

# Not a Thing of Beauty

## **Proust among the Nations: from Dreyfus to the Middle East.**

**By Jacqueline Rose** Chicago Ill: Chicago University Press Hardback 256 pp. ISBN 978-0226725789

Reviewed by Manu Bazzano

*Self & Society – The Journal of Humanistic Psychology* Summer 2013

I see Jacqueline Rose as a natural heir to Hannah Arendt: the same rigorous thought, the same courage to tackle head on (and elegantly) what wilfully escapes the hollow platitudes of contemporary discourse. This book partly continues her critical examination of Zionism so brilliantly conveyed a few years ago in *The Question of Zion* (2005)<sup>1</sup>, this time following an exquisitely unorthodox trajectory with an impressive array of first-rate guest appearances: Dreyfus, Freud, Beckett, Jean Genet, Elia Suleiman, Mahmoud Darwish and Marcel Proust. *Unlike* Arendt, who welcomed the Jewish diaspora and questioned the very nature of belonging as spurious, Rose seems caught up in the compulsion to revisit again and again the armoured citadel of Zion. She could have looked elsewhere: to a nation of elective affinities that refuses to be limited by borders and partitions or to be enthused by the arbitrary call of belonging; to a sovereign embracing of a voluntary diaspora; to a principled refusal of ethnicity as tribalism. Yet many of us are grateful for her choice to persevere in her quest to unmask the blatant injustice done to the Palestinians and, in this case, to find striking links between the Middle East and Europe, the Israel-Palestine conflict and some of the greatest literature produced in the very heart of Europe.

The first step in the book's journey is Dreyfus, sent to prison on Devil's Island, off the coast of French Guiana in 1895, wrongly accused of treason, languishing in his cell for five years, one of the most famous miscarriages of justice in history. His was an infamous example of widespread anti-Semitism in Europe. In France, Freud was similarly subjected to rabid prejudice with the newborn art of psychoanalysis equated with 'irrationalism' and assumed to be a frontal attack of venerated Cartesian rationalism.

The odd thing is that the author (coming of course from a diametrically opposite angle of informed, articulate and sympathetic stance towards psychoanalysis), obliquely agrees with that view. Partly drawing from Jacques Ranciere, she presents the unconscious as the seat of a 'confused knowledge', of a thought 'which can only break bounds and rise to the surface of the mind as a form of savagery' (p. 11), adding sharply:

'For all the attempts to transform it into an aesthetic object, the unconscious is not a thing of beauty' (ibid)

Is that really so? Hers is of course a well-timed reminder, in a psychological landscape naively bent on narcissistic, happy-clappy self-actualizing and mechanistic reprogramming of

---

thoughts and behaviour, of the very real existence of the shadow. It is true, as Rose reminds us, that we are fundamentally 'inhospitable to ourselves' and 'prey to aggressive drives' (p. 64). Discounting this fact would be a sure sign of narcissism and the seed of political disaster – the latter pretty much the course of action chosen by the ruling political class in Israel. Rose aptly reminds us of the story, in the early days of psychoanalysis, of the American woman who during a lecture by Ernest Jones on dreams, objected that Jones could speak only for Austrians; in her case, as with her fellow Americans, all dreams were positive and altruistic.

Yet what Rose fails to register is that the very notion of the unconscious has shifted considerably since Freud to make room for a sophisticated and pluralistic view beyond the *Id*. Instead, the author obstinately inhabits the memory of an unreconstructed view of psychoanalysis, even exhuming 'hysteria' as a contemporary relevant form of malaise. This is at variance with her own appeal for a 'new vocabulary, a way that allows us to remain attuned to the iniquities of the world' (p. 9).

