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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Simon Harel is the director of the Department of Comparative Literature and a full professor at the Université de Montréal. From 1989 to 2011, he was a professor in the Department of Literary Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal and director of its Centre interuniversitaire d'études sur les lettres, les arts et les traditions (CELAT).

A researcher and prolific writer, he broke new ground in the unexplored field of migrant writing, especially among minorities. Simon Harel's work is at the frontier between literary studies and cultural studies. His research examines different forms of recitation to explore portrayals of the reaches of otherness, the phenomenon of exclusion, and intercultural issues. *Voleurs de parcours*, published in 1989 and re-released in 1999, is recognized as one of the most noteworthy Quebec cultural studies of the 1980s and 1990s.

Simon Harel is a leading intellectual and a renowned scientist with nearly 30 essays and multi-authored volumes to his credit. He has organized several major scientific and cultural events, proving himself to be an enthusiastic and impassioned speaker. He has often represented Canada at international fora and is regularly invited to be a guest professor in France, the United States, and Brazil.

He won the 1992 Gabrielle-Roy award (in partnership) and was jointly awarded the 1993 Prix du Conseil des Arts de la Communauté urbaine de Montréal, literature category. He also accepted, on behalf of the CELAT, the Association des communautés culturelles et des artistes (ACCA) 2006 Nelson Mandela award for diversity and inclusion. He was nominated a member of the Royal Society of Canada and a Trudeau Fellow in 2009.

Dr. Harel edits the "Théorie et littérature" collection for Éditions XYZ. His most recent works include *Les passages obligés de l'écriture migrante* (2005), *Braconnages identitaires : Un Québec palimpseste* (2006), *Espaces en perdition. I : Les lieux précaires de la vie quotidienne* (2007), *Espaces en perdition. II : Humanités jetables* (2008), and *Attention écrivains méchants* (2010).

ABSTRACT

What are cultural and social mobility? Or more generally, what is contemporary mobility? Narrative, and particularly written speech and the construction of words, images, and space, can capture and explain the fundamental dynamic of individual identity and social integration, as well as the basis for the support required in the face of marginalization and immigration. Literature's discussion of mobility contributes to an examination of the apparent "desolidarization" of the socio-cultural body.

LECTURE

The Universal Singular

University of Regina

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We would like the world to be doing better. We would like it to avoid the aridity of compartmentalization and oversimplification. On one hand, the world as seen from above (reflecting our image of vertical architecture) is a universe that holds itself apart from the minutiae of daily life. On the other hand, the world as seen from below jars, treads and tramples on the fragile shelter of our inhabited spaces. My comments here are built on a crossbreeding of images from above and below, near and far. At first glance, the theory behind these ideas may seem simplistic, resting, as it were, on questionable distinctions. Are we really reduced to ham-fisted approximations that tear us apart, forcing us to choose between an aerial world and a chthonic universe? These geometric considerations about the composition of the real world may not seem to be very useful. And yet the people we refer to as "subaltern subjects" are still scurrying along alleyways and tunnels, urban spaces with sharp corners, windowless places, the seedier parts of which conjure up the works of Dostoyevsky.

While loss of reputation was once a personal matter, this is changing, as we witness the emergence of a much wider spread discredit. In the works of John Maxwell Coetzee, we will have an opportunity to see that discredit can be expressed through minute

actions, as if, rather than sinking into the abyss of non-being, the subject can once again exercise a fragile civility and claim reprieve without being pitiful. Is there such thing as narrative action that can repair minute instances of discredit? This is the point of view that I will take with regard to Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*.[1] While this novel adopts a traditional narrative structure (a university professor loses his job following a trite incident of "sexual harassment"), the dreaded catastrophe (loss of reputation that signals a fall, a permanent loss of status) never materializes.

The novel does explore a loss of reputation that reflects a lasting habitus that is hard to undo: a university colleague greets his former fellow with deep discomfort, not knowing quite what to say or do; a neighbour tries to avoid the professor's eyes when he ventures furtively outside his home. But in every case, this moment of minor discredit, although disagreeable, does not lead to any real consequences. It may be painful not to be acknowledged by a neighbour concerned with appearances, it may be humiliating to be reduced to the point that you do not exist in the eyes of the people around you, but this is no doubt a limited perception of the actual issues of discredit. In this regard, the narrator of *Disgrace* does not seem to be the worse off. Of course, the embarrassment and indifference of others are not pleasant attitudes to experience, because these expressions of avoidance clearly indicate that you are no longer welcome in the public space. For Coetzee, this disgrace surfaces in places of traffic or transaction (supermarkets, chance encounters at street corners). These are the situations where the loss of status is felt.

To be sure, discredit presented this way tallies with our idea of the bankrupt who may still at times be overcome by terrible anguish. It expresses the dread of the disintegration of the social order, as if the integrity of the financial system (and the social rules that go with it) were veering dangerously close to the breaking point. In this

1. John Maxwell Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000).

situation, social self-regulation (which gives us the feeling that our points of reference—whether moral, cultural, or economic—are irrefutable) is extremely vulnerable to demonization. This is not a new train of thought. We are confronted with it again, right now, in 2011, as a financial crisis of enormous scale threatens the stability of the international banking system. But if we look more closely at what constitutes the profound originality of the work of John Maxwell Coetzee, we see a surprising calm, considering the scale of the anticipated disasters.

