

Contents

- 15th-30th May*: diary pages from Italy (Germana Pisa, Marco Giovenale, Maria Granati, Lucianna Argentino), and Croatia (Drazan Gunjaca) p. 3
- Bloodied dog**, by Jáchym Topol p. 9
- Poetry and the present**: *Foreword*, by Massimo Parizzi; *The present of Capital and poetry in exodus*, by Ennio Abate; *Present in and of itself*, by Giorgio Mascitelli; *Poetry and the present*, by Lelio Scanavini p. 11
- 9th-27th June*: diary pages from Italy (Lucianna Argentino, Maria Granati), and Palestine (Dorothy Lale) p. 27
- On the Jewish Civil War and the New Prophetic**, by Marc Ellis; **Zionism versus Judaism!**, by Azam Tamimi p. 37
- 1st-12th July*: diary pages from Italy (Paola Turrone, Lucianna Argentino, Marina Massenz, Massimo Parizzi) p. 61
- From Indochina. Travel notes**, by Massimo Parizzi; **The traveller's ego: upturns and downturns** by Marina Massenz p. 65
- 8th-23rd August*: diary pages from India (Carol Faison), and Italy (Lucianna Argentino, Maria Granati) p. 95

Granati)

Does the left already know everything?: *Foreword*, by Massimo Parizzi; *What does the left already know?*, by Christian Grecco; *The politics of results*, by Massimo Parizzi; *The left that knows too much*, by Giorgio Mascitelli p. 103

August 24th. The remaining 99.5%, by Amira Hass; from the Israeli newspaper “Ha’aretz” p. 121

24th-25th August: diary pages from Italy (Laura Zanetti, Alfredo Menghetti) p. 125

Contributors and translators p. 133

Subscription p. 139

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This review exists through the voices it gives expression to, in their variety. All contributions are welcome. Please write to **Here - notes from the present, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy, phone -fax 0039-02-57406574, e-mail: massimo.parizzi@alice.it**

Diary: May to August 2005

Here

notes from the present

Milan, Italy, May 15th

Who can say why certain phrases and certain situations suddenly return to memory, emerging from the past according to some mental alchemy known only to our synapses, if to them. Why, in certain moments, and not in others, do these phrases or images or situations reappear and become the focus of our thoughts, to the point of overriding the thoughts and emotions of the day? Why, today (and not yesterday... when there seemed to be just as much need of it), does this phrase suddenly leap to mind: "Work on it, but don't let it work on you"? Work on it! Don't let it work on you!

I can still hear the voice of the teacher - a true mentor - who encouraged us to master our anxiety this way, anxiety about our classes, about the tasks in front of us, at school or in our lives. Just this recollection, just the echo of a phrase from the past, and I'm off! Without a trace of fear.

Rome, undated

...in the beehive of the all-full, overrun thou runnest over with overlaps, superimpositions. on the heels of your time for sleep comes the onslaught of the time for transit's... towards the occasion of the

Germana Pisa

May 1. As 'model worker' for 2005, the leaders of the Chinese Communist party named the 25-year-old Yao Ming, basketball star and one of the faces most in demand by multinational corporations for their advertising campaigns. He earns over 20 million dollars a year, twenty thousand times the income of the average Chinese citizen.

Marco Giovenale

May 2. Gala dinner for the White House Correspondents' Association. In front

time for transit >>> towards the aggression of the time for work. that's right, employed and imploded. when it seems to be over, there you are in the non-space for eating. full, not very. not very much time or cash, you have to choose. they keep you on your feet, a few hours at least.

like those strange slots in churches, where the falling coin triggers spotlight assaults on Caravaggio, Guido Reni, Mola. down they drop.

urged on by other bodies, you disburse and then are spit into a dirty exterior with more jostling. you go back in, and in the end you're out. the seam with re-entry is perfect. not the slightest gap. actually you're already running late. standing up or sitting on a worn-out shock absorber, you're back to the walls of the customary division. illusory nonetheless because you yourself need to scrape away the edges and boundaries. no air pocket between coming home and opening your email, making dinner, the shower, the dreary details of domestic bureaucracy, pretense of reading, and finally sleep, where the hours are gnawed away at their brackets. never eight. often not even four or three.

the body, which the post-human thought it would torture with a genuflection to the aesthetic enigma, was actually and is invariably delivered into the hands of the market, trinkets or surgery or latex or narrative, the wound pours outwards. coprophagia, soccer, live broadcasts from Parliament, supplements to La Repubblica. it is built on supplements, constituents. fat, fat chance. all up against each other. the subway meat grinder. the hours chained together - with love. drop it here pick it up there. chemicals may help. or playing back the jingles of the good old days. each man's walkman sings for all...

of 2500 guests - the biggest names in the US media, as well as bankers, senators, and generals - Laura Bush declares: "Nine o'clock, Mr. Excitement here is sound asleep... I'm a desperate housewife". Then, turning to him: "George, if you really want to end tyranny in the world, you're going to have to stay up later". And then: "George didn't know much about ranches when we bought the place [their ranch in Crawford, Texas]... He's learned a lot since that first year when he tried to milk a horse. What's worse, it was a male horse". The 'speech' was part of a plan designed by White House strategists to give the Bush family a warmer image: it was written by Landon Parvin, a speech-writer who also worked for Ronald and Nancy Reagan, and reviewed by the president's advisors. Laura Bush had rehearsed it over and over.

May 4. A suicide bomber blows himself up in Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, killing sixty young men who were standing in line to sign up for the army and earn a salary of three hundred dollars a month.

Modena, Italy, May 20th

Maria Granati

Just a few lines to tell you about two small incidents today that struck me and moved me.

In the afternoon I saw a death notice, unusual in that it was for an Arab man, perhaps Moroccan or Egyptian, named something like Farouk al Kaaled. It's the first time I've seen something like this. It may be that Moroccans, though they are the largest ethnic group in Modena's immigrant community, don't have the custom of placing memorial notices, or can't afford it, I don't know. But the curious thing was that the announcement didn't name any family members, his wife, children, relatives, friends, anybody; the text only read: "Goodbye, Doctor! We'll miss you so much!" I thought it must be an affectionate tribute from this doctor's patients... was he alone, and how long had he been in Italy? What did it cost him to study and practice medicine here? And now he's dead. I thought this message from his patients was beautiful, so simple and so human. It seemed to me like a new sign of dialogue, and above all of affection, of connection between different kinds of people, something that it is still rarely seen.

The other incident had to do with an elderly woman, probably unable to use her legs, judging from her posture, who was sitting on the ground in front of a church, her head veiled. Perhaps she was Arab. I gave her a euro, with the usual feeling of embarrassment one feels in these situations; she grabbed my hand and kissed it. This had never happened to me before either. I went away a bit disturbed, above all with a strong feeling of guilt, but with a mixture of other emotions that I'm still trying to decipher. That's all.

