

“Respect for the World,” a review of *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*, by Gabriel Josipovici, in *American Book Review*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Jan./Feb.), p. 26. (Published in March 2011.)

What Ever Happened to Modernism?

Gabriel Josipovici

Yale, \$28.00

Cloth; 220 pp.

ISBN: 9780300165777

<http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/home.asp>

by Jeff Bursey

Books that rely solely on realism and assert that they ‘give the world as it is’ strike me as false. Entrenched views about what the world looks find themselves solidly established in much current fiction that “seldom refers to any of the literary developments of the past 20, 50 or a hundred years,” as Elif Batuman said recently while discussing creative writing programs (“Get a Real Degree,” *London Review of Books*, 23 September 2010, 3). Gabriel Josipovici’s newest non-fiction book, an essential work that is highly readable and quotable, has been swarmed by waspish commentators in English newspapers for saying bad things about Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan and others. In *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* Josipovici draws on Kierkegaard, Borges, Kafka and others to determine when Modernism arose, what it is, and what has happened to it. After discussing Beckett’s “Dante and the Lobster,” in which a lobster is placed in boiling water, he writes:

Even when a story is about the limits of the imagination, it is still calling on us to imagine. It has no other recourse. You can never succeed, for each time you think you have succeeded, each time the reader says: ‘Ah, I see’, you have failed. . . . And that is why Modernists look with horror at the proliferation in modern culture of both fantasy and realism--both Tolkien and Graham Greene, as it were, both Philip Pullman and V.S. Naipaul. Not out of a Puritan disdain for the imagination or the craft of letters, but out of respect for the world. (75)

Those familiar with Josipovici’s work will recognize that respect, and the humanity underlying it. It seems an abiding concern for him to both acknowledge the unknowableness of the world while accepting that this is the way life is. That open-mindedness is shown at the end of the book where Josipovici says that his version of events is “the true one” (178), to him, of Modernism, while also maintaining that “there is no such thing as *the* true story. . . .” (178) His position is well articulated, if compressed occasionally in such a short book. His argument provides no comfort for those who think differently.

James Purdon, in the *Observer*, faults Josipovici for writing about Modernism and not solving stubborn problems about “arts education, about publishers and prizes. . . .” ([www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/oct/03/whatever-happened-to-modernism-gabriel-](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/oct/03/whatever-happened-to-modernism-gabriel)

[josipovici/print](#)) [Dear ABR: yes, he is writing for the Observer], topics that lie outside his purview as much as cold fusion does, and I imagine physicists are whittling their knives. Purdon asks a rhetorical question: “Or might it [Modernism] simply have gone to ground in its natural habitat: the small presses and little magazines?” This is an assertion with no proof attached; and Modernism is painted as something Other (the *Observer* is big and mainstream).

Philip Hensher’s *Daily Telegraph* review begins inauspiciously with this rhetorical question: “What shall we do with modernism?” (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/7928647/What-Ever-Happened-to-Modernism-by-Gabriel-Josipovici-review.html>). He continues: “It erupted into our lives around the turn of the 20th century, forcing on us works that at first we could not understand and frankly did not like. Over time, though, we have come to enjoy quite a lot of it.” Born in 1965, Hensher is nowhere near the generation that experienced Year One of Modernism (whenever that may be, a topic Josipovici deals with), and he is flatly wrong when he says that people “did not like” Modernist works. Yet he does validate Josipovici’s remark that, from the 1950s on, “English culture was actually growing steadily *less* interested in or aware” (x) of Modernism. Early on, Josipovici says he regards Modernism not as a period or literary movement but “as the coming into awareness by art of its precarious status and responsibilities, and therefore as something that will, from now on, always be with us.” (11) Unaware that he has lived in the shadow of Modernism, and confessing his ignorance of Josipovici’s works (though his fiction began to be published in 1968, in 2010 Hensher writes that “I had not heard of any of it.”), Hensher’s patronizing review wants to cast Josipovici as a bad writer and the author of a book suitable only for “a good silly-season story.”

Writing for *Literary Review*, John Sutherland asks his own barbed rhetorical question: “Why is he [Josipovici] still here? Why has he chosen to live in an England which he deplors. . .? Because, I suspect, he needs to be embattled--as Modernism itself needs to be in perpetual conflict with the bourgeois.”

(http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/sutherland_08_10.html) It’s clear, from the negative reviews, and from the constant identification of Josipovici as an academic and professor, that his lengthy publication list of novels, short stories and plays don’t count, and haven’t influenced the culture. Until the brouhaha, his books generally go unreviewed. He is the Other, like Modernism itself. (Tom McCarthy and Lee Rourke are two exceptions to this disregard.)

The negative reviews solidify the argument that many current English writers, while aware of Modernism, or pleased to wear its gloss, have turned away from its concerns. Despite T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Woolf, et al, Modernism seems peculiar, now, in the minds of novelists who, instead of rejecting tired forms and expressions, rely on “the arbitrariness of conventional narrative, its ready-made quality. . . .” (98) and reviewers who defend the “self-impoverished narrowness of mainstream British so-called ‘literary’ literature, its obsession with Amises and McEwans, its deliberate ignorance of so much else. . . .” (Jenny Turner, “Seeing Things Flat,” *London Review of Books*, 9 September 2010, 8) What Josipovici is advocating is to be honest in fiction about not providing solutions, of not being assured of one’s place. To illustrate and prove his points he brings in painting and theory, Greek drama, and poetry, which are fruitful, and also display a learning missing in, for instance, Hensher.

Churnalists and critics focused on Josipovici's views about current writing, reading the final chapters as a sudden eruption against it, without noticing the passion previously displayed. One example of that will suffice. When he brings us close to the act of creation, and the dangers in it, he underlines the reality that smooth narratives--say, the seemingly inevitable progress of painting to arrive at Cubism--has shortfalls.

Nothing is at stake here, nothing signals to us that at every moment choices were being made, decisions taken, lives being ruined or saved. And I am not talking about a more biographical approach being needed, only an awareness that living and telling are not the same thing at all, and that though we, as readers and viewers looking back, inevitably lack the sense of what it was like to live certain moments, the historian can work to counter that, as indeed the best ones do, and, when dealing with works of art we can, if we are good enough critics, get close enough to them to convey something of what their making involved for their makers and first viewers. (101-102)

Naturally, the passion Gabriel Josipovici expresses runs into the "terrible constriction, a fear of opening oneself up to the world" (174)--of expressing vulnerability in a world where "the plethora of possibilities made all actualities seem pale and insubstantial" (43), and where mist covering the unseen ground doesn't allow for sure footing--found in the "terror of not being in control. . ." (174) that he sees in Amis, McEwan, Barnes and others. Hopefully future writers will regard this impressive and impassioned book as an invitation to engage openly with his story and view of Modernism, and to open that topic up even more.

[1,238 words]

* * * *

Reviewer Bio (2-3 lines): Jeff Bursey is the author of *Verbatim: A Novel* (Enfield & Wizenty), a book told in lists, letters and political debates. He reviews frequently for *American Book Review*, *Rain Taxi*, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* and other publications.