

Notes to the Old Country: Body, Memory and Autobiographic Text – Israel September/October 2000

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1. NOTES TO THE OLD COUNTRY

"Notes to the old country," my autobiographic reverie begins, as I find myself penning this text instead of writing the academic book review, for which it is--and is not--a substitute. "I do not like," says the first-person narrator: her opening move in a personal drama of displacement.

I do not like the politics of the peeling cream pickup-truck which seems about to park here in a parking space too small for it, in a town too small for its cars, too big for the small-minded greed of many of its functionaries. The truck stands box-like, right rear wheel on the pavement. Neither here nor there--but this Israeli vehicle asserts a definite presence by the sheer force of its transgression. And the sheer quantity of its bumper stickers. *"THE PEOPLE ARE FOR THE GOLAN HEIGHTS."* The driver gets out. *"TEARING UP SETTLEMENTS TEARS THE PEOPLE APART."* He dusts off his jeans. *"I AM FOR THE GOLAN."* Well then, who are you? *Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor . . . ?* Not a soldier, at least, not at present. We exchange glances. My hair (short--very short) and my sleeves (short--very short) place me for him just as his knitted head-covering and the logo on his T-shirt place him for me. A settler. *Rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief. . .*

It is Friday morning, September 29, 2000. The eve of the Jewish new year, *taf-shin-samech-alef*. Toronto Bagel, Magdiel, Hod Hasharon, Israel.

When boxed in, I, too, have learnt to park impolitely.

Memory, claims Jeff Prager, sociologist-turned-psychoanalyst, is never detached from social and temporal coordinates--"when and where remembering occurs." It is, he adds, "an integral part of that developmental process which implicates a person in his or her own past, and that constitutes the person's self in relation to the surrounding social world" (1998: 177). *And this is my point in rewriting myself this month between the lines of theory, in rewriting theory, this month, as a lifeline.*

2. SOFT WITH A NOSTALGIA NEITHER PAST NOR PRESENT

My waitress has buck-teeth. The slice of cheesecake she brings is light and creamy. I eat--the serviette now limp beneath the wet residues of desire. My gaze returns, despite my irritation, to the pickup-truck. When conducting myself, performing myself in Hebrew, I have learnt to call it a *tender*. But the form of the word itself--its sound--is phonetically other and skewed. Or I am skew and othered with respect to it. Mouthing "tender" in Hebrew, there is the shock of the old-become-new, but not the affection which constricts my throat when I remember South African poet Seithlamo Motsapi's variations on "tenda," and the time is post-apartheid and there is a world of love and difference, love of difference, in the poet's incantation.

"Tenda," I think, is a love poem all itself.

Shall I write a love-poem for my daughter Maya to read? For her brother, green-eyed proverbial *Sabra*, Idan, who sometimes spikes his hair as if in imitation of the well-known allegory of national temperament? *Native-born Israelis are like sabras or prickly-pears: impenetrable on the outside and soft on the inside.*

I am not soft, except with nostalgia for the languages of an African childhood which I, English-speaking, Hebrew-speaking, at a stretch, Afrikaans-speaking, have never had. What does this make me? An expatriate? An Israeli of South-African origin? A melancholic, Freud would say (SE 14: 249-50).

Tenda.

But my thoughts uncoil heavy and languid. Is it the fault of the burning sun which even this late

September day dries up eroticism? Dries out will? Or is it the charge of my disillusionment?

"The aspiration to express certain feeling states," says Prager, "or to achieve or dispel others, may bring into play fantasy, imagination, and reconstruction that are hardly synonymous with the past" (1998: 111). Remembering, Prager claims, always occurs in an interpretative modality (ibid.: 101-102): it is, he stresses, quoting Richard Terdiman, the work of "a theory machine" (ibid.: 125).

3. ROGUE AGENCY

As I struggle to make light of my cynicism, a former acquaintance walks past. I hear rather than see this scion of the old South Africa whom the New has let fall from grace. It is his accent that gives him away. We exchange the time of day and now it is the turn of the blind Ethiopian woman to pass, her arm on the shoulder of a relative, son? brother? uncle? There is a hesitation between breaths, mine, as she negotiates some irregularity in the pavement. The black leading the blind--and we, of the middle classes, are blind-eyed to the emptiness of the promises we held out in the name of the Holy Land. Of the promises we still hold out in the name of a sleekly marketed high-tech prosperity fuelled *but not necessarily enjoyed* by immigrants, computer technicians, programmers, from the former Soviet Union.

A truck reverses. Logo-bearing, Logos-bearing: Zionist socialism having long capitulated to the forces of globalized capital.