I advanced the idea, earlier, that the fictional works of Coetzee propose to examine these minute postmodern lives in the domain of everyday life. It is a prosaic existence in which the principle of horizontal architecture takes on its full meaning. In response to grandiloquent expressions of decline and the rebirth of hope, of life and death, of success and failure, it is easy to picture, with a sensitivity suitable for the present age, a disgrace that consists of not being "in step" with life, of endlessly suffering a lag that means the facts and actions of the world pass us by. The idea of discredit that we imagine is no doubt excessive. It is not so very different from old ideas of banishment, people forced to live outside of their world, in a place devoid of all known and native comfort. While the main protagonist of *Disgrace*, David Lurie, is doomed to discredit, the consequences that go with it, although unpleasant, are not an unbearable punishment. The story unfolds as if the objective destitution caused by his dismissal as a professor is actually a type of liberation.

His liberation should not be perceived as simply a break with the stable beacon of his professional universe. On the whole, it is not only his loss of employment but also the "lost cause," the minute form of which speaks volumes about the individual failures of late modernity. The novels of John Maxwell Coetzee are all characterized by what I call decelerated cultural mobility, as if the accelerated signs of consumption (of culture, financial assets, and property)

and the squandering of our heritage (signs of human occupancy in our territories) justified a very abrupt stoppage. So life stops for a moment. The subject is no longer on the alert. To put it more clearly, he is in a limbo that has nothing to do with our usual discourse on the virtues of placelessness.

Coetzee's *Disgrace* leads us to a problem of domicile, which connects back to my reflections on the various aspects of livability. The intention I put forward[2] assumes a merciless battle between restricted space and a subject who is trying to establish a spreading existence. For Chekhov, Conrad, and Antonin Artaud, it was a matter of unleashing insults and invective in order to eventually master the wrongness of the place. Unfurling waves of the Pacific, torrid temperatures of the Sierra Madre, poverty of exile: all signs of implacable battles. It is not the same in Coetzee's *Disgrace* because the subject, even though he is in some ways banished, can count on places where a loss of status is not shameful. It may seem strange to put it that way, and yet it corresponds to the imaginary space put forward in *Espaces en perdition* with this difference: the tone of desperation that I used is no longer required. This passage of *Disgrace* demonstrates this:

> "You can help at the clinic. They are desperate for volunteers."
>
> "You mean help Bev Shaw?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "I don't think she and I will hit it off."
>
> "You don't need to hit it off with her. You have only to help her. But don't expect to be paid. You will have to do it out of the goodness of your heart."
>
> "I'm dubious, Lucy. It sounds suspiciously like community service. It sounds like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds."

2. Simon Harel, *Espaces en perdition. I: Les lieux précaires de la vie quotidienne* (Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, InterCultures collection, 2007); *Espaces en perdition. II: Humanités jetables* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, InterCultures collection, 2008).

> "As to your motives, David, I can assure you, the animals at the clinic won't query them. They won't ask and they won't care."
>
> "All right, I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself. I'll do it on that basis."[3]

We can see the impact of the words. The public interest, which maintains the collective order, is no longer relevant. But this does not mean that the subject (here, David Lurie) is condemned to live in a universe where he is denied any notion of independence.

There is, in *Disgrace*, individual responsibility. Self-affirmation and the consolidation of a personal identity suggest the development of a positive narcissism. This discourse, which is the implicit ideological basis in current thinking on pedagogy, knowledge transfer and the education of children, relies on the following postulate: when the usual points of reference are in crisis (at least, this is what is continually being said about the recognized obsolescence of the family, the nation and the State), we need to establish a foundation (individual, this time) to slow down the heightened mobility we are discussing. That makes late modernity the setting for frenzied individualism. This is not a randomly chosen expression. It too provides food for thought. Do we not live in an era when slaves to identity behave like true lunatics? Are we not living in a world where the requirement to be ourselves is like a true prison? The quest for identity has become an imperative.

This seems to be the stance of David Lurie who, despite his disappointments, continues to display what others see as stubborn pigheadedness. As his daughter says, "So you are determined to go on being bad. Mad, bad, and dangerous to know. I promise, no one will ask you to change."[4] Can *Disgrace* be viewed as the portrait of

3. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 77.
4. Ibid.

an "age of man"[5] in defiance of the accepted code of conduct, the record of clearly difficult masculinity struggling in a crisis of frayed morality? So what is left? The self? Surely that is the most banal statement of postmodern naivety! Of course, the expression is inept. It suggests decline, as if the subject, without too much fuss, had agreed to lose his reputation. Certain passages confirm this description of a gradually eroding life. For example:

