

Everything Passes

Gabriel Josipovici

“A Quietly Relentless Intelligence”

Like miracles, the last visions of those who die and come back to life are intense personal events that are absolutely untranslatable: the images of a bright light, with perhaps a figure beckoning at the other end, are common enough, but they are visions which can't be truly shared except with those who have descended the same set of chilly, slippery steps to the grave. What of those who, as one foot hovers above first contact with damp earth, see something else? They may have witnessed a less welcoming view of a cold, sparse, dimly lit space, an anteroom to the next life, or else the next life itself. What kind of vision is that? What lasting effect would it have?

Those questions come to mind after reading Gabriel Josipovici's latest subtle, cryptic novel, *Everything Passes*, a sixty-page gesture to the infinite that contains more than many longer novels do on the state of a man's mind, and soul, as he recalls incidents in his life and a tiny portion of what may be a glimpse into his afterlife. Felix is a creative writing professor with two children by his wife, Sally, and later has a second love, a cousin named Lotte. He also has a medical event that he describes calmly, though it feels terrifying, to a friend, George. His children call or visit from time to time. There are meals around a table. That is about all the action.

The interest is in what Josipovici does with these simple devices. From the beginning there are two images that, with minor variations, repeat throughout:

A room.

He stands at the window.

And a voice says: Everything passes. The good and the bad. The joy and the sorrow. Everything passes.

This is followed on the next page by:

He stands at the window.

Cracked pane.

His face at the window.

Greyness. Silence.

As the novel proceeds, these returned-to images become vaguely unsettling, and rich in potential meaning. The revelation towards the end of *Everything Passes* forces us to scrutinise and revise the impression of Felix's story which we had been constructing as we read. Re-reading is impossible, so we peer vainly into a sudden fog searching for tangible details that will dispel all mystery. But there is no pat answer. In praising one of his students for what he's written, Felix says: “We are hardly aware of it and then suddenly it's there in front of us. We are hardly aware of it and already it's starting to vanish.” This can aptly be applied to Josipovici's own narrative, and our initial understanding of it. We are given enough, but only just. Another writer might not be able to resist wringing more agony out of Felix's marital, medical and epistemological situations.

Text comes at us in bursts, usually short, like stanzas of poetry, but the writing is not limpid or beautiful (i.e., pretty). Dialogue is attuned to how conversations sound, and the language there is sharp. The literary device of repetition, coupled with the presence of that unknown voice, call to mind responses to prayers, and encourage one to think of the prose as incantatory. The compact nature of the writing demands of the reader that she meet the text's intentions and unpack as much as possible.

A manifesto placed in Felix's mouth helps define him for the reader. After praising François Rabelais, Felix says: "I want to sweep away the popular image of Rabelais as a writer of bawdy stories and nothing else. I want to make people aware of the issues he faced and so clear the ground for a genuine renewal of fiction writing in our day." (In response, Sally asks him to repeat lines of love poetry by Dante—an economical depiction of the divide between them.) In Felix's mouth, these words rest on a certain level; if seen as speaking to one of his creator's purposes, they mean another. In a 1986 lecture reprinted in *The Singer on the Shore* (2006), Josipovici describes how, when trying to write his first novel, there was a struggle within him: what needed to be said versus what convention demanded. He felt weighed down by the "great works" of Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen, and George Eliot, which were "supremely confident, supremely articulate, even in their narration of failure and frustration and incomprehension." Then, he read Proust's "great novel." "As soon as I began it I knew that it was *real* for me in a way that Tolstoy and the rest never had been." The revelation that came to Josipovici is phrased in much the same way Felix talks: "There was something dead, I realised, in recounting a story, /27/ describing the scenery and places for my readers as though they were blind. I wanted something which would be alive from the first word to the last."

Josipovici is now in his mid-sixties. His prolific output (memoirs, criticism, essays, novels, and plays) and his writing virtues—a restless, quietly relentless intelligence, an appreciation for painting, music, and religion (especially Judaism), a keen interest in creating the right structure for his ideas, and, judging by his tone, a considerate attitude towards readers in general—has not been rewarded with a substantial audience. This neglect may be due partly to his being categorized as an experimental writer. He had choice words on this sidelining in an essay published in *The Mirror of Criticism* (1983):

It is a shock to any artist who has only thought of getting things 'right', of pinning down that elusive feeling which is the source and end of all creative activity, to wake up one morning and find himself labelled 'experimental.' Yet that is what happened to me. . . .

. . . [M]ost other reviews I received for those two novels, *Migrations* and *The Air We Breathe*, seemed to share the same assumptions: there are writers and there are experimental writers; the 'experimental' is a sub-branch of fiction, rather like teenage romances or science fiction perhaps, but differing from them in being specifically highbrow, and, like other highbrow activities, such as abstract painting and classical music, it is totally unconnected with the real world; however, we should tolerate this for the health of art (and to show how tolerant we are). (174)

Happily, obscurity has not affected Josipovici's integrity as an artist. His work continues to appear from Carcanet in the UK, and *The Singer on the Shore* (Carcanet, 2006) has received

positive reviews there and in Canada. In February, Ecco Press brought out the US edition of his extraordinary novel *Goldberg: Variations* (first published by Carcanet in 2002). As with his other work, *Everything Passes* poses questions which make a reader think and feel. A respectful author, Josipovici trusts that his readers will privately investigate their beliefs in a ceaseless search for answers.

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