LENCO

VESTE

SEG

TIGER

. . . and segue to the traffic passing.

Above me, a Cessna is circling. No question about it. Nothing unusual, I guess. To describe its yellow and blue paint-work as surreal would be a mistake. But what is it doing here? And what is it doing here, this morning? I have come to inhabit a universe of signs, of foreboding.

The waitress takes my coffee-cup before I can pretend to read my fortune in its grounds. Before I can pretend to read my fortune on her ground.

Whose prerogative is agency, that of the writer of an autobiography or its reader? For Gillian Whitlock, reading women's autobiography, postcolonial criticism has renewed a "sense of the agency of the reader and the urgency of reading" (2000: 203). Like Prager reading the case-history of his patient, Ms. A., through interpersonal and sociocultural intertexts, Whitlock reads the autobiographies of (post)colonial women writers--(Susanna Moodie, Karen Blixen, Beryl Markham, Dorris Lessing, among others--for "supplementation rather than completion, for complexity rather than closure, for the making of truth rather than its revelation" (ibid.). For the making of some truth about empire, about the "intimate empire" of the self, now that the empire is no more: "I mean to suggest that now, in the ruins of colonialism, the grounds of autobiography present the reader with room to manoeuvre, and different ways of sifting through the debris . . . This is the method of a critic who uses rogue connections as a way of navigating the terrain of postcolonial autobiography and negotiating with the past" (ibid.: 203-204).

4. TWO WEEKS LATER

It is the same coffee house; the same waitress is working morning shift. Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. Malaise has given way to unease, and the diseased social body is riddled with bullet holes. Fear accumulates in little heaps on the pavement, anonymous and collective like last night's bottles outside the farmer's social club *founded 1924* where Romanian guest-workers-- *Palestinians being a risky option for the construction industry in times like these*--gather to drink. Hod Hasharon's tramps, more unwashed than homeless, come to scrounge a cigarette or, failing that, yesterday's yeast cakes.

My cheesecake was freshly baked this morning. Its sultanas--solid suns, California courteous, imports like myself--are sweet. So that it surprises me. Sweeter than the harvest of these days of the Jewish festival of ingathering. Sweeter surely than we dare hope. For the fathers, and their fathers, and their grandfathers still before them, have been eating sour grapes, dour grapes, round as stones, smooth as bones, and once again, my teeth are set on edge.

My mouth, hours away from toothpaste, tastes bitter. More bitter, sevenfold than the coffee I drink. *Lavazza means life*. In between one news broadcast and another there is no discernible shortage of creature-comforts, our malls are indistinguishable from yours, which confounds somewhat, does it not?, the staple mythology of Israel under attack.

My single-mother tongue, months away from *tenda*, grows bitter fur. Bitter with the grind, the grounds of years. Personal recollections of the migrant chalked up on the public slate. Public memory personalized. Bitten, my cheesecake is no longer the four-square utopia it once was. And bitter the coffee, seventy-sevenfold these days, now that desire has gone to ground.

Laid to rest today, gone, irreversibly to ground, is also a thirteen-year-old boy, the radio announces, loud enough for me to hear. A Palestinian, shot by Israeli forces.

Outrage (the rage of the outsider) motivates me to write these words, but who authorizes me to do so? Which reader am I trying, in Whitlock's compelling formulation, to "seduce" with the "high gloss," in Alex Butchart, James Sey and Martin Terre Blanche's equally compelling formulation (Terre Blanche, et al., 1999: 7), of "realist narrative banality"?

*If I tell you this civil(ian) war diary began as a letter to my father?
If I tell you it was re-written for a substitute father? A lover? An editor?*

Whitlock claims such questions to be central; seeks to disclose the ways in which the autobiographic mode necessarily involves negotiations of power. Autobiographic writing, she states, is engaged in an "ongoing process of authorization in order to capture not its subject so much as its object: the reader" (2000: 3). And not just any reader. What relations of power, mediated by race, class, gender, pass between the writer, particularly the woman writer, and those strangers, (amanuensis, editor, critic) who institutional presence is not only tolerated, but indispensable, for the autobiographer to attain the very privilege of addressing the reader about her life? "By turning to autobiographies by those who are the least authorized--the freed slave Mary Prince, the Creole traveller Mary Seacole, the 'Mother of Soweto' Ellen Kuzwayo, the Aboriginal activist Ruby Langford Ginibi--the ways that autobiographic expression

is negotiated and intersubjective come into view. Autobiographic writing by those subjected to the most brutal forms of colonization on the plantations of the Caribbean, in the townships of South Africa and the reserves in Australia allows us to examine the connections between women's texts and the production of truth and authority in autobiography. For autobiographic writing is engaged in an ongoing process of authorization in order to capture not its subject so much as its object: the reader" (ibid.: 3).

What of *this* piece of writing which I place before you. It might be true to say that I am its conduit, that it presupposes my displaced embodiment, a cultural and critical distance contingent on being *neither here nor there*. And also, that the particular inflection of this review is dictated by an unwillingness to read well--if, by reading well, is meant business as usual in the academy; or and also, lending intelligibility to the discourses which surround me:

Of memorialization

Of intimacy

Of bodies.

5. **I AM NOT THIS BODY**

On the ground by my feet, I read more reifications of memory. *Ha'aretz* newspaper, yesterday's? last week's? *EVERYONE HAS A NAME*, the announcement says, above the photographs of twelve men, Israeli Arabs, shot during demonstrations by the police of a state that official discourse tell them is their own. In naming them, through the pointed appropriation of a foundational poetic trope of Zionist commemorative mythology, the Hebrew-reading eye is momentarily tricked. And does its sympathy then bifurcate? One of us, not one of us. The secret code that even now de-roads, erodes, derides the rational charter of citizenship (*equal rights for all*) in our "secular" "modern" democracy.

We have learnt, this past fortnight, that the hyphen between Tel Aviv and Jaffa is a rift, that there is a gulf (*not unsuspected*) between "upper" Nazareth, Jewish, and its "lower," Arab, counterpart. And we have begun to count bodies.

The abject body, claim James Sey and Derek Hook (Terre Blanche et al. 1999: 293), has come to be seen as "the unpassable limit of discourse, an object which representation is unable to fully possess or envelop." It is here that power finally achieves its ends--turns the body on its head and erases the individual body, in its singularity, as the end-point of "forces that constantly maintain the body as the seemingly invariant entity we experience it to be" (Alex Butchart, James Sey and Martin Terre Blanche, *ibid.*: 3-4). Like the memories which it embodies then, the carapace of body is "fabricated not found, invented rather than discovered" (p. 4). And if so, there is a lesson here for the postcolonial, the gendered (auto)biographer.

There can be no transhistorical narrative of, say, the suffering body, the body-as-victim. We must resist the body-narrative of being-victim (how much more so, of being Jewish victim), as providing a stable, unified or consistent meaning which might "legitimately" be mobilized in the national cause. "Bodies are volatile," emphasises Whitlock (2000: 3), they can reveal the profound truth of experience suppressed between the lines of the retelling of the truth (*ibid.*: 22-26). When thinking about "colonialism's culture in particular," she says (*ibid.*: 3), it is precisely the contingency and history of bodies which must be taken into account.

Not to mention their vulnerability, I add.

6. GIFTS OF THE BODY POLITIC: PHANTOM LIMBS

I cannot pronounce all the names of the 13 men whose deaths I call upon myself to commemorate. For Arabic rests heavily on immigrant tongues which are called upon daily to forget personal origins in the name of the new . . . Zionist nationalism . . . and to blur belonging so that the name of the new is all that is retained. Take, *I hear myself say in that tone which makes my kids wary, makes them bored*, take Dizengoff Center, for instance. Formerly the shantytown of Nordiya where impoverished Eastern European immigrants lived on Adib Hinnawi's land, as my friend, the writer-chronicler Tamar Berger has taught us (1998). Presently territory belonging to "present absentees"--in official parlance of Israeli bureaucrats--those phantom limbs cut off from a social body divided against itself. The amputation of memory renders Dizengoff Center a place with a past curiously

invisible, not even covertly present as a trace like the more-than-trace of my South African accent in which my Hebrew-speaking body remembers daily to resist assimilation into the melting-pot, Zionist-style.

And I shudder, voiceless, because memory, *my lived memory*, protests that the logic of an eye-for-an-eye has, once already, turned the Hinnawi vineyard into a scarlet graveyard. Tit--*screaming chest*, severed breast--for tat. Purpled or bleeding red, these bodies which tear at our TV screens. This week of school vacations, shopping malls are subdued rather than carnivalesque. The fear of another suicide bombing like the one which ripped through Dizengoff Center in 1997 lies heavily upon us.

Who has the stomach for it? Who would number the spirals, the body-parts? We who are left (yes, even we *on the left*) do not flinch from our public duty, weep at the evidence of yesterday's lynch, the lynch ("mob-killing of two Israeli soldiers in Ramallah"), and avert our children's gaze from the footage.