> Without the Thursday interludes the week is a featureless as a desert. There are days when he does not know what to do with himself.
>
> He spends more time in the university library, reading all he can find on the wider Byro circle, adding to notes that already fill two fat files. He enjoys the later-afternoon quiet of the reading room, enjoys the walk home afterwards: the brisk winter air, the damp, gleaming streets.[6]

On reading this passage of *Disgrace*, the reader readily accepts the image of a world that is at risk of triviality. While Michel Leiris's stories explore the anguish of death, Coetzee's works mull over a gradually eroding mobility. In other words, Coetzee's novels, which belong to the world of Commonwealth Studies (although the term is rather simplistic), stand in stark contrast to the defence of movement that is almost required in novelists as varied as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul. It is of course problematic to lump together writers who often diverge on nearly everything. The influence of Beckett and Dostoyevsky is clear in Coetzee, while the works of Joseph Conrad provided the main narrative model for V.S. Naipaul. In this regard, we have to admit that Coetzee's novels demonstrate a troubling marginality. The novelist describes a progressive exhaustion (reminiscent to some extent of V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*). While the image of the journey (current vector of thought on cultural mobility) is widespread in the discourses of late modernity,

5. Michel Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1973).
6. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 11.

Coetzee's writings reveal that stagnation is the consequence of excessive movement.

Is immobility the future of the world, this troubling feeling that we are repeating ourselves in our middle age, as if the subject, rather than projecting himself into an unlimited universe, is struggling with the least common denominator of self-awareness? I referred earlier to triviality and anonymity as if, in the long run, the euphoric reign of multiple identities resulted in a sort of disillusioned narcissism. Everything unfolds as if the identity vertigo that consists of defending the status of subject (to and against everyone) gives way to the realization of diminishment. Suddenly the story is an inaugural disgrace, the troubling recognition that the subject is only playing a role that is already included in the list of qualifications and disqualifications of identity. In this regard, I defended the description of minute lives as if not yielding to the full and entire awareness of "subject" were a considerable advantage in carrying on one's daily business in the heart of postmodernism.

What more can be said about this remark, which questions the subjectivity shown through language?

It has been repeatedly asserted that the subject has no existence except insofar as described. To this we have added that the subject's credibility (our confidence or lack of confidence in him) depends in the first place on the statement of a passion, as proven, for example, in the works of Naipaul. If credit is the pledge of confidence in the world (the principle of a self-organized world in which we can situate our actions), what happens when words are no longer enough, when the subject is mute, when talk is forbidden? When I was writing *Espaces en perdition*, I was interested in the words of society's rejects, who are confined to the eccentricity of barely human discourse. Cries, whisperings, mutterings: veiled expressions that do not belong to the world of articulate discourse, revealing a subject at risk of eradication. The men and women who inhabit the stories

of Chekhov are definitely vulnerable to violence. They are cheated because the world of language is somehow stolen from them. For Coetzee, the categories of subhuman or infrahuman (even though we recognize their highly derogatory nature, which equates the subject with trash or debris) nevertheless contain a tenuous trace of subjectivity that, despite everything, we want to recapture.

From *Life and Times of Michael K* to *Disgrace*, Coetzee's novels tread a weary, back-breaking journey. In *Espaces en perdition*, I discussed the unique role of vagrancy that consists largely of stagnation, evoking movement despite the repetition that suggests deceleration. I suggested that this blind progression (the result of the combined stresses experienced when the world no longer welcomes you) was an allowable practice because the certainty of wandering is so similar to a crazy dream. It is no different with Coetzee. David Lurie is an idle academic. He inhabits the world of learned discourse, the pursuit of vague research projects that may or may not be serious intentions. This world of learned discourse is actually a firewall that protects him from an unbearable exterior reality. When he is dismissed from the university, David Lurie is set adrift, so to speak.

It is not the shakeup caused by his dismissal that demands attention (a moral failure, a faux pas with its highlighted guilt), but the fact that places suddenly acquire a density, a brutality from which there is no escape.

The discredit in *Disgrace* is not set (as it is in Henry James's novels) in a muted and cosmopolitan world. Unlike James's approach, which places the subject who is prey to a brutal loss of reputation in a conventional setting, the discredit that David Lurie suffers is an example of generalized pain. It is not the protagonist's bourgeois identity that is on the line after the trite matter of sexual harassment. Convincingly, David Lurie is the protagonist of a world that is crumbling from all sides and in which the university is only the shallow golden cage. What will David Lurie's exile be like? Will

he be condemned to banishment, forced to inhabit distant worlds reeking with terrible infamy? Listen: "This is how his days are spent on the farm. He helps Petrus clean up the irrigation system. He keeps the garden from going to ruin. He packs produce for the market. He helps Bev Shaw at the clinic. He sweeps the floors, cooks the meals, does all the things that Lucy no longer does. He is busy from dawn to dusk."[7] This is a very strange banishment, consisting of becoming responsible for domestic tasks that tie the mind to the place. Rather than describe an ethereal world (an abstract exile, reduced to the portrait of an unhappy conscience), Coetzee's *Disgrace* paints a very concrete portrait. The post-apartheid society rejects provide an admirable incarnation of this distress represented by a cultural mobility that has no resonance.

