

# The Criticism of Gabriel Josipovici: Trusting Words While Suspecting the Word

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Gabriel Josipovici is a practitioner of what George Steiner—in his fine book of 1959, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*—called the Old Criticism. He is a Jewish polymath who was born in France in 1940 and, together with his wealthy Egyptian family, survived the Second War there, before living for a dozen years in Egypt and then immigrating to England in 1956. Now a research professor in the humanities at the University of Sussex, Josipovici is also a novelist, a playwright, and a critic who ranges over the entirety of Western literature. He approaches the great texts from love and admiration, not with a captious desire to deflate and unmask. With Matthew Arnold he agrees that we need to keep recurring to the “five or six supreme poets of the world” who have asked fundamental questions in lasting literary ways, there to derive fundamental answers for our own time. This task requires the critic to have a philosophical temper of mind and the willingness to make large moral judgments, in the conviction that technique and metaphysics are inseparable.

## I.

That Josipovici meets all these requirements first became evident in his remarkable work entitled *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (Yale University Press, 1988). There he revealed that, unlike the New Critics of the 1950s, he does not regard literature as autotelic: its end lies not in the creation of perfectly formed and largely self-referential worlds, but in the ragged and awkward ways it fructifies our own word-driven humanity. Yet neither is Josipovici any kind of conservative or reactionary wanting to recover the lost humanism of the European past. On the contrary, he is a man haunted by and thoroughly steeped in the skepticism of our time. Perhaps he agrees with the Jewish writer who said that, after the Holocaust, it is no longer man who needs explaining but God. Like the great 19<sup>th</sup> century masters of suspicion, as Paul Ricoeur called them, Josipovici worries about the dialogical efficacy of all speech, wondering whether we are not finally condemned to silence and separation and despair.

*The Book of God* caused a critical stir because of Josipovici’s insistence that the Bible is not an ancient literary artifact whose meaning is disclosed chiefly to biblical scholars, historians, and archeologists. Neither does the Bible have authority because it recounts a single grand narrative that runs from Creation through Rebellion and Election onto Incarnation and Redemption and Consummation. This conclusive structure can indeed be derived from and imposed upon the Bible, but Josipovici regards all such patterning as but a bootless attempt

to turn Scripture into yet another wonderfully well-wrought human construction. The Bible resists all such imposition of mythic order, Josipovici argues, all such finality of explanation. What makes the Bible a book unlike any other book is its depiction of human life as inexorably open-ended. Its narrative rhythm is akin to breathing: a movement forward, then a pause, a looking back in remembrance, and then a new movement ahead to the unknown future.

Josipovici maintains that at the center of this inhaling and exhaling of words, this systolic and diastolic action of verbal time, lie death and the acceptance of death. Acknowledgement of this sobering truth is the great pause before any resumption of movement. In the Hebrew Bible, there is no consolation for our mortality other than the assurance that God is amidst this human fray, speaking and listening to those who address him. We know that a pattern inheres in things, but we can never quite discern what it is, since the mysterious and unknowable God is its author. The Bible does not consist of stories *about* God's nature and character, therefore, as the *Enuma Elish* contains stories about Marduk. Rather do we encounter God *through* the Bible's strange narratives: "the stories in this book will be our only way of discovering and understanding him." They do not confer meaning so much as they make it manifest as something unfolding before our very ears. The only road to reality is a linguistic path, therefore, and it is neither straight nor smooth.

The Bible's denial of the human thirst for certainty—our longing to live by way of totalizing truth and thus without risky dialogue both with others and with God—seems everywhere evident to Josipovici. It is present from the moment Adam and Eve break trust with God in their desire for a non-dialogical life. Ancient Israel, at its noblest, denied this sinful urge to finalizing system and form by remembering and recording *everything* human, not just edifying events and heroic figures. The lengthy genealogies are not a tedious excrescence but the very essence of the Hebrew determination to recall the human past. Josipovici also contends that the Hebrew particle *wa* ("and") creates a world of radical ambiguity and discontinuity, one that is built more on accumulation than subordination. One thing follows another, but usually because it comes *after*, not because it is derived *from*. "The Bible does not discriminate," Josipovici declares, "either between classes or between good and bad deeds: the sins and errors of Adam and Jacob and David are as important as the humility and obedience of Abraham and Moses."

Certainly there are moral judgments to be found in Scripture, but it is not essentially a book of moral *exempla*, as both the book of Job and the parables of Jesus make clear. Even when divine retribution falls, Josipovici sees it as overtaking a person largely as "the outward expression of what that person himself experiences: because Saul doubts God, he loses him; because David trusts God, God remains with him." Even the story of Jesus' resurrection is not cast in comforting

terms, as when the women encounter the risen Lord, not in easy recognition but in terror: “A lesser writer, one with a thesis to propound, would have let the women rejoice at the news; Mark seems merely to tell us how it was: the most joyful tidings are also the most frightening.”

## II.

Josipovici’s recent book entitled *On Trust: Art and the Temptations of Suspicion* (Yale University Press, 1999) serves as a sequel to *The Book of God*. In both works, it becomes evident that Josipovici is a Jewish version of Mikhail Bakhtin. He wants to rediscover the real and true God—not Blake’s Old Nobodaddy, not the theistic sky-god whose rotting cadaver stank in Nietzsche’s nostrils, not Hemingway’s “Our nada who art in nada.” Such a supernaturalist deity who jumps in and out of his creation, like a divine factotum subject to human will, is forever dead, however numerous his worshippers may remain. Josipovici wants a to find a way of reading and believing that can withstand Theodore Adorno’s celebrated claim that there can be no lyrical poetry after Auschwitz, as well as Rabbi Irving Greenberg’s insistence that it is obscene to speak of God in the presence of burning children. In this later book, therefore, Josipovici does not address Ricoeur’s 19<sup>th</sup> century masters of suspicion but their epigoni: not Marx and Nietzsche and Freud, but Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and their kind.

Like most of their deconstructionist companions, these new suspicioners urge us to distrust all words, and especially the literary works which words create. Kafka and Beckett were, among others, the terrible discoverers of this truth that words violate the very thing they seek to honor: human life. To set them into scrolls or books is to arrest the uncontrollable flow of life into an artificial pattern. A narrative is linear and sequential, as are sentences themselves. For Josipovici, our lives do not have beginnings and middles and ends; they simply come and they simply go, from nowhere discernible and toward nothing discernible, other than decay and dissolution. Totalitarian political efforts to deny the radical limits of our mortality, by way of omniscient systems of government, led to the unexampled carnage of the previous century. How then may we live, asks Josipovici, without bathing the world in blood? He makes the false alternatives ever so clear: either we create grand narratives such as Milton’s that encompass and explain everything, or else we despair of all sequential creation and sink into despairing silence.

Yet Josipovici believes that there is a third and more realistic way. He calls it the way of trust rather than suspicion—trust that words can acknowledge the discontinuity pandemic to human experience, while still affirming life’s forward movement. Josipovici argues that such trust has been practiced by the greatest writers of the Western tradition, from Homer and Sophocles to Dante (despite his bent toward system) and Shakespeare, on to Proust and Kafka and Beckett. What

he finds in them is what we have seen him desecrating in Scripture: a verbal world that is not impatient of paradox, that lets contradictions coexist, that does not seek the certainty of premature schemes and structures. These masters of trust are the makers of a modest but positive kind of art, one that does not call us to celebrate the corruption inherent in all making, the falseness of all transcendence, as in Deconstruction's triumphalist negativity.

Homer is Josipovici's exemplar, and nowhere more than in the seeming ruthlessness of his metaphors. Homer likens a warrior who has been stricken through the neck with a spear and is falling from his chariot to a diver plunging into the sea. Another with his neck broken and his face reduced to a bleeding mass is made analogous to a poppy in a field beaten down by a spring shower. But whereas a modern novelist like Cormac McCarthy would create such images in order to shock the reader, Homer does not: "He is merely seeing things, and asking us to see them, from some perspective other than that of the individuals engaged in the action." The author of Ecclesiastes would regard such deaths as proof that all is vanity. Homer looks upon death, by contrast, as part of the larger rhythm of life, seeing it not as horrible so much as inevitable and strangely beneficial. For even in death, man (at least in traditional societies) still belongs within the web of state and family, tradition and destiny.

This was also the vision of the Greek tragedians. Josipovici argues that in their work we encounter *sorrow* indeed, but nothing akin to the modern *pain* that comes when man loses his trust in the rhythm of life and the double vision it requires: "man eats of the fruit of the earth, yet how frail and vulnerable he is compared to the stone or the bronze which can cut into him or crush him.... [O]ur loss is never to be made good; and [yet] ... life goes on, [so] that our loss is one everybody suffers and has to learn to bear." Oedipus is the prime example. Sophocles does not make us pause to ask whether Oedipus deserved his fate. He enables us to observe, instead—and with something akin to religious awe and exaltation—that "this is how it was, look and see and, seeing, grieve."

The Jacob stories in Genesis contain something of the same serene objectivity. The Bible does not make us worry that Jacob won both his birthright and his blessing by cunning and trickery. Indeed, his final encounter at the Jabbok puts his craftiness and bravado in a positive light, as he receives a new name and a new blessing because he wrestled with God. Such is the tenor of the whole Hebrew Bible, according to Josipovici: "you come up against a reality you have not chosen and do not necessarily like, and you accept it and live on, renewed by the encounter. Nevertheless, reality extorts a price: Jacob will walk with a limp for ever after." Rather than exalting Jacob as a hero, therefore, the narrator ends by observing him from afar, and as if nothing terribly unusual had happened: "And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh."

Dante would seem the ultimate counter-example. Josipovici admits, in fact, that Dante had “the most powerful sense of form in the entire history of world literature.” But unlike Plato and Milton and the other great system-builders, Dante constantly reminds us—with the spiraling forward and backward movement of the *terza rima*, each tercet containing 33 syllables, thus echoing not only the Trinity but also the 33 cantos making up each canticle—that his poem is a fabricated thing. It is a vast artifice that celebrates form even while acknowledging its limits by means of what Josipovici calls “relaxed control.” Dante’s decision to write in his native Tuscan rather than Virgil’s authoritative Latin proves his awareness that there is no all-sufficing language, that there is no necessary unity between *res* and *signa*, and yet that he can trust words and memory and imagination to lead him down the slow and torturous path that opens out to life:

... Dante’s sense of trust in the world and in the vernacular ... has had to be fought for and earned; ... [as has] his demonstration that the acknowledgement of failure, of our human limits, is precisely that which can lead us forward and help us out of the spiral of egoism and self-pity into which the refusal of such acknowledgement, the clinging to the self we know, will lead us. Dante’s poem is about making the will right through the voluntary submission which will bring about the possibility of real self-expression. That is the story it tells. But it is also the story it enacts in its work on language, for the poet, in the course of his poem, reveals himself to be not a master or a slave but a maker, not the triumphant controller of his language or the humble follower of authority, but one who finds his freedom in what to others would be impossible constraint. (91)

### III.

There is neither space nor time to show how Josipovici traces out this theme in Shakespeare’s late plays, how he sees it betrayed by the Romantics, then recovered in Proust, and finally displayed—albeit in startlingly minimalist ways—in Kafka and Beckett. Nor has this brief summary done justice to the rich complexity of Josipovici’s argument. Suffice it to say that Josipovici has a critical acumen of the very highest order, and that he ranks with George Steiner, another Jewish émigré critic, as a religious reader of texts both ancient and modern. Indeed, Josipovici’s work bears considerably similarity to Steiner’s similar attempt to retrieve a modest and humbled kind of transcendence in *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), despite Steiner’s considerably greater trust in logomorphic reality. Yet no serious student of literature can afford to ignore Josipovici’s salutary desire not to skip blithely past the horrors of our age, but to find a way of living and believing and reading that will remain true to life in this late hour.

Yet I believe that Josipovici's project, for all its admirable qualities, constitutes a temptation that both Jewish and Christian readers ought to resist. Not the least of his failings is to be found in his apolitical individualism. He speaks almost always of a solitary reader finding meaning from a solitary text. This is an especially egregious error when we recall that the Bible is not the literary product of individual craftsmen but the canonized text of a people first called Israel and later named the Church. Though certainly it can be read in solitude—many Christians believe, alas, that it should thus be read—its chief significance lies with the Jewish and Christian communities whose worship and service it sustains. So are lasting works of art produced not merely by individual talent, as T. S. Eliot long ago reminded us, but out of a communal tradition.

Jews and Christians also read their singular Scripture in communion, even as they also preach it communally. Such proclamation does not entail the over-righteous certainty that Josipovici fears. Those who are truly called to declare, "Thus saith the Lord," do so with an awful awareness that their words have efficacy only as they constitute a far-off echo of the divine Word. Yet Josipovici has little regard for the preachments of the Hebrew prophets. He faults them—as he also faults the book of Chronicles and much of the New Testament—for seeking "to forge a single meaning out of the manifold elements of the tradition." For him, all theological surety is a sign of heresy. How much wiser, in my view, to have recognized that the prophetic Word alone can be uttered in the presence of burning children.

Yet the chief malefactors, in Josipovici's estimate, are not the Hebrew prophets but Plato and St. Paul, St. Augustine and Pascal, Milton and the 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists. They all commit what Josipovici regards as the cardinal sin, albeit in different ways: they reduce life to a single pattern, summing up everything by means of an all-explaining vision that violates the real mystery of human existence. They yield to the lure of what Josipovici calls "revelation" and "faith": the blinding insight that resolves all things into a single idea or design, usually culminating in some sort of afterlife. In short, they substitute dogma for trust. "With St. Paul, as with Plato, this quality of trust has gone. Perpetual vigilance is now required, perpetual questioning and self-examination. Suspicion reigns: suspicion of the world, of others and, above all, of oneself. No wonder the question they both ask is: 'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'"

A farrago of errors is displayed here, far too numerous to unravel in a short essay. Plato and Paul, when they speak of the body, are not speaking of anything remotely similar. For Paul, the body is not *soma* but *sarx*; it is not a physical encumbrance that prevents his spirit from knowing and doing the good, but an outward dependency that signals an inward enslavement far more binding than the flesh: it enchains him in his good deeds even more severely than in his evil acts.

Josipovici is surely wrong also about Dante: he sets his totalizing Story within the obscure particulars of Florentine social and political life precisely in order to show that the architectonic scheme does not obliterate the importance of earthly events and those who enact them. Dante also has recourse to his vernacular Italian for the same reason that Luther translated the Bible into German and Chaucer composed his *Canterbury Tales* in the everyday dialect of London: to show that the biblical Grand Narrative has currency not so much for some putative cultural or political elite as for the *populi minuti*.

Josipovici is also mistaken in his negative regard for dogma. He sees it as crushing all complexity, denying all uncertainty and ambiguity. Flannery O'Connor was much nearer to the truth when she observed that, especially in the late modern world, dogma is almost the last guardian of mystery. Rightly understood, dogma does not lock the mind in certainty and finality so much as it invites endless and inexhaustible truth: every act of dogmatic understanding prompts an ever greater sense of mystery, an ever greater awareness of ignorance, and thus an ever greater thirst for wisdom. Hence the venerable Christian insistence on God's own darkness. The apophatic theology of the Eastern church stresses, for example, our terrible *unknowing* of God. This tradition manifests itself in much of the Western mystical tradition, especially in such figures as Luther and St. John of the Cross. Juan de la Cruz is well named indeed: nowhere is the revelation of God made more mysterious and unfinalizing than at Golgotha. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar acknowledged this hard truth by taking his motto from a phrase adopted by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) concerning the Eucharist: "*the ever greater dissimilarity to God no matter how great the similarity to Him.*"

What Josipovici most seriously misunderstands is that the grand narrative of Scripture and the Jewish-Christian tradition is not a story of comforting certitude and explanatory finality. On the contrary, it is God's Word exactly because it is characterized by the starkly realistic paradoxes that Josipovici otherwise admires. God no sooner creates the good world than He must virtually destroy it in order to save it yet again. Far from being an ethical Deity who grants Israel what she deserves, He gives his people repeated new beginnings, only to have them respond in rebellion and rejection. The prophets are stoned, not for their moralizing sense of justice so much as for their insistence that God's elect nation must live graciously, caring even for their enemies. So it is also with Jesus. In his summons to a radically New Way, he is miscomprehended chiefly by his own disciples, who even conspire in his crucifixion. Christ's resurrection produces a radically New People, the veritable Body of Christ, whose chief characteristic, it turns out, is its squabbling small-mindedness and corruption.

J. R. R. Tolkien described the trajectory of this singular Story as having a deep kinship to the Greek tragic vision insofar as it always discerns human life as

ending in the *dyscatastrophe* of sorrow and failure and defeat. Yet this is the Single Narrative that fulfills and overturns the tragic vision by taking a sharp turn past sin and death. What lies beyond the bend, however, is not some long and happy life in the world to come, but rather a *euclastrophe*, a new and worse calamity that nevertheless issues in astonishing good. “The Birth of Christ is the euclastrophe of Man’s history,” declares Tolkien. “The Resurrection is the euclastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.”

Josipovici much admires the work of T. S. Eliot, especially *Four Quartets*. In fact, he cites Eliot as an exemplar of modesty about the limits of all discourse:

last year’s words belong to last year’s language  
And next year’s words await another voice.

Josipovici ends *On Trust* by quoting Eliot’s summons for his readers to fare forward rather than to fare well: to seek the risky aegis of fresh tongues rather than the false security of stale speech. Yet for Josipovici, words remain ever so difficult to trust because the verbal world they create suffers the same danger as the visible world which they recreate—namely, the perpetual threat of falling into irreparable ruin, never to be reconstituted.

For Eliot, and for Christians more generally, we are allowed to trust articulate human breath for quite different reasons. “The intolerable wrestle/With words and meanings” is indeed an affair, as Eliot says, of “only hints and guesses/Hints followed by guesses,” making each new verbal beginning “a raid on the inarticulate.” Yet Eliot is willing to hazard the life of speech because our words have been authorized by the Word, by the Incarnation which redeems all the products of time from their inexorable ambiguity and falsity. This unmanageable Word has become flesh in an unmanageable way, full of grace and truth even as it dwells darkly among us. It is a darkness that illumines, enabling us to voyage forward into a future that is open-ended but not bleakly uncertain. Eliot thus agrees with Tolkien that we await a providentially euclastrophic future, one where “the communication/Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living” and where therefore “All shall be well, and/All manner of thing shall be well.” So it is, I believe, that must we salute the skeptical linguistic humanism of Gabriel Josipovici, even as we resist his call to do the impossible: to trust words without reliance on the Word which makes them trustworthy.