In pursuing her fierce and delicate argument, she takes the reader through the 'scarred landscape of a contemporary world from Europe to the Middle East where 'the legacy of Dreyfus is still being played out to this day' (p. 10). But why Proust of all people? Because, I presume, he is Mnemosyne's elected bard, a great poet of involuntary memory and a contemporary of Freud who like Freud did not 'idealize, flatten out, or subordinate to reason the vagaries of who we are' (p. 8). Both Proust and Freud also are prey (this the author did not say) to the idea that it might be possible by means of involuntary memory to decode reality and retrieve a sort of lost language. Both egregiously stand for the bourgeois dream of resolving the contradictions of frightened elites in the face of the ravages of history. This point is made clearly by Adorno, quoted by Rose, who saw Proust adopting a 'physiognomy' in the attempt to arrive at the secret language of things.

In spite of my disagreements, I recognize this as a first-rate book and a must-read for all practitioners who are interested in a much needed contemporary discourse which unites *polis* and *psyche*. A necessary, urgent book often prompts us to revisit familiar ground, inviting us to make the familiar unfamiliar again. I remember feeling greatly moved by Ari Folman's film *Waltz with Bashir* which deals with the Sabra and Chatila massacres. In September 1982 the Phalangist Lebanese, fully aided and supported by the Israeli army, massacred over three days 1.700 Palestinians at the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila. In watching the film, I had overlooked something important which Rose helped me see with tremendous clarity. The film presents the point of view of a traumatized Israeli soldier who had erased the event from his mind. The film, she points out, undoubtedly stages a breakthrough of national memory, before going on to ask:

What kind of memory, indeed, whose memory, is being privileged by this film? ... For Folman, as an Israeli, the difficulty was something else – how to draw up from the forgotten past a moment of cruel self-reckoning. Yet if this is the strength of the film, it is also its weakness. *Waltz with Bashir* is the story of the perpetrator who suffers (p. 168).

This is urgent, courageous writing which looks unflinchingly and with remarkable empathic power at both historical events and subjectively nuanced, highly personal passages of poetry and love. In both dimensions, memory gains the central ground, particularly in our time of selective historical memory and hyper-active forgetting. Unwearyingly, the book charts a collective trajectory of pain, pointing all along out that there can be, paradoxically, great freedom in suffering. Much better to awaken to the reality of suffering than to be lulled in the cosy slumber of de-sublimation. For Samuel Beckett, who authored a masterly essay on Proust, there is great freedom when 'the boredom of living' is replaced by 'the suffering of being' (p. 147). Protection is futile, and only when false protection is abandoned, life becomes fertile again. Freud himself, writing in 1915 argued that 'life ... regains its full interest when ... life itself may be lost'. Yet suffering cannot be *represented*, not even *suffered*. 'You must learn to suffer better', Clov says in Beckett's *Endgame*. What we can't tolerate becomes segregated; yet this strategy doesn't work. This is where voluntary and involuntary memory becomes crucial.

For me personally, the true hero of this book is not really Proust but Jean Genet, who makes his irreverent appearance towards the end of the book. A novelist and playwright of tremendous power, he went to live with the *fedayeen* and recorded his experiences in a book of aching beauty, *Captif amoureux* (translated as *Prisoner of Love*)<sup>2</sup>. Genet, the supreme outsider, loved the Palestinian cause *because* it was a lost cause. For Genet the Palestinian revolution, at least during the phase he was acquainted with, was not the desire for a territory but the impossible aspiration to dissolve the twenty-two Arab nations and 'garland everyone with smiles', creating in the process a hybrid yet fertile union between revolutionary Marxism and Islam<sup>3</sup>. The Palestinians brought Genet back to life and precipitated his vocabulary, injecting his art with urgency and passion, prompting him to question literature itself, even that of a great writer such as Proust who escaped the world, disappearing, as it were, up his own past. Genet's view of Proust is ambivalent throughout; to Proust he owes him the very decision to become a writer when he read him in prison in the 30s and 40s – a prisoner made captive by literature, in particular by a passage in *A l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs* which exposes the hatred of the foreigner hidden in the elegant veneer of Parisian aristocratic conversations.

#### References

1 Rose, J. (2005) *The Question of Zion* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,.

2 Genet, J. (2003) *Prisoner of Love* N.Y.: New York Review of Books

3 Bazzano, M. (2012) *Spectre of the Stranger: towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality* Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press

---