In another Coetzee novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, we read: "Crossing the city on his way to work, K rubbed shoulders every day with the army of the homeless and destitute who in the last years had taken over the streets of the central district, begging or thieving or waiting in lines at the relief agencies or simply sitting in the corridors of public buildings to keep warm".[8] In Coetzee's world, the imperatives of work (accelerated), wandering (frenzied) are ways to pin down a place that vacillates, prey to upheaval or instability. It is in the heart of the world, in its filthy folds, that we have to live. And discredit, as we have seen, is an experience that bankrupts repeatedly face. Recall the passage in *Disgrace* about life on credit. The protagonist remembers that he has not paid any bills for months, counting no doubt on some providential intervention that will seal his fate. It is a trivial life that relies on nothing solid. But what exactly does this surrender mean? There is clearly a surrender in Coetzee's

7. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 120.

8. John Maxwell Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 13.

works that does not coincide with the excessively hackneyed figures of postmodern disillusionment.

I believe it is important to point this out. The world of lost causes, which corresponds to the ideas of Edward W. Said,[9] is too often reduced to temporal causality. Old age and illness are obvious expressions of this examination of the meaning of existence. Likewise, if we follow Edward W. Said's ideas to their logical conclusion, we must recall the reason for the crisis of the Ideals (a factor that Said claims justifies recognition of lost causes). Updating Ideals (a salient feature of a society that relied on a secular statement of a meaning to be defined) was a credible choice. Although Don Quixote may well sink, crew and cargo, into a wandering folly, the Ideal is nevertheless a reassuring solution (as regards the acknowledgment of a world that surrenders any religious reference). But here is another world collapsing like a fragile scaffold. In order to maintain course, the Ideal assumes awareness of time as well as space it can master. Whether we like it or not, the Ideal is still the pledge of hope in a temporality that is the sign of continuity. So the militant political ideal and the expression of "noble" causes attest to trust in a world open to change. Trust paints a world that still arouses our desire to belong. It is possible to live, to believe in a future in which "our" children will be the happy inhabitants.

Bringing the Ideal into play assumes in every case that a shared discourse can be adopted. But the complexity of Coetzee's novel is the juxtaposition of the imagined world of lost causes (in the era of bankruptcy) and the quest for a fragile solidarity. Listen:

9. Edward W. Said, "Causes perdues," in *Réflexions sur l'exil et autres essais* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2008), 657-686. In this article, Said questions the acceptance of "lost causes" in recent history. He indicates that the Palestinian movement, for the last 40 years, has raised great hopes (perception of a justified rebellion) but also a loss of credibility in the eyes of the United States. From this perspective, Said broaches the meaning of "lost causes" in historical discourse, not to mention the moralism of this kind of value judgment.

> Again the feeling washes over him: listlessness, indifference, but also weightlessness, as if he has been eaten away from inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains. How, he thinks to himself, can a man in this state find words, find music that will bring back the dead?
>
> Sitting on the sidewalk not five yards away, a woman in slippers and a ragged dress is staring fiercely at them. He lays a protective hand on Lucy's shoulder. *My daughter*, he thinks; *my dearest daughter. Whom it has fallen to me to guide. Who one of these days will have to guide me.*
>
> Can she smell his thoughts?[10]

This passage from *Disgrace* tells us that there is something tangible in this imagined world of lost causes. Contrary to Edward W. Said's point of view, which reflects a more Hegelian logic (an end of the story whose "lost cause" is, in the context that interests us, a nihilist expression), Coetzee's works leave room for small-scale emotional earthquakes, catastrophes that are both inaugural and terminal. With these figures in mind, we come back to the image of the little thought connections so loved by François Laplantine.[11] But more substantially, we see an original use of credit. *Disgrace* is a reflection of a world whose apparent simplicity hides an absolute pain that is expressed brilliantly in another Coetzee book called *The Master of Petersburg.*[12] When disillusionment is no longer a convenient expedient, the protagonist of *Disgrace* moves (barely) in a demonetized world. Things and beings no longer have intrinsic value. They certainly have no trade value. In this setting, the pursuit of a shared life is an exercise doomed to failure.

With regard to this, I suggest that phoenixology be taken seriously: the deaths and (re)births of personal (and cultural) identity

10. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 156.

11. François Laplantine, *De tout petits liens* (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuits, 2003).

12. John Maxwell Coetzee, *Le Maître de Petersbourg* (Paris: Seuil, collection "Cadre vert," 1995).

seem to tally with the passage of time. This updated travel path, represented by phoenixology, appears to me to be a coherent way to consider the latencies of modernity and the anxious haste of postmodernity. Whether we are talking about Artaud, Chekhov, or Coetzee, it seems clear that the turbulence we are describing is caused by hesitations. The characters in the works of Chekhov (speakers of so-called popular speech) are at a loss to speak… They never stop rushing into the deadends represented by closed spaces: asylum, school, hospital. More than a century later, the works of Coetzee partly echo this concern of the marginalized subject in a world he barely inhabits.

