "I was surprised too that they had let her come." (Josipovici, 1987, 97). But no tangible or concrete details are provided. The reader finds out that it has been going on for quite a long time and that it has already left its mark on the character: "[…] you cannot simply wish away so many thousand days, pretend they have not happened." (Josipovici, 1987, 97). Since the locus of exile here lies in a strange wintry town, the place reminds one of a camp or reservation, at least a form of penal colony, not without keeping with Siberian camps. The word "exile" is not used in the text itself – it pertains to the sphere of the unnamable and the ellipsis, even though allusions to a camp/colony seem obvious: "This is not a place one leaves, either for a short time or forever." (Josipovici, 1987, 98). It seems to be a town whose inhabitants live side by side with convicts: "[…] the inhabitants were taciturn if not actively hostile, as though

they had seen too many of us in the past few years and preferred to act as though we were not there." (Josipovici, 1987, 97).

Broadly speaking, defined as a condition of distance and separation, exile has something to do with a state of forced dis-occupation. An exiled self is first and foremost an *un*occupied or rather *dis*occupied self. And there is a correlation between the notion of the ordinary and the everyday familiarity and exile. In other words, in the circumstances of non-exile the self is polluted – or over-occupied – by otherness, where otherness refers to the familiar that keeps the individual busy, and pollution to the state of being constantly occupied or preoccupied by all but one's own self and the thought of one's own death. Non-exile depends on this occupation with otherness and has more to do with involuntary or necessary need for fullness, i.e. the need to let oneself remain overcome by others despite oneself. Occupation as pollution by otherness is a means of distancing the experience of exile, thus the experience of death. Seen form this angle, exile is merely a trace of migration. It is not directly tantamount to migration. It is the inactivity once migration has drawn to a close. Wanting to be on the go is a form of refusal to remain in exile. It is thus a form of reversal of migration. While Josipovici's characters in *Migrations* and *Distances* keep walking, as though to avoid exile, precisely, the protagonist in this short story fears being dispossessed of occupation: "I had also got used to the fact of having nothing to do all day, though at first that was what I dreaded most of all." (Josipovici, 1987, 97). In fact, ordinary activity creates spaces of familiarity (occupation), thus keeping the experience of the unknown and distance – thus of exile – at bay. Dis-occupation as emptiness (lack of fullness as non fulfillment) only brings one to experience oneself as a self, annihilating all the masks and semblance of familiarity. What the protagonist of Josipovici's story turns to is precisely the opposite – he deviates the experience of exile by re-focusing on the ordinary, turning exile into a space of familiarity, *reterritorializing* it:

> Every day I walked though the identical streets with their rows of identical houses and identical wooden palings; stopped every now and then to watch children clearing the snow from the tiny front yards; bought the few provisions I needed; returned to the cold flat; cooked; sat huddled against the cold for an hour or two, in the dark, looking out at the moonlit town under its blanket of snow, and tumbled into bed to sleep as best as I could. For some reason the satisfaction this programme afforded me was epitomized by a peculiar sensation of peace and well-being which would run through me sometimes as I lay in bed in the bitter-cold pitch-black early mornings and stretched my legs to opposite sides of the bed […]. Curiously, in that moment I would feel, in the intimate core of my body, that I actually existed in this world of silent streets and identical houses, of white skies and dirty snow, in a way I had not known myself to exist before, in the excitement and hurly-burly of the big cities in which I had always lived. (Josipovici, 1987, 98)

The narrator's focus on the everyday is perhaps a means of survival. He recreates, within the unknown, an abode of familiarity according to an everyday gesture: "I had in effect found a rhythm, a pattern." (Josipovici, 1987, 97). Consequently, when his sister asks him to go

back with her, to put an end to his exile – he only tries to explain to her the very impossibility of doing so. The refusal to be free may be interpreted as a token of resentment the narrator feels towards that unknown authority: "What humiliation? […] You don't know these people, I said. You don't know the things they do – They're not doing anything, she said. They're letting you go." (Josipovici, 1987, 100). But, interestingly, it may also be understood with reference to the ordinary and the conception of exile as dis-occupation. When the reassuring comfort of the ordinary has taken over, exile has been partly evacuated. Paradoxically, freedom – thus, the very act of beginning to migrate again – means disturbing that comfort, and annihilating the self from within its ordinariness, its familiarity. While the character's sister breaks the news to him – "But you're free, she said. You can walk round the town now, can't you? You can eat where you want. You can come home at whatever hour you like." (Josipovici, 1987, 101) – the protagonist faces the prospect of the uncanny: "Suddenly the little town no longer seemed familiar." (Josipovici, 1987, 97). The meaning of "home" is lost, not only because home is no longer where it used to be, but also because the locus of exile has become home as a space of familiarity. The exile within Josipovici's penal camp turns into a condition of transformed non exile.

Conclusion

To conclude, Josipovici's works reveal a tension that occurs between the ordinary, the bodily movement and the notion of exile. While purposeless or chaotic movement shows us something about migration and the need to be on the move, exile is anchored in the aftermath of displacements and keeps a proximity to openness. The Open appears when the confines of the self broaden up to the very experience of self. The open is not the realization that discovering new land is unfamiliar and that it somehow does not belong to me or that I do not belong in it, but precisely the opposite. The uncanny experience of the Open is that that strange unfamiliar land is after all part of me, does after all belong to me and I belong in it. The uncanny experience of foreign land is the very acknowledgement of the fact that part of it has somehow always belonged with me or that I can turn it into my own. Thus, the discovery that I shelter the unfamiliar within me. This is what happens when within the very movement of the body the essence of migration refuses to emerge as is the case in *Migrations* or *Distances*. This is what happens, too, when the familiar becomes so stifling that the only solution is remaining is exile. This is what happens to the man in the short story, "Exile", who manages to tame imprisonment into his own space of quasi-domesticity. But then, at that

stage, exile may have already turned into something else, and the question remains, as the man in *Migrations* asks: "What space do I occupy?" (Josipovici, 1977, 231).

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