But take for granted that our children should be duty-bound to kill . . . children.

So fig-groves shade graves and vines are veined with mourner's tears. This land has no memory of wholeness, any more than I do.

In an article entitled "Gifts of the Body: Women's Corporeal Practices between Norms and Transgression," Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the phantom limb experienced as present despite its amputation: "In his view, the subject's seeming unawareness of the loss of the limb results from her refusal of mutilation. This refusal, however, is not merely a psychological process but must be understood through the bodily existence that is always oriented to the world. In so far as objects (e.g. a door handle, a stair rail, an eating utensil) continue to present themselves as utilizable for 'a hand I no longer have,' the body subject refuses to close off possibilities of action" and so maintains a fantasmic perception of the unscathedness of the body (in Terre Blanche et al. 1999: 14).

Which is to say, the body-in-the-world remembers to construct its lost wholeness in a manner which is analogous to the fetishist's construction of a screen memory: "The fetish object acts as a 'sign' in

that it substitutes for the thing thought to be missing, the maternal penis. The substitute also functions as a mask, covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of absence, especially if the 'absence' sets off associations with the wounded, bleeding body" (Laura Mulvey on the Freudian construction of the fetish, 1996: 5). But the fetish never frees itself from the history of its production. In Octave Mannoni's phrase, the fetishist's disavowal typically takes the form of "I know very well, but all the same . . ." (ibid.: 8). Which is also to say that the epistemological effects of unmasking, of disrobing, never stabilize as triumphant vindication, for all time.

I know very well, but all the same, continues the refrain. The anti-logic of the phantasmic and the fetishistic violate the philosophical rule (law, governance) of the excluded middle. Small wonder that European modernity needs to disavow the fetish--in the supposedly "anthropological" register--and to make it the dividing line between belief and superstition, rationality and irrationality. For European modernity, rationality promises to deliver a human subject, and to deliver that subject (gendered) as male into the promised land of autonomy. Rationalism--hence relief from the driving tyranny of external despots, and the despotism of what Freud would call the "drives". Rationalism--hence the well regulated body, in control of its orifices, closed, bounded (Mikhail Bakhtin 1984). One thing and not another. Certainly not one thing and another.

But now, as we ride the epistemological surges of Foucauldian anti-humanism, constructivism and intersubjective revisionings of Freudian psychology, we find it easier to concede the limited power of our autonomy, and the powerful illusions it nevertheless sustains. Easier to concede that we are never autonomous in our remembering ("In the therapeutic setting and beyond, we find autobiography as anything but autonomous; it is more properly sociobiography" Kenneth Gergen in Prager, 1998:167); that we are never fully authorized, in isolation, to take sole charge of authoring the "truth" of self ("[T] he gap between 'experience' and 'telling the truth' is . . . considerable . . . The relationship between the amanuensis and narrator, ear and voice must be carefully managed, for distinctions between permissible entrance into the ear and invasive impropriety are subtle" Whitlock, 2000:21). And intelligible, if not exactly easily conceded, that naked though we might, at times be, the body is never uninscribed by the corporeal power of discourse which assumes body-surface, bodily-volume, as *its* condition of possibility. The

ancient meanings of *writan*, Joss Marsh reminds us, include "to score, incise, carve, engrave with a sharp instrument" (1998: 261).

What then, remains, unthinkable?

7. NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM

A long, long time ago (and it was this past August) Ashis Nandy stood in Jerusalem and performed a reprise to modernity. A reprise which takes neither the form of the colonizeds' consensual rage at foreign order, *tit-for-tat*, nor the colonizers' census-driven rage for ordering the foreign, *this-or-that*, but, Nandy implies, the post-modern (but also deeply historical, pre-modern) confluence of *this-and-that*. In India, as recently as 1995, he reminds us that, despite what modernity conditions one to think otherwise, the identity of a single individual is often the composite of more than one "identity" whose components seem mutually exclusive: individuals who are simultaneously Christian and Hindu, Christian and adherents of tribalist beliefs, Hindu and Moslem, and so on (Nandy, 2000).

I believe very well , but all the same.

Tenda, tenderly, on the pick-me-up of Nandy's utopianism as a necessary corrective to present despair, I conclude this piece, live out this month, by beginning to write the unthinkable.

Next year in Jerusalem, the capital of two national states.

Next year in Jerusalem of *this-and-that*, its streets populated by Israeli-Palestinians and Palestinian-Israelis.

And tendrils of vines, tangled together, as we are here.

Magdiel Hod Hasharon

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