Society's rejects, people of little means, the homeless, seem to have the right to speak in Coetzee's fictional works. They describe what I have called a minute life. It is not, however, a matter of death and (re)birth, a metamorphosis of the subject who thereby claims the means to live a new life. It is not a matter of the grandiloquence of an identity being changed from top to bottom so that it takes on the new characteristics of an era. The art of phoenixology could be justified in a world where it is possible to change identity.

Contrary to this point of view, I have focused on the singular role of a decelerated approach. The characters who inhabit the works of Coetzee are indeed often diminished, not to say permanently incapacitated. And while I focused on the role of little connections, which suggests a denial of grandiloquent discourses (from the bellicose rhetoric of literary nastiness to architectural representations fashioned by a vertical impulse), it seems to me today appropriate to consider the deceleration of verbal expression, the discomfort of the body (its clumsiness, its loss of autonomy?). Could it be that the dream of a triumphant phoenixology is the ultimate death-defier because it is important to prove (to ourselves) that we can once again renew ourselves, demonstrate courage and resilience?

To follow this train of thought to its conclusion, it seems that the works of John Maxwell Coetzee are a clear indication of defeat.

The various protagonists of the tale are always waiting, as if this stance were a symbol of retreat. This is not an ironic attitude, a cynical posture, that characterizes Coetzee's works. Rather than being cynical and standing purposefully off to the side (the better to watch life with disdain, as if the narrator did not want to share the destiny of his peers), Coetzee recounts the remnants of postmodern rubble (legacy of 9/11?) in a universe that brings together, in total confusion, the violence of society's rejects and the indifference of the wealthy.

As such, the motif of cultural mobility that we spoke of earlier demands re-examination. We know that mobility is a practical topic, that it is the object of attentive consideration on the part of intellectuals and artists who *want to move* with the times. Is it surprising that the postmodern condition (our particular point of interest being the space of the poor and the badly off) is characterized by a progressive deceleration tending toward immobility? For want of (theoretical) certainty, I would like to offer an intuition. The triumphant phoenixologies of identity offer the clearly seductive idea of a (re)configuration of the self.

The protagonists of *Disgrace* seem to think otherwise. They move in a limited world, but their actions, without necessarily being restricted, suggest cautious movement. It may seem strange to express it this way. Shouldn't disgrace, for the reasons just outlined, be a powerful factor of subjectivation? In its negative form, disgrace refers to the anguish of a loss of reputation. Not knowing who we really are in the eyes of others (in short, not being perceived with an amiability that reassures us of our goodness) is definitely a narcissistic injury that we cannot simply set aside. In this case, the loss of reputation (the normative expression of disgrace) is similar to a punishment.

Although the goal of our discussion is to identify, with regard to the perception of vagrancy, an aporia in the current discourse on the transhumance of identities (the cultural relativism that serves as the new middle-class universalism) and to explore the organized

obstacles that hinder the free exercise of mobility, I have to agree, with some humility, that the right to movement is a platitude that camouflages much crueller issues. In other words, the right to movement (much as we talk about the right to housing, the right to an environment free of toxins) cannot serve solely as a theoretical platform. For the same reasons, exercising cultural mobility cannot be reduced to creating a symbolic "market" of places and routes that will, in the long run, give us back the right to full and whole subjectivity. We must take care not to adopt a uselessly optimistic point of view. Mobility, of course, entails exercising a right of way. But once again, we need to ask ourselves about the fractured forms of our pathways.

In the works of John Maxwell Coetzee, the choice of South Africa as the site of this discourse on the impossible forms of mobility is not a matter of chance. Trying to build a cart that will allow him to take his mother from Cape Town to Port Albert, Michael K beavers away furiously with the obstinate single-mindedness of the truly desperate:

> He went back to the hostel where he lived and paid the back rent. "I've given up my job," he told the warden. "My mother and I are going to the country to get away from things. We are just waiting for the permit." He took his bicycle and his suitcase. Stopping at a scrapyard he bought a metre length of steel rod. [...] But though the wheel bearings slid smoothly over the new axlerod, he had no way of preventing the wheels from spinning off. For hours he struggled without success to make clips out of wire. Then he gave up. Something will come to me, he told himself, and left the bicycle dismantled on the Buhrmanns' kitchen floor.[13]

We need to carefully assess the restricted scope of this movement that is barely a beginning, a desire to move. This is not a matter of transhumance or a journey that takes us toward infinity, but the placement, in a confined space, of the need to be. Michael K is kicked

13. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, 26-27.

out of his home. He is obliged to move, to seek, in short, a location that will allow him to (re)claim the status of subject.

Do we need to dwell on the small violences that render us helpless? I have adopted this point of view because the singularity of these tiny actions, echoing the works of Anton Chekhov, is a way to deal with a reality that transcends us. In Montreal, for example, if we look at the tramps at Place Émilie-Gamelin, we can observe that this difficulty of being is staged like an immobile ballet, a disconnected choreography. These expressions communicate images that belong to a rhetoric expressed in space. Describing an urban ballet, when it is performed on the "main stage" of Place Émilie-Gamelin, is not a gratuitous political gesture. The tramps in this public square (who have only the "street" as their home) are, like Michael K, condemned to dwell on the perimeters regulated by the zones of power. Here is a "green space," a "public square," a place for "rest" and "relaxation" (all key words in an urbanism that embraces the precepts of shared life) that suddenly looks like a combat zone.

The melancholy of the wanderer (we know this expression is weak, because, following our examination of David Lurie's wandering, it elicits a reflection on vagrancy) is a cruel act, a gait that rhymes with nothing. While the walker picks up his pace (it is so important for him to criss-cross the vast world, to contemplate new vistas), the vagrant exhausts himself. He goes well beyond what reason dictates and health permits. Under duress, caught in the crossfire, the walker is actually a slave. While the worldly wanderer likes to hear himself talk, the vagrant with the empty stomach hears the impulses of urban disorder echo in his skull.

It is clear that the distinction expresses a rupture, a disassociation. I mentioned in *Espaces en perdition* how anti-human statements lodge themselves in the heart of the language. The expressions "delete" and "reboot" belong to computer technology—what we used to call artificial intelligence. In this case, the description of network automatisms (whether they are computer or cognitive

networks does not matter) continues to obey a principle of codified regulation based on the binary unit of measurement called a "bit." In this regard, I suggested in *Espaces en perdition* that this codification of information technology was becoming the main argument of a new rhetoric of tropes that places little emphasis on "subaltern subjects."

As I am writing these lines, the "financial crisis" is the subject of endless commentary. It is all summed up in one obsession: an economic recovery plan (whether or not it is truly useful is not the point of our discussion) will put an end to this unfortunate decline. Transnational capitalism must be "civilized"! Looking like a savage beast of unpredictable behaviour, the market economy (this phony representation of real "trade" between subjects) serves as a phantasm that we must once and for all domesticate. In world business, human intervention is the pledge of a serious mind. But what does this intervention actually mean? What are the conditions that define this necessary "presence" of a responsible subject capable of imposing its guidance on a turbulent world? This is a scenario that has already been widely discussed. While the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* described the violence of a colonial power relationship (thwarting African "nature," dealing the death blow to Indigenous powers), the current discussion suggests an imaginary enemy that needs to be battled relentlessly. This enemy is the fantasy (turned real, we say emphatically) of endless credit, of an annuity of which we are all the irresponsible trustees. So now our virtuous protectors are telling us, "You have to pay!" Although the economy of "pretence and simulation" was the subject, as far back as the 1970s, of relentless criticism on the part of Jean Baudrillard (as his 1972 *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* attests[14]), the era of network

14. Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, Essais collection, 1972).

automatism is called into question in a tone that does not manage to hide its persistent uneasiness.

Praise for walking (an impulse both curious and invasive) stumbles over the debris of spaces in distress. A consequence of this description of a ruined urban universe, vagrants are the new figures in a rhetoric of tropes in a decidedly sorry state. While the walker (from the famous angle of the migrant, in the 1980s) could see far and had no fear of forcing the obstacles stacked up before him, the vagrant, as we perceive him today, seems doomed to endless repetition. I have used this image several times (notably with regard to the works of Chekhov) because it seems to me to describe a playing field reduced to its weakest expression. In this context, our study of the comings and goings at Place Émilie-Gamelin is meant to perceive a rarefied universe. Subject to the constraints and vexations of the forces of the law, exposed to administrative harassment at every level, vagrants, who barely live in the cracks of Place Émilie-Gamelin, are indeed beings that escape all society life: homeless, "disqualified" in the eyes of effective power, the unacceptable markers (could they be urban scarecrows?) of a "presence" that upsets and angers.

In the course of this discussion of the forms of vagrancy in the era of discredit, I have tried to define the meanderings of the law, its determination to trap and shackle the weakest. The discourse makes use of obsessive references: mazes that are migrainous and hallucinated worlds of folly, oxymorons (another rhetorical torture that forces us to say the same thing and its opposite). There is indeed a long list of these devices with their pointless violence. It is as if we were living in a world made of borrowings and tricks, in a funeral suit drawn perfectly by Michel Leiris.[15] Decidedly, it is a world of little joy that we are describing, a universe of uncertain reliability

15. Michel Leiris, *Le forçat vertigineux* (November 26, 1925), 13 leaflets. Dated and signed original manuscript. Manuscript text dedicated to Georges Bataille, Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, cote BRT 158.

that demands our anxious vigil once again. Thus the vagrancy that we observed in the tales of Chekhov develops zones of tension that appear at nightfall, on the edges of share lands, in pathways that are hard to navigate.

In terms of preventing opinions from being voiced (which is partly related to our discussion of vagrancy), Chekhov interests us in that he does not testify, does not claim to adopt a fair tone. Like François Laplantine, I want to focus on the small connections of thought, modesty, euphemism, these barely visible tropisms that imply a (re)definition of vertical forms of culture (from eloquence to sublime). This implication of grandiloquence may, however, transform itself into a commonplace. Is it appropriate to oppose greatness to smallness?

We can clearly see that this discourse, if not clarified, can be a simple approximation without serious relevance. Does referring to "people of little means" come down to the same thing as simply opposing "lower-class people" to "upper-class people"? The expression is practical and has the merit of being clear. But shouldn't we, once again, re-evaluate this culture of abasement and sudden elevation? Of course, class constraints (unequal access to health care and education) and discrimination (based on ethnic origin) help perpetrate the abasement. But our discussion of this question cannot be content to verify the entwined markers of vertical and horizontal architecture. I raised this notion (which is still in the news) because I wanted to define, following the example of Michel de Certeau's[16] demonstrations of the infraordinary, a multi-figured universe that we can barely perceive. We have unintentionally adopted the stance of an entomologist straining to see the smallest of the small, who uses microscopes to plunge into the heart of the insect world. The works of Jonathan Swift also come to mind, with his famous Gulliver

16. Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien. Tome 1 : Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1990).

who inadvertently tramples the world of the Lilliputians. So our journey to the heart of the infraordinary would have served as a cultural metaphor. Although our intention was laudable (to explore the mysteries of an elusive universe), we need to ask ourselves today seriously about the consequences of this point of view.

Relentlessly fleeing without knowing the exact object of the crime, fearing completely unjustified incarceration, walking endlessly as if the ground were burning our feet—these are the signs of vagrancy that doom us to play the role of prey. No doubt it is this secret anguish that we feel. Our dread of being seized, assaulted, and ravished insidiously contains the unseemly form of the expected trauma. Throughout this discussion, it seemed appropriate to me to describe these often disagreeable affects that make us live all wrong. Like Michel Leiris's dizzy slave[17] (reminiscent of imminent death or death that has already come to pass), omniscience (the desire for a society life with no imperfections) is a life upside-down, a life gone sideways.

On the contrary, vagrancy is a meandering walk that runs along the walls of dreary cities, abandoned neighbourhoods. It is also having the experience (which rushes us toward the traumatic universe) that the sum total we can dream of is a world in the negative, a pathway haunted by a demonic awareness. All these bad dreams that we cherish, the complaints and snivelling take the place—another paradox—of affirmative discourse. We struggle to drag them along like a procession of nightmares. But why do we cling to this disability that is perhaps an indication of our inability to live fully? What else does this cultural mobility, with its restrictive nature, mean? Following the characters in Coetzee's works, their short-range meanderings in *Slow Man,*[18] it clearly seems that our

17. Michel Leiris, *Le forçat vertigineux.*

18. John Maxwell Coetzee, *L'homme ralenti* (Paris: Gallimard, Points collection, 2007) (Original title: *Slow Man*).

migrations are dying down, that they no longer know the aerial scale of the world that Gaston Bachelard described. As far back as *Notes from Underground*, Dostoyevsky enticed us to penetrate into this world that we perceive as a *claustrum*. Unlike the radiant spherologies described by Peter Sloterdijk[19]—"bubbles" heralded in the Aristotelian world of forms—our *claustrum* functions as an evil eye, blood-stained gaze, traitor's expression, double agent at the heart of a paranoid universe.

With regard to the forms of credit and discredit, we have restricted our discussion to the impression of correction or imperfection suggested by reading stories off the beaten track. The vagrants whose modes of wandering we are trying to define are not, however, eccentric characters or stigmatized beings. Their pain (as we can see in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*) is the expression of a universality: rather than describe a new human condition (a repertory of rejects and unfortunates), perhaps we should study the breaking points that create (with a sudden rupture) communities of disposable men and women.

At first glance, the theory of "disposable man" corresponds to expulsion from the domain of social space, as I demonstrated in *Espaces en perdition*: being disposed of means no longer having a proper life, being doomed to abasement. In keeping with this working definition, I advanced the idea that this expulsion is expressed by complete denial in the domain of language. The expressions "delete" and "reboot" were meant to be a literal description of a mode of operation in which the automatism of a self-regulated system holds sway. In this story we propose to read, exclusion is not even a matter of a decision founded on intersubjectivity. It simply embodies, with an operational rationality, a decision whose apparent autonomy

19. Peter Sloterdijk, *Bulles: Sphères I* (Paris: Fayard, Pluriel collection, 2011) (Original title: *Sphären I—Blasen*).

overpowers all human interpretation (with everything that implies in the way of errors, hesitations, prevarications).

The discourse we hear the most frequently about "disposable humans" vaunts beneficial displacement (the gradual abandonment of the forms of good old human conscience, with its wanderings, its doubts, its quibblings). As a corollary of this point of view, the flow of information (facilitated by the dissemination of the Internet in daily life) is modulated and refined so that the flow of meaning is never interrupted. Like the "disposable man" that we are examining, we have to imagine a soothing swell that reminds our sometimes disillusioned selves that it is possible to be comforted.

The excess flow of information knows neither earthquakes nor floods, because it is understood that the backsurge (this drawdown of the network on itself, the information interference that never stops colliding with itself) is the horror of any system that lays claim to transparent functionality. This is another perspective that may help us understand more exactly what we mean by disposable humans. Like detritus that washes up on a shore, building strange marine statues over time and tide, Internet dumps are heaps (of bits of information in network memories) that are nevertheless unaware of backsurges. The Internet is a becalmed sea, with a soothing pace. Although it offers the illusion of living at the heart of a world that is always mobile, the very form of the Internet claims to capture all discord, process it—that is, digitize it.

The portrait of vagrancy in Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* is completely different—and I admit, very distant from our contemporary virtual conceptions. Here is a dreary world, a *claustrum*, a collapse that forbids all aerial grace. In this setting, there is no question of raising oneself, aspiring to a better life. There is no question of improving a status that is steeped in precariousness. If society life expresses a view of the world (an eye that defines the scope of a field of action), we have to acknowledge that this view (for Dostoyevsky,

Platonov, and, today, Coetzee) does nothing but flood back inside, like a toxic sea that poisons you. Of course the image does not reassure us, because it presages catastrophes to come; and why not: earthquakes whose (archeological) scars are already gouged across the land. It is the imagined image of the cesspit, the excavation, the detritus that immobilizes us. In a way, we fear the regressive rage of the backsurge more than anything else.

To put it concretely, could this swarming mass of pain (emotional imprisonment in a world that is no good to live in) suddenly give birth to something else? In this case, the backsurge we are talking about (as we explore the forms of discredit) is what is left of us after all our confidence is broken once and for all. Because this backsurge of confidence on itself (which we could also call the undertow of the awareness confronting, in its movement, its own inertia) is a way of saying that we are both "outside" of the world and "in" its innermost interiority.

The confidence that interests me today assumes that the value of discredit has been exhausted, as if it was becoming a strange therapy. Our masters here are Artaud, Chekhov, and, closer to us, Coetzee. They tell us about escaping the worse (disgrace?) and then coming back to the surface of the world. Living the worst, relentlessly, is an immense task that is, actually, an outrage, a way of defying a world that does not like us. Is this our destiny? It is as if we have to slander, be bad, content ourselves with the bitterness of the rejection of others (their negation, even) to finally be…alone. That is what *The Master of Petersburg* teaches us.

For this, my wish is to fall back on reading contraband. Expressions of cultural pluralism have led to the appearance of new words: relocation/dislocation, displacement, migration… these are the current terms of a discourse that I would suggest is, itself, vagrant. This expression may be surprising. After all, until now, we have been speaking of the mobile and agile forms of a literature that

is able to renew itself. In other words, the primary objective of my discussion of cultural mobility has been to promote works that draw on this famous resilience (which I also call psychological plasticity) that can lead to the emergence of flexible and adjustable literary devices. That was definitely my intention at the beginning. But my optimism (is optimism required to deal with precarious places?) soon stumbled on the distressing reality of a collapse (of thought, territory) that is the total opposite of freedom of movement.

The issue of cultural mobility is one of the underestimated traits of globalization. Most of the time, cultural mobility is defined as one of the consequences of the advanced tertiary economy: new forms of communications technology, development of the Internet, effective globalization of the financial system that acts, so to speak, in real time. All these factors seem to substantiate the image of an ineluctably accelerating world. As such, the notion of cultural mobility belongs to the optimistic expressions of the present time. We move, we are displaced. The signs of the discourse are themselves migrations.

You may have recognized here an academic enterprise that we draw on without questioning ourselves too closely about the foundation—that is, what exactly is mobility? A preliminary answer is resolutely concrete: mobility is the capacity to move without hindrance. It occurs in situations where so-called ancient ideas of rootedness, belonging, heritage are no longer appropriate. Thus mobility is the opportunity to become part of an inevitable progress whose sole and unique function is to erase territorial enclaves. Such enclaves are diverse: in contemporary academic discourse, the geographic representation of the nation-state, downtown (the places of power listed by Michel Foucault,[20] from the prison to the asylum) are convincing expressions of this misfortune that is experienced today by

20. Michel Foucault, *Le corps utopique* suivi de *Les hétérotopies* (Fécamp, Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2009. Postface by Daniel Defert).

the statement and description of places that are associated with the establishment of an "own space."

In this discussion, I have tried to focus on a cultural mobility that cannot be summed up, as you no doubt understand, by the simple nomenclature of territorial markers in a geography of locations. In brief, cultural mobility allows us to take into account, beyond the simple empirical description of a territory, the conflicts of signs and languages that come into being in what Michel de Certeau called, once again, "own space." I have suggested that the expression of this cultural mobility is in crisis today. Unlike the optimistic discourses that advance the idea, as is often the case, that mastering mobility is a major advantage, I wanted to focus on the meaning of vagrancy today, on what it means to stagnate, endlessly repeating the same gesture, the same movement.

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