

“Josipovici’s Survey”

The Singer on the Shore: Essays 1991-2004

Gabriel Josipovici

Carcamet

347 pages, \$27.43 paper

ISBN: 1857548442

by Jeff Bursey

Since 2000, Gabriel Josipovici has published a memoir of his mother, two novels (*Goldberg: Variations* was positively reviewed here in September 2004), and had another come out, *Everything Passes*, in September. Despite this prolific output, he is not well known. “Gabriel Josipovici is one of the major contemporary British authors,” one critic states in the online Literary Encyclopedia. “If this fact has so far escaped the notice of British literary critics and much of the British public, this is no doubt due to Josipovici’s denigration as ‘merely’ an ‘experimentalist’... [T]he oeuvre of Josipovici has... reached a critical mass which requires that one take it seriously...” While this collection has been reviewed favourably in the *TLS* (which has published Josipovici’s own reviews), it’s not the kind of book that will be “sold next to the lightbulbs in a three-for-two offer” at a supermarket, as Nicholas Lezard observed in *The Guardian*.

Born in 1940 to Russo-Italian, Romano-Levantine parents, Josipovici lived in France until 1945, then in Egypt, before relocating to Britain in 1956. Undoubtedly his life experiences have helped shaped a response to art but, like other writers, he returns to a pantheon of literary forebears: Kafka, T.S. Eliot, Kierkegaard, Proust, and the anonymous authors of the Hebrew Bible are touchstones.

The first three essays focus on the Bible as narrative, its language and the free mix in it of prose and poetry. It’s near the end of discussing Jonson, Swift and Sterne (in “I Dream of Toys”) that Josipovici announces the inherited novelistic concerns that have preoccupied him. “When I started writing seriously, in my late teens, I felt crushed by the weight of the European tradition—all those massive novels like *War and Peace* and *Middlemarch*, standing there like mountains, utterly confident, without a chink in their armour. How could one begin to emulate them?” This is familiar to anyone who wants to write something new, but in this admission one can hear, as well, the anguish of a multilingual young man, who had already lived through a terrifying war, had been lodged in three countries, and was desperate to find his rightful place and speak in his own voice. Fortunately, he found that which soothed him: “But then I read Eliot and Proust and was overwhelmed by their acknowledgement, within their works, of inevitable failure.” Josipovici elaborates on this vital discovery in the final essay, “Writing, Reading and the Study of Literature.”

En route to that personal manifesto the reader is taken through Rembrandt’s self-portraits, a ramble with Sterne, and an elegant radio talk on BBC Radio titled “Dejection.” After completing his own work (one assumes a novel), Josipovici is “left with a blankness, an emptiness, which feels as if it will last forever.” He traces the Romantic notion of Dejection and watches it transmute into failure, already presented in “I Dream of Toys.” In “Kierkegaard and the Novel”, Josipovici begins with a Keirkegaardian question, rendered here as: “What authority do I have for what I say and write?” The answer follows quickly thereafter: “...since the writer has no authority for what he

is saying, to go on writing as if he had is the greatest sin, for it falsifies the way things are instead of helping to clarify it.” Blankness, failure, falsity: this essay explains Josipovici’s thinking, and also that of many of Modernism’s children, whose work is often classified as experimental.

There’s an essay on Kafka, followed by a close reading of voice in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Both are engaging. In “Borges and the Plain Sense of Things”, Josipovici talks about how “modern writers have been at pains to stress that their fictions are only fictions, not reality. This is not in order to play games with the reader or to deny the world, but on the contrary, out of a deep sense of the wondrous nature of the world and a determination not to confuse the world as it is with the world as we imagine it to be, not to confuse actuality with possibility.” We can question whether or not that is indeed how other modern writers feel, or whether or not this is intuitively what a reader feels as she reads, but the distinction is a helpful starting point

Introductions to the works of Aharon Appelfeld, and the painting of Andrzej Jackowski, precede the title essay, originally given as a an inaugural lecture on the difficulty English authors have in keeping, in Josipovici’s phrase, “the wound of the negative” open; by which he means the ceaseless resistance to cliché in language and thought. Those who allow this wound to close become conservative (e.g., the later Waugh, K. Amis, Larkin). “Memory: Too Little/Too Much” addresses the problem of remembering the Holocaust in a fitting way. “This Is Not Your Rest” is a meditation on an issue familiar to frequent readers of *Books in Canada*. The opening words encapsulate the essay:

“I have often asked myself what it is that makes me a Jew. Since I have not celebrated my bar mitzvah, do not attend synagogue or take part in any of the feasts or fasts (unless it is as the guest of friends who do), the answer ought to be simple: nothing. Yet all my ancestors were Jews, and, as I grow older, I feel more and more affinity with Jews and with their (our) past. I may not be much of a Jew, but I suppose I am more of a Jew than anything else.”

“Writing, Reading and the Study of Literature” was based on a lecture he had given in 1986. Using his own creative struggles during the writing of his first novel as examples, Josipovici talks, among other things, about a problem many writers face when starting out:

“What had happened was that I had adopted not just the tone and manners of every book I had ever read, I had also adopted their assumptions. Chief among these was the assumption that if someone, in a novel, arrives at a house or enters a room or meets someone for the first time, then that house or room or person must be described. But why must they? Was this an absolute law of narrative? No, of course not. It was a convention, it was the way you told a story.”

Suddenly awake to new possibilities, he bypasses convention. “I had discovered that I was not so much interested in telling a story as in *making a story happen*.” The rigor required to tell a tale in an individual way excited him. While not free of literary antecedents—a strict impossibility—Josipovici no longer had to pay the deathly taxes critics habitually exact and extort. This is a clearly written, unsentimental, unromantic essay on writing that, even twenty years later, is heartening to read.

Even as one argues with this or that point, it can’t be denied that each essay illustrates Josipovici’s admirable mind and catholic taste. For the most part, he backs up his remarks with well-chosen quotations, and at all times he is a lucid writer who eschews jargon. For those familiar

with his work *The Singer on the Shore* will be agreeable reading. New readers will be gently guided by him to investigate topics with a fresh perspective, and, perhaps, will go on to buy his other works.

[end]