May 5. The Marine captain who was filmed in the cold-blooded shooting of an unarmed, wounded Iraqi, in a mosque in Fal-lujah on November 13, 2004, was acquitted on all counts. The military jury stated that his conduct had been "consistent with the established rules of engagement".

May 6. A suicide bomber blows himself up in the middle of a market in Sawayra, Iraq, killing sixty people, primarily teenagers and children.

May 11. Kamikaze attacks in four Iraqi cities, killing 75 people. But there were many other similar attacks we could not and cannot recall here: they are too frequent.

Rome, May 27th

Lucianna Argentino

This morning in the supermarket, they caught a young woman from Eastern Europe who had stolen a jar of face cream and two containers of bath gel. They stopped her at the register behind me, and I felt, as I always do when these things happen, a deep sense of embarrassment and shame; but I have to confess, this time it wasn't so much for the girl as for a co-worker, who with a scornful tone and attitude, started making unsolicited and questionable remarks such as: "Well done. You like Italy, right? You all come here and try to get away with murder!... This has nothing to do with hunger!". (If she had stolen food, would he have let her go without saying anything? I asked myself, feeling a certain indignation boiling up inside me.) I don't mean to justify the girl's action, but I was bothered by the way G. laid into her and humiliated her, and inside I was thinking: "In a minute I'm going to turn around and tell him I'll pay for what she stole, as long as he'll shut up about it". But as a supermarket employee I couldn't do that. I was hoping that maybe one of the customers in line at the register, who were watching the scene in silence, would do it... but nobody said or did anything. In the end, though, fortunately, the girl was allowed to go, with the intimation never to show her face again. Now I'm wondering whether my idea was an ethical one: if I could have stood up and paid for the stolen goods, would I have done the right thing? Or would what was intended as a gesture of solidarity towards the girl have also been one of solidarity towards the theft? And for the girl, wouldn't it have been just an added humiliation? Sometimes distinguishing between ethical and unethical, right and wrong, can be truly difficult...

May 13. Revolt in Uzbekistan. Thousands of people demonstrate in the streets, and the army responds by shooting into the crowd: five hundred are killed. For over fifteen years the country has been run by Islam Karimov, whose regime is accused of being founded on terror. Karimov enjoys the support of Putin and Bush.

May 16. General Motors admits that it has used human corpses in crash tests for its cars. It would seem that dummies do not respond to impact the way bodies do, and are much more expensive.

Pula, Croatia, May 30th

This morning, as I was sitting at a table on the terrace of the usual café anxiously waiting for my first coffee, I witnessed a scene surpassed only by fate.

I have known Dino for a long time. He is part of the inventory of this café and of the small neighbouring shops. So much so that no one notices him any longer. He is always hanging around, and we sometimes offer him a drink or exchange some nonsense with him... No one knows exactly how old he is. Perhaps twenty-five or twenty-six. He is brain-damaged. From birth. A 'mild' form, one that does not confine him to a wheelchair. He is always smiling, even though nobody knows why. However, since we have lost our optimism, it is nice to see a smiling face around, even if we do not know what puts him in such a rare mood.

Just as every other morning, Dino was there today. Next to us. Almost. He was sitting about eleven yards away, next to the news-stand, on that dirty concrete platform, and he was crying. Quietly, under his breath, with a strange expression... a grief nobody could understand. No one knew why he was crying. I was waiting for him to stop so I could at last drink my coffee, which had already been on the table for a while. To no purpose. He went on crying. Then, suddenly, he joined his hands as if about to pray. My first sip of coffee, cold by then, went down the wrong way.

I stood up. I had a hearing in court in about ten minutes' time. A brother and sister, both elderly, had sued each other over a four-square metre courtyard. One of those absurd lawsuits that allow you to reach retirement.

Drazan Gunjaca

May 16. Global Forum 2005, organized by the American economics magazine "Fortune", opens in Beijing. Hu Jintao, president of the People's Republic, welcomes his guests to the Great Hall of the People. They are 800 bankers and CEOs from the world's largest corporations. He receives an ovation.

May 23, from "La Repubblica". In 2000, in Beijing, the Ministry of Labour and the police Bureau for the Protection of State Secrets classified information on child labour as top secret. Whoever helps reveal cases of exploitation of children in Chinese factories can be charged with betraying state secrets.

May 25. From the testimony of workers at King-maker Footwear in Zhongshan (Guangdong, China), gathered by the humanitarian organization China Labor Watch: "There are kids working in every department who are between 14 and 16. The workday starts at 7:30 am and ends at 9 pm, but overtime is obligatory, and in peak months, workers spend up to 105 hours a week in the

As soon as the hearing had finished, I went back to the same café. I don't know why. Dino was no longer there. Nobody knew where he had gone. As I asked around, people shook their heads unconcerned. Without taking anything, I headed for the city brain-damaged sufferers' association, run by a friend of mine. I had to tell someone all that. My friend eyed me with pity, and his smile reminded me of someone...

Dino is just over twenty and has no friends. He loves everything around himself, he is even fond of a girl whose stall he goes past every day, though she doesn't even notice he exists. Dino will never experience his first kisses, that unknown passion that rises from within the depths of one's stomach and gets right to one's head. He will never have a driving licence to drive those fast cars he can see darting past that concrete platform. He will never have... He has attempted suicide a couple of times already.

I wandered aimlessly round the city in my car, and listened to the news on the radio. The speaker was talking in a robot-like voice about the Italian woman volunteer kidnapped in Afghanistan [Clementina Cantoni, kidnapped on May 16th in Kabul, where she was involved in providing aid to women, particularly widows; she will be freed on June 9]. They kidnapped her to obtain the release of their friends, criminal friends, from local prisons. Of course, criminals have no problems making friends. The speaker said the volunteer might have been killed. Because she was doing some good. I really hope she is still alive. At least that. Otherwise, we should remove all the plaques that honour this or that military leader, whether well-known or unknown, from the streets, and replace their names with that of the

factory. The monthly pay is 757 yuan (\$90), but 44% is deducted for food and lodging, which means dormitories in which 16 workers are packed together on metal cots". Kingmaker Footwear's primary customer is Timberland, regularly singled out by the American economics magazine "Fortune" as one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For".

May 29. Referendum in France on the European Constitution. 55% vote no.

kidnapped volunteer. And of others like her. So that those insignificant little plaques, which we usually ignore, may remind us, at least sometimes, that we are merely human beings and that one day we may need those who know how old Dino is, and... My God, what a terrible world we live in. And it is only our fault if it is in such a bad shape.

Bloodied dog

by Jáchym Topol

Here

notes from the present

He pronounced a moratorium the war was over
the Year of the Monkey had begun and everywhere were scattered
orange peels the wires chirring in the air
the night was dark and damp
there was nothing to talk about nowhere to go
he met a bloodied dog
at long last
it was the best creature
he could meet after a long walk between the walls
a dog shivering from the cold at the end of the passage on the left a tall building
on the right a beerhouse then the Linhart bakery
the sand crunched and for a moment he saw the world
in the shudder of a moment
something suddenly came to be.

Poetry and the present

Here

notes from the present

The magazine which organized this conference in collaboration with “Casa della Poesia” is called “Here - Notes from the Present.” That means that for us, its contributors, the present - whether the public present of major events, the private present, or the present of inner life - is something of interest and importance. And indeed, the review is made up of diary entries. It is a magazine which cares about the here and now, about existence in this or that place in our era. And at the same time, it’s a review in which poetry has always had a place, ever since the first issue. Without even the need for us to decide it. Without the question ever coming up of whether or not to include poems in the magazine. As if it were something obvious, taken for granted, necessary. Why is that? I must say this is a question I continue to ask myself, one that lies at the origin of this event, where I decided to put it to you. I don’t have a definitive answer. I can offer some fragments of an answer.

First of all, and this is obvious, poetry exists. It exists in our present. It’s impossible to confuse a poem from the nineteenth century with one from the twentieth. It’s almost impossible, at least for now, to confuse a Chinese poem with a European one. Poetry bears the imprint of the here and now. It belongs to this world and this time. But that’s not enough. It’s that the interest, I’d say the passion, for

Massimo Parizzi

Introductory comments at the conference “Poetry and the present: different times at the same time?”, organized in collaboration with “Casa della Poesia” in the theatre of Parco Trotter, Milan, Italy, on May 14, 2005. The contributions that follow were also related to this event.

the present, has always been accompanied by a certain diffidence, in my own mind and in this review.

What is it - thinking of both public and private life - that we call the present? A sphere that is underway, that is coming to be. Dominated by necessity and by purpose. Made up of the accomplishment of tasks, the resolution of problems. And of tasks which impose themselves, and problems which arise. Made up of the constant wait for something to end and something to begin. For the work year to end and vacation to begin. For the war to be over. And I should point out that this is the same rhythm as in capitalistic production, commerce, and consumption: a succession and alternation of needs and fulfillments, needs and fulfillments... Maybe this rhythm corresponds to what gets called 'human nature', maybe capitalism is the system which is closest to human nature. But that doesn't mean it's the best; mankind has struggled so much against nature...

In any case, the rhythm of the present is one that contains a significant element of blackmail - the realm of necessity is the realm of "if you don't do this..." - and a significant element of self-satisfaction: the goal that has been achieved, the task that has been performed, the problem that has been solved... Blackmail and gratification that go hand in hand: we are gratified by our subjection to blackmail. In short, it's a sphere that is so absorbing it becomes totalitarian. This recalls the comparison I made with capitalism.

And poetry? I have often had a certain experience upon opening a book of poetry, especially after a day spent with body and mind immersed in the 'present': the experience of a violent shift. Of the

demand for an adjustment in one's mind and one's perceptions. A demand that some part of me responds to at times with enthusiasm, as if it were just waiting to hear it asked, but at times with resistance, with refusal. A shift towards what? This I can't say. But a violent shift. As if there were a break between the rhythm of the present and the rhythm of poetry. You can't slide smoothly from one into the other. As if poetry pointed out the totalitarian nature of the present, saying "that's not everything, my friend...", and inviting you to step out of it. Does poetry, then, belong to another world, another time?

I don't know what poetry is. The most I could say, if someone asked me, is that it is everything that has been called poetry over the years. And everything that has been called poetry over the years has been made up of strings of words that then return to the beginning. In a novel, the return comes when a line gets to the end of the page. If the page is narrow, it comes earlier, if the page is wide, it comes later. You could imagine a novel written in one very long line. But not a poem. To a novelist like Italo Svevo, this was irritating; as he once said in reference to Montale, he couldn't fathom such a waste of paper. Poetry wastes paper. It returns to the beginning before the page, or life, or the story, are finished. It is constantly starting over and starting up again. An extraordinary invention. Maybe we can start here in trying to explain that shift I was speaking of, the shift that poetry demands? That break between the rhythm of poetry and that of the present?

In any case, if the presence of poetry in "Here", a magazine of "notes from the present", has seemed necessary to us from the beginning, it has been in order to ask the reader to make this very shift.

The present of Capital and poetry in exodus

Here

notes from the present

The present that lies before us is one made up of war, of computers, of money, of television, of the destruction of man and nature. For centuries now we have been in the unacceptable present of Capital. Or do we think it should no longer be so defined, and that we should refer to it and experience it as the 'present', period, and forever unfetter it from such a long history of exploitation and oppression? This latter interpretation - a new belief, or diktat, or penchant, or ethic - the prevalent one in today's light/rapid/emotional communication, is not a view to which I subscribe. I still have too clear a memory of the azure air breathed in by our adopted forebears (and to some degree by us as well) within 'presents' that were as tragic or more tragic than the current one, and I have not forgotten, for example, a certain Walter Benjamin, who in the desert of Nazi Germany, and later of a war-torn Europe, did not leave off investigating what is called 'the past', with its monstrous tragedies, but also its struggles and its advances, or refrain from naming and criticizing the present of Capital, refusing to casually turn the page on it. Even though I know I am making more of a Pascalian wager than his in the twentieth century.

To stick to the point, I have to ask myself whether poetry can exist comfortably in such a present, without aiming a scowl at it? I'm tempted to say no. But I immediately correct myself, remembering that po-

etry also exists in the form of an idol. And as an idol, it has already entrenched itself in the virtual world of so many websites (which, like money, does not stink); it is served as a delicate side dish to the main course at festivals and academic conferences; small change is passed to it under the counter by dubious sponsors; it performs a quick striptease or tucks you in for the sleep of reason on TV. And it is still valued - alas! - for its traditional 'aura', or - alas and alack! - for wearing the robes of a 'private religion, a secular mysticism', as it does its part to help you shrug off the bloodshed of these new wars with only the stray tear. And yet in the past - I am mythicizing to a bare minimum - a certain 'critical' kind of poetry once challenged the present of Capital, or at least was wedded to it in ways less repellent than those just cited. And it has been paradoxically *present* in the history of some *nows* which have rent the continuum of domination. Perhaps almost incognito, in collective and concrete forms; *in progress*, but with noteworthy results even within its own codified structure of symbolism (words, meter, syntax). And in a way of its own, because it never entirely serves the politics, philosophy, science, religion, or ideology of a community or a social class. For those who have forgotten, I'm referring to certain *nows* like 1871 in Paris, 1917 in Moscow, 1943-45 in Stalingrad, Milan, and Paris, and 1968 in many parts of the world, when the bars of the present of Capital were pried open by famous or nameless men and women who, through those revolts and ruptures, built a life that was not the one chalked out by their rulers. Knowing that scattered here and there in their midst, there were also poets.

This breed of poetry, however, has fallen into the deep cesspit of the war in Iraq. This is the theory

- not a particularly literary one - which I will brutally summarize here. Again, by way of ellipsis, I might add that starting in the sixties, Italian poetry began struggling towards an exodus, emerging, that is, from a worn out dialectic completely circumscribed by its national tradition, but that now, under the shock of globalization, its exodus (like many others, both physical and mental) has been halted by permanent war (in Iraq, for the time being) and its pernicious influence, which can be seen in all fields and even within the crevices of our daily or subconscious lives. The poetry that was capable of resisting and opposing the present of Capital *as poetry* is no longer with us. Nostalgia? Not at all. From its absence I can only glean this ethical, political, and poetic suggestion: we need to put ourselves on the trail of this poetry in exodus that has fallen into the pit of the war in Iraq. We don't know at what depths it lies. From over here (Italy, Europe, the West), we can barely imagine its groans, screams, and whimpers, mingled with those of the tortured men and women in Abu Ghraib and other no-man's-lands. And if, as poets, we went running to that horrible pit, we would end up like Giuliana Sgrena, who sped unselfishly to Iraq to lend a closer ear to poetry's lament from the pit of war; and who fell into it herself; coming out the worse for wear, without having pulled it up. Pulling the poor thing out of there is a truly arduous job. Poets aren't Rambo's. Yet if we acknowledge that in the present of Capital, poetry - the poetry that interests at least some of us - has fallen into the pit of war (in Iraq, for the time being), this would at least allow us to clear out some of our country's inane cultural parking lots, and stop pretending to search for it close to home: in the amourette within heart's reach, in the

Italian journalist kidnapped in Baghdad on February 4, 2005 and freed on March 4. After her release, as she was being taken to the airport, soldiers at an US checkpoint fired on the car she was in, wounding her and killing Nicola Calipari, an Italian secret service agent.

intimacy of our bedsheets, in the utterly soporific routine of daily life.

Will it really be possible to track down this *poetry in exodus*? I don't know. But it would be a positive step if poets (and not only poets) could once again affront the issue of a common value and beauty - shared by all and intended for all - that has been obliterated by the winds of war and by imperial globalization. By returning perhaps not to the wording, but to the questions - even the political and social ones - that were posed by the 'critical poetry' of the 1960s, by *politically* and *poetically* challenging the hierarchical relationship between the *many* and the *few*, which is also ingrained in the institution of poetry (a medium like any other), by working towards the construction of a *common language* (simple, but not tritely commercial like the dominant one in mass media) that can only be forged by fully developing the poetic potential *generically* present in the experiences which we manage to grasp, as individuals and as a multitude, in our living hours and working hours - for many of us increasingly interconnected - hopefully, to be shaped into a collective *De vulgari eloquentia* suited to these times. Are there already traces of this in what is being said or written today in poetry? It's hard to say. A possibility of poetry in exodus, poetry of the multitude, can perhaps only be glimpsed allegorically, drawing closer, in our imagination, to the dim figures we see stirring in the crowds of immigrants, of workers of the intangible, and of the ever more numerous *poetizers*.

Migrants, the new proletariat, writers of poetry. Everything is to be found in this multitude: ambivalence, nostalgia for the 'great' poetry of a certain era in the past or 'of the ages', hothouse cultivation of little geniuses, construction of genera-

tional cliques (young poets “*trampling the helms of dying warriors*”). Everything: ambition, improvisation, and maybe even a cancerous side to it. The nebula of *poetizers* grows, but is fragmented, not collaborative. It puts on a show of dialogue and critique, rather than practicing them seriously. But if this stirring cloud contains even a seed for the formation of an intelligent poetic challenge to the present of Capital, then as the editors of poetry and literary journals, and journals such as “Here”, “not of poetry, not of literature”, but of “notes from the present”, we mustn’t let it escape. Poetry and periodicals have often gone hand in hand. And today we need lots of journals, journals that can offer the poetizing nebula mired in this present of Capital a coherent prospect of beginning or recommencing the interrupted exodus. Most of the poetry that emerges from the nebula and reaches the journals almost spontaneously adapts to being used as an exemplum or illustration of some particular theme, or is diluted in a chaotic, aesthetizing, unemotional, non-ideological stream of communication. Often, due to the author’s poetic approach, it is already a fragment in itself, and fits in comfortably with other fragments of various kinds (diaries, essays, narratives, eyewitness accounts). It is not all that different from the poetry that stands more aloof: in a collection, an anthology, or a journal strictly for poetry. This is a situation I find depressing. And so I’ll take the liberty of suggesting an option I find intriguing and perhaps futuristic: a kind of poetry - I’m speaking of the poetry that *should be written* - that is clearly out of step with this present. A kind of poetry that is tired of playing the handmaiden to something else, or the Cinderella crouched in a corner of an ‘intellectual’ review, but equally fed up

with the seclusion of 'true' poetry journals, and which demands to enter into fertile dialogue and conflict with the contributors and editors of all sorts of periodicals (in all fields), demanding a role that is not supplemental, not ornamental, but on equal footing with the other texts, or even inventing itself channels different from the present ones, better suited to its unbridled - though never flighty - *poiein*. These are abstruse expectations at the moment, I know. But they offer a contrast that shed light on the impoverished cultural panorama of this spuriously pluralistic present. So tell me, wouldn't a prospect like the one I'm hinting at be lovely? Shouldn't we aspire to a kind of poetry that asks itself questions, and lets questions be asked of it even by non-poets, a poetry that asks and invites questions about the *underground* (ideas or compendiums of ideas) that is the foundation for the journals it lives in, and about the *underground* of this present of Capital? I would find a poetry of this kind - one that could refuse to toe a genteel line, or to coexist with the thoughts of A, the testimony of B, the essay of C, without ever jostling them or being jostled - truly to my liking. Just think, poetry that could suggest to its many devotees, as only it knows how: wouldn't it be a good idea to spend more time in 'reality', even if in today's world you are no longer sure what that means? And then, addressing the esteemed editors of so many contemporary journals, could add: what am I doing here in your midst - a fragment among fragments, a monad in verse among monads in prose - while we shift (or are shifted) from one present to the next, in a sort of immobile planetary dance? Don't you think that there's something about this present that simply isn't right?

Present in and of itself

Here

notes from the present

If I were to try to comment on the relationship between poetry and a generic historical present, I'd find it easy to say, like that comedian on tele vision a few years ago, that "there's a real crisis these days", and no one could find any way to refute that. It would be easy to say that no one reads poetry, and that its ability to shape reality, and to construct a collectively acknowledged relationship of symbolism with modern-day experiences, is almost nil. But these things were already said about a century ago by Aldo Palazzeschi - to consider only our own writer - in a society that was only partially similar to our own. Indeed, I think this kind of problem is not related to our present time, but is implicit in the very concept of poetry. To get some inkling of this, one need only pick up a handbook of literary rhetoric and theory, where one can read that poetry is a discourse intended for re-use (e.g., a form of discourse, as opposed to discourses intended for consumption, which is not aimed at the immediate communicative context, but at long-term memorability, even in the future). This persistence in memory inherently implies a certain distance from the present, and is only perceptible through a tradition for reading the work, established at a later time, or else is immediately vouched for by a particularly strong authority, though this is a cir-

Giorgio Mascitelli

cumstance which has rarely occurred in history. In short, each body of poetry is in a difficult position in relation to its own time, since the present only rarely offers proof of its staying power. In this sense, what Palazzeschi says is on the whole analogous to what Persius wrote approximately two thousand years earlier, in a society radically different from our own. Poetry's marginality and centrality need not be mutually exclusive; rather, they are often complementary, because poetry's centrality is often a later construction, or rather, an optical illusion, created by the same readership tradition that let it persist in memory. For example, this optical illusion is common in many of those who read poetry using aesthetic criteria that consider it as objective reflection of its historical present: a poet's ability to capture certain profound traits of his or her present is at times implicitly confused with the sociological centrality of poetry and the poet in that era.

In our time, however, it is unquestionable that some factors accentuate the perception of poetry's marginality. We live in a period in which the pervasive omnipotence of the media machine has created serious difficulties for every other form of social communication and the institutions that guide it. The pageants that we witness every day have also led to a crisis in the literary institutions - developed more recently than is commonly believed - that facilitated the circulation of poetry and the establishment of traditions for reading it. Yet the most destructive effect of this phenomenon lies above all in the massive degree to which it has drained our experience of the present of meaning, and the way in which all communication has apparently lost its significance, the marginalization of literary institutions being only one consequence

of this. The sole assertion of the media machine is that the actual present is the machine in and of itself, and nothing exists outside of it. This is not, however, a problem of poetry, but a problem of human experience in today's world, or to put it better, of any social action. Of course, there is yet another specific reason for crisis when it comes to contemporary poetry, because in the century that just came to a close, much of the truly significant poetry expressed a poetic theory in which poetry's effectiveness was equated with its direct ability to influence the reality of its time, both by challenging literary institutions, and by building a new relationship with its audience. It is therefore obvious that a vision of poetry that links its validity to an immediately social function, if not an explicitly political one, will run into serious difficulties in a time when the goals it set for itself have been achieved by the media machine, though of course with a completely different orientation. But this is still the crisis of a certain concept of poetry which arose out of specific historical conditions, and not of poetry as such. And even this poetry is read today not for the greatness of the poetic approach, but for the stature of the texts.

Paradoxically, the gradual extinction of the literary institutions which gave poetry some token relevance in the twentieth century offers a great opportunity, in terms of its freedom (of course, one might as well admit it, this is the freedom of retirement or unemployment) to take new paths. To seize upon this freedom, one must have a historiographically rigorous familiarity with poetry's past, in order not to nurture nostalgia for an Arcadian world which embraced poetry, often a completely imaginary construct. Personally, I believed instead for years

that the task of poetry (and of literature) in the present day was to bear witness to a quest and an idea, but there is something lugubrious and testamentary in this image, not because poetry cannot bear witness, but because emphasizing this aspect of it means creating a posthumous relationship with the present. Perhaps poetry does not even need to bear witness to the reality which is currently obfuscated by the media machine, because if it is good poetry it manages to do so anyway, whether or not this is set as a goal. Poetry's most difficult task is not to say things about the present that are normally left unsaid, i.e., to serve as its critical conscience, but to understand that acting as a critical conscience is only a provisional, occasional role imposed by external circumstances, and not poetry's identity or purpose. If this is not understood, then poetry exists only as a challenge to the current status quo; that is, its existence is dependent on this incredibly negative present, or better yet, by those who hold power in this present. Of course, the writing of poetry is influenced by this juncture - and it could not be otherwise, because it does not live in a bell jar - but it cannot identify its reasons for existence with a mere negation; if it exists only as a protest, it is completely inscribed within the present, and within the power dynamics that have shaped it. More than social marginality, poetry must fear its own acceptance - even as an adversary - by the current framework, because then it too would contribute to that nullification of human experience I referred to above. Poetry is numbered among the things that give joy to life, and the awareness of this ethical nature is what gives the poetry of our time both its vitality and its tenacity. Much poetry, even good poetry, of recent years has been marginal in ma-

ture, not because of its lack of circulation, but because it had mislaid this awareness. It's hard to ask outsiders to think like aristocrats, but that's exactly what poetry needs.

That's why, at our present juncture, I hope that poets will look for reasons to write inside themselves, devote themselves to writing good poems, and as for the rest, just try to stay in good health and in good spirits.

Poetry and the present

Here

notes from the present

A fact that will never cease to give cause for reflection, one laid down in front of us by Yves Bonnefoy as the key speaker at last year's Milan Triennale (see "Poesia", January 2005), is that our society is the first to experience anxiety over the future - the future of our species and of our very planet. "The future is truly disquieting" observes the poet "as is this present age, which seems unable to counter a steadily growing threat." "What is the point of recording a disaster, simply recording it, like Beckett and many others after him? Doesn't that mean simply giving up? Doesn't that mean helping the great snare draw closed around us?" According to Bonnefoy, poetry, as "the memory of full reality which blazes a path through words" - "this memory of the immediate, of the particular,

Lelio Scanavini

of the finitude” - “is what makes it possible for us, on this earth, in this life, to feel affection, to feel love”, what can give us back “our power to love”. This is utterly, profoundly accurate, and holds true for poets of all times, from Dante to Leopardi and from Villon to Eliot; yet we can’t help doubting whether recovering our power to love, the gift offered the world by its greatest poets, will be enough to stave off the danger that hangs over us, or counteract the great snare that threatens us. Here it is not a matter of believing that poetry can save the world (as B. knows and writes), but more modestly, of knowing what and how to write *in this* world.

And so amends should be made to Beckett and his heirs, for the unjust accusation of sloth and involuntary collaboration with the enemy. For poets aware of their complete powerlessness and lack of influence, what else is there to do besides record the disaster, launch warnings tied to balloons or stuffed into the proverbial bottle, bear witness to this distressing present, and work so that the feeling of the time (their time) can blaze its own path through words?

Back to the diaries

Here

notes from the present

Rome, June 9th

Some days I get really tired of hearing people talk in clichés, and think using tired, second-hand stereotypes. I'm especially distressed by hasty comments about immigrants from outside of the EU: the most common ones are "they come here and think they can run things"; "when we're the ones paying taxes for them". I don't know whether people say these things out of ignorance, prejudice, blindness, bad faith, or what, because I think even they must see all the 'caregivers' who hold our grandmothers' hands or push their wheelchairs, or the Albanian or Romanian workers who come at lunchtime - slathered in plaster, hands crusted with lime, wearing tattered shirts that offer a glimpse of ugly tattoos - to buy themselves a sandwich and a cold beer. On the other hand, a few days ago it came as an unexpected surprise to hear Rosina, an elderly unmarried lady from Calabria (who's been in Rome for ages but has never lost her Calabrian accent because she's always been cooped up doing housework, as she once confided), say to me, short and slight as she is, upon seeing two very tall black men in the line next to mine, "My goodness, did you see how tall they are? Who knows what a long way they've had to come, poor dears!". Thinking, I'm sure, of

Lucianna Argentino

June 1. Referendum in the Netherlands on the European constitution. 61.6% vote no.

June 1. Ricardo Lagos, the president of Chile, releases testimony proving that during the Pinochet regime, even children under twelve were tortured in Chilean prisons. With the aim of forcing their parents to 'confess'.

June 4. The anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. In 1989, a non-violent student demonstration asking for democratic reforms was suppressed by the army, which killed hundreds or perhaps thousands of demonstrators. Their number has never been revealed: it's a state secret.

June 5. Flooding in China. Over 17 million people are evacuated. 200 are killed.

the distance she herself travelled over sixty years ago, when she was barely more than a girl; it must have seemed a very long journey from her village to Rome, where she came to work as a housekeeper for a young married couple and later to take care of their children, whom she calls her nieces and nephews. That phrase, “poor dears”, coming from a woman who in the eyes of the world is just an insignificant chatterbox of an old maid, was refreshing to my spirit, a breath of clean, pure air. That phrase, “poor dears”, spoken in sincere sympathy and solidarity, brought together people separated by an enormous difference in culture, age, and geographic origin, united ‘only’ by the fact that they are far away from their land of birth. That phrase, “poor dears” destroyed all barriers and borders, crossed all barriers and borders, to take on the form of a full and genuine humanity.

June 7. Great Britain has imported a new technology from the United States used to monitor employees: an electronic wristband that records their movements, calculating the pace of their work and their breaks. Adopted by some of the largest companies in Britain, it is already being worn by ten thousand workers.

Potenza Picena, Italy, June 12th

Maria Granati

Last night, in Potenza Picena, we were woken by a succession of not very loud claps of thunder, somehow rumbling, but continuous. Since it would not stop, and the evening had been marvellous, with neither wind nor clouds, a slightly pink sunset with Venus shining in the East over Recanati, we were amazed and opened the window to look over the valley towards the horizon. A clear night, with no clouds; that thunder was caused by fireworks, extremely visible ones, almost below us in fact, a few miles away as the crow flies. We were very surprised, as it was three o'clock in the morning and the show went on for about half an hour: nothing like that had ever happened before; any firework

June 7. Miners and farmers revolt in Bolivia. They are demanding the nationalization of natural gas, of which the country has vast reserves, or at least an increase in the share that multinational corporations must pay the state to extract it. This is opposed by the center-right, which holds a majority in parliament, and the governors of the richest regions. Thousands of demonstrators clash repeatedly with the police and the army in La Paz.

display, whether secular or, more often here, religious, takes place before midnight. A few minutes later we went back to bed. Today I opened the newspaper, a bit depressed for having voted in a practically empty polling station, and found the answer to our questions in an article by Michele Smargiassi in "la Repubblica", "Ferrara and Pezzotta at the CL vigil, abstention marching on Loreto": those fireworks had been celebrating the about fifty/sixty-thousand pilgrims marching from Macerata to Loreto for seven hours, from eleven to seven in the morning. A prayer meeting, just imagine, "that life be always preserved". The 'Virgo Lauretana' at the head of it, "we are here to worship"; of course, and, in the prologue to the liturgy, Pezzotta spoke, and also... Giuliano Ferrara, a well-known churchgoer, an apostle of Christ, whose editorial in yesterday's "Il foglio" read: "Don't go and get screwed". And, in the front line, bishops, cardinals, prelates of all kinds and those fifty thousand pilgrims all cheering... What about that? I stepped back into my past, and remembered things buried in my childhood memories; I recalled the processions of the crying Virgin Mary, then called 'peregrine', my parents excommunicated because they were communists and the procession going past my house without stopping, almost as if we had been banned from the community; all that injustice and discrimination, the cold war, poverty in the fifties, the Church always clinging to power and always on the side of the rich... Though at least in those times there was an evocation of the dread of Bolshevist Communism. While today, what and whom do our local Tabans, fundamentalists or neocons want to bring down? I think they are bringing down our Constitution, the laicity of the State, the rights of all, our

Today and tomorrow, June 12 and 13, a referendum is being held in Italy to repeal some articles of a law voted by the right-centre majority, which strongly limit the resort to artificial insemination techniques and research into embryo stem cells. The Catholic Church heavily interfered in the referendum campaign by encouraging voters to stay away from the polling stations in order to avoid reaching the minimum number of voters (50% plus one) under which the votation is invalidated. Movements and personalities from the Catholic world such as CL (Comunione e Liberazione - Communion and Liberation) and the trade unionist Pezzotta contributed to such a campaign, but also people like Giuliano Ferrara, the editor of the newspaper "Il foglio", who have never had anything to do with any kind of religion and religiousness (that's the reason for Maria Granati's irony). Loreto is a well-known Marian shrine. In the end, only about 26% of voters turned up at the polls.

our history, dignity and memory.

Potenza Picena, Italy, June 21st

In the afternoon, at my cousin's house in the country, Saverio and I picking and eating cherries for hours; as for my cousin, he doesn't even look at them, "go ahead, that's your kind of fruit, red for the reds..." (he's nostalgic for fascism and once forged a *fascio* emblem with his own hands; he's a blacksmith, a true artist). So, as the sun was going down in front of us and Venus was glittering in the pink of the sunset just over Recanati, all the way down to a tower or dome, I'm not sure (the tower in Leopardi's poem "The Solitary Thrush"?), which at a certain point seemed to catch fire and we could no longer tell apart the blaze of the sun, the planet, windows, maybe, we kept picking cherries, eating, red hands, red mouths, stained shirts, but who cares. It's a shame that when there was more time ahead of us to experience these moments we weren't paying attention, busy running after other things, and now everything has this taste of the ephemeral, of fleeting time, ("hope is brief and memory is long..."). But this adds beauty and intensity to things.

Ibdaa, Palestine, June 27st

We left for Dheisheh in the afternoon, arriving at the Beit Jala road block at around 5 pm, looking eagerly for my friends, Ahmad and Khaled. At first, the local taxi drivers crowded quickly around us, thinking with our luggage that we were a sure bet for business, but they stepped back when I said we were waiting for friends. A call to Ahmad

Maria Granati

June 12. The union activist Antonio Matos Filho is assassinated in Parauapebas, in the Amazonian state of Pará, Brazil. He had been working on behalf of the "sem terra" movement of landless farm workers. He was 38 years old.

June 12. Florence Aubenas, a journalist from the French newspaper "Libération", is freed in Baghdad; she had been kidnapped on January 5.

June 15. Pakistani authorities have refused to allow Mukhtar Mai, a woman who had worked for the arrest of her rapists, to travel to the United States for a human rights conference: "It would damage our country's image".

Dorothy Lale

June 18. Demonstration in Madrid against the law legalizing gay marriage. It is organised by the Catholic Church and the Popular Party. Under Franco's regime, homosexuality was punished with imprisonment. beating. elec-

told me that we had a few minutes to wait and the conversation quickly turned to where we lived. I always cringe at my reply of 'America', when I am in Palestine, a place that my tax dollars keep under occupation. Upon hearing our answer, one driver said, "maybe Bush is not too bad? Maybe he's ok?", and raised his eyebrow. Out of politeness, I tried not to laugh too hard, but I responded with the first Arabic phrase I ever learned: "Bush majnoon" (Bush is crazy). He smiled and nodded. Another asked what I thought about Sharon. Again, I laughed and told him, 'Inta majnoon' (now you're crazy). Within a few minutes I was reunited with my dear friend and one of my best English students, Khaled and his cousin, Ahmad. They immediately loved my Mom, of course, and promptly hustled us into Khaled's car to take us directly to a gorgeous house that they were trying to rent for us. We then proceeded to try to find the owner, but to no avail. After a few drives in circles, stopping in typical small community fashion to ask everyone on the street if they knew where Abu Michil was, we decided to try to find him another day and head instead to Ahmad's home. I am so proud to call this family my friends and to make it the first stop with my Mom. We were warmly welcomed by the entire family. I have yet to enter a Palestinian home in which even the littlest family member is not told to come greet the guests and shake hands, even the babies are picked up and introduced personally. We proceeded to drink cola, make small talk and then eat a wonderful meal together. I had to roll my eyes at Ahmad when he gave me a plate and fork. I love making connections with families during meals in which we all eat from the same platter,

onment, beating, electroshock, and lobotomy. The Church did not protest this.

June 24. Elections in Iran: they are won by Ahmadinejad, mayor of Teheran, referred to as an 'ultra-conservative'.

June. An investigation by the Italian judiciary reveals that in 2003, CIA agents kidnapped the imam Abu Omar, a terrorism suspect, in Milan, taking him to Cairo, where he was imprisoned and tortured. On May 21, an analogous investigation by the Swedish parliament found that in 2001, CIA agents kidnapped two Egyptians in Stockholm who were suspected of ties to terrorist activities. They were also flown to Egypt and subjected to torture.

Yesterday, June 26, saw the 'celebration' of the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, established by the United Nations in 1997. According to Amnesty International, 95 governments currently practice torture, and half of the world's population lives in these countries.

taking small pieces of warm, soft bread and scoop bite size mouthfuls of rice and chicken. Some of the most cherished memories I have from last fall revolved around a cozy dinner table. Always the insistence that the guest have the biggest, juiciest piece of chicken and at least 3 pieces of bread sitting in front of her at all times. As this was my poor Mother's first experience with Arab hospitality and she is so polite, she continued to gamely eat all the food Ahmad's mother continued to happily pile on her plate. I had to intervene to prevent a hospital visit on our first night.

After ca'hwa (Arabic coffee) and some political discussion about Ahmad's family history, we were off to see Khaled's new home. He has been working 'illegally' in Jerusalem as an electrician because there is no work in the Bethlehem region for him. The unemployment rate is 70% and growing. It is illegal for anyone from the West Bank to travel to Jerusalem without express permission from the Israeli army. Permission is difficult to gain, to say the least. As they have not yet ever granted Khaled permission to go to Jerusalem, he has quit asking. He has no choice if he ever wants to have a home, to have a wife and a family. The economic situation in this area will not improve with the continuation of the Occupation and the impending completion of the Separation Wall. Khaled is trying desperately to finish his home before the Wall completely encloses this region, as neither he nor the materials for his house will be able to get in and out of Jerusalem easily after it is completed. Until last month, Khaled had spent almost 3 months living and working illegally in Jerusalem at risk of arrest or death. Last month a neighbor of the place where he stayed discovered that he is a

June 29, from "La Repubblica". The United States armed forces are having increasing difficulty in finding young people who are willing to enlist. "In April, the army fell short of its recruiting goals by 42%, and in May it had to make do with 5000 young recruits, most of them from poor urban neighbourhoods. Hundreds of recruitment officers prowled the ghettos, handing out t-shirts and promising shorter tours of duty and bonuses of up to 40,000 dollars for anyone who decides to enlist. Another way to draw in young people is an interactive, hyper-realistic war game. Called America's Army, this video game is distributed free of charge, and is proving to be extremely popular with teenagers. Recruiting stations have already handed out three million copies on disk".

June 30. The Cortes in Madrid approved a law granting equal status to homosexual and heterosexual marriage. On the same day, the third annual Conference for Religious Dialogue is held in Doha, Qatar. It was attended by 86 representatives of the three monotheistic religions: Islam

refugee and reported him to the police just as he entered a taxi. The police began chasing the taxi, but the driver refused to pull over. If he were caught transporting an illegal person, he would lose his taxi license, as well as be given a hefty fine. Perhaps he would also be arrested and serve several months in jail, but at the very least a file would be started on him with the police and in this place that's never a good thing. The chase continued and finally the driver told Khaled to jump from the taxi, but Khaled refused, as it was going too quickly. They continued for another 10 minutes, but the police called in a helicopter and began shooting at the car. Khaled decided he better jump. The driver slowed, he jumped and began running toward Bethlehem. With the Wall almost completing encircling this area, he had to run for almost an entire hour to evade the 4 police chasing him. He finally entered the Bethlehem side and found friends who hid him for the next few days. He found out later that the police had released his description on a radio broadcast, reporting that he was attempting a bombing attack and was to be shot on sight. The look in Khaled's eyes as he related that part of the story reminded me of deer's caught in headlights, wide, bright and surprised. He had faced a very real brush with death and I can sense the change in him. He used to be the first to laugh among the three of us, always ready with a smile when I looked at him, but no longer. He seems distracted and heavy-mooded. Ahmad will tell me later that for a week afterwards, Khaled spoke only of selling his half-finished home and hiding away in another city. It took Ahmad and his family's encouragement to talk him out of it. The heavy knowledge that it's only a

theistic religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

Among other topics, it dwelt on the family, expressing a shared condemnation of homosexual unions, cohabitation, extramarital relations, divorce, and abortion.

matter of time before one of my dear friends here is murdered rises in my mind again.

Despite the heavy mood following his story, Khaled's mood improves exponentially with every flight of stairs we take to reach his flat. By the time we reach his door, the familiar grin I love is spread across his face and I'm so excited to see his future digs that I'm laughing. The first room we see is the guestroom, and I'm not surprised to realize later that it's the largest room he has. The beautiful tile floors glimmer in the fading sunlight as Khaled lifts one to show us 'Made in Italy' written on the back. He winks at us and says 'only the best for my wife', then admits he hasn't met her yet. We enter the second bedroom to see a small balcony overlooking the rest of Doha. Ahmad tells Mom and I that while he worked with Khaled on this room, Khaled spoke only of the 2 children he will have, one son and one daughter. This room is for his daughter. Khaled is preparing an area near the balcony that she can use to study in private, because her brother will certainly be hassling her all the time. I will recall this brief trip into Khaled's hope for his future, when later we are taking tea with his neighbors and he tells us: "For Palestinians there is no tomorrow, no hope for what we might do, no dreams. There is only the Occupation and the hope to finish today alive". I hear his words but think only of his daughter mulling over her books, while her brother jumps on her nearby bed.

Finally it was time to return to Ibdaa, where I taught English for 5 weeks last year. I was nervous and excited at the same time, unsure of what to expect. Would the children remember me? Would I remember their names? Would they em-

brace my Mom and charm her with their contagious laughs and teasing? It was all wasted worries. I arrived to find warmth, love and happiness, just as the first time. Crowds of kids were huddled around the entrance and even more scattered throughout the Center, draped over chairs and counter-tops and everywhere hellos, hugs and exclamations of “Dorothy!” greeted my return. The ever-unflappable Shadi sitting behind the front counter, responding with “keif halik, majnoona?” (how are you crazy girl?) to my hello. After a few brief emotional hellos, I usher Mom upstairs to our room to unpack a bit before joining everyone from the Center at a championship basketball game against a team from Gaza. Their most difficult accomplishment for the day was arriving for the game at all, despite all of the checkpoints they had to maneuver. The tournament was scheduled for last week, but due to extended delays at the checkpoints, it was re-scheduled. It seems Mom and I have arrived on a good night. I learned something new about Mom this night. She is an absolute basketball nut. It’s a well-hidden secret that even though she despises watching it on TV, she will go wild at a live game. Areef, my trouble-maker friend had scored us court-side seats. Watching Mom jump to the edge of her seat, clapping and cheering like crazy was one of the best memories of the day. Once she was told which team was Ibdaa and therefore ‘her’ team, she was one of their loudest fans. It was a great game and the Ibdaa guys made us all proud by stomping the competition. I stunned several friends into silence by stepping directly in front of them as they walked by our chairs. By the end of the night, I had a morning appointment to work

with the Health Committee and two dinner invitations. Little did I know that was only the beginning. Mom and I returned via the typical, everyone smushed-into-one-taxi mode of travel back to Ibdaa thoroughly satisfied with our day.

On the Jewish Civil War and the New Prophetic

Here

notes from the present

At the turn of the twentieth century, Zionism was a decidedly minority movement among Jews, opposed by most religious and secular Jewish organizations in Europe and America. Even during the Nazi period and after, significant portions of Jewish life remained either indifferent toward or actively opposed to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Opposition to a Jewish state was voiced even by Zionists who opted for a cultural or spiritual understanding of a Jewish homeland.

Since the creation of Israel, there has likewise been no shortage of internal dissent concerning the cycle of violence and atrocity between Israelis and Palestinians. Soldiers under Yitzhak Rabin's command in the 1948 war, educated in 'cosmopolitan' ways, refused to cleanse Arab villagers from areas that would become part of the new Israeli state. During the Israeli bombing of Beirut in the 1980s, some Israeli soldiers refused to serve in Lebanon. During the Palestinian uprising, other Israeli soldiers saw, in the policy of might and beatings, images of Nazi brutality once carried out against Jews. For many Jews a transposition had taken place in Jewish life: Were Jews, in denying the rights of Palestinians, acting like those who had denied Jewish rights across the millennia?

Marc Ellis

From Wrestling with Zion: progressive Jewish-American responses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, edited and with an introduction by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, Grove Press, New York 2003.

As the tradition of dissent has grown over the years, Jewish leadership has become increasingly accepting of Israeli policies which, at different times in the last decades, shocked the Jewish world. The recent Palestinian uprising has now raised the stakes significantly, as reports circulate of Israeli tanks and helicopter gunships surrounding and menacing a defenseless civilian population. This current violence comes after almost a decade of peace talks, as the implementation of the Oslo accords has constantly been delayed and violated, as settlements grow ever bigger and more provocative, and as bypass roads and tunnels cut through and around West Bank cities and villages. This second intifada has raised both the consciousness of Jewish dissenters and the rhetoric of Jewish leaders.

Even those Jewish dissenters who initially accepted Oslo have emerged in the post-Oslo era with a new voice. Rather than policy implementation, for example, "Tikkun" now speaks of witnessing to values in the Jewish tradition that are being systematically violated. Lerner writes most forcefully: "We want the world to know that in this dark period there were Jews who stood up and proclaimed their commitment to a Judaism that would fight for a world in which every human being is treated with respect and the sense of sanctity that are central to a spiritual vision of the world". At the same time, however, major Jewish organizations have been placing full-page advertisements in papers like the "New York Times", calling for Jewish unity in the face of Palestinian aggression and what they term the Palestinian refusal to accept the 'offers' of the Israeli government for a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In these calls for Jewish

A Jewish bimonthly magazine of politics, culture and society edited in the United States. Rabbi Michael Lerner is its editor.

unity, the helicopter gunships used by Israel are not mentioned, nor is the closure of towns and cities.

The Jewish establishment and Jewish dissenters have been arguing over the same turf - the moral innocence of the Jewish people, born of Jewish suffering. Jewish leadership proclaims this innocence to be self-evident; Jewish dissenters believe an original Jewish innocence is in need of recovery. Forgotten by both sides is the view that Jews were never more innocent than other peoples, an initial Jewish response to the establishment of the State of Israel that explicitly refused to claim a right to a homeland uncontested by another people. In the emergency years of the post-Holocaust world, Judah Magnes, Martin Buber, and Hannah Arendt, who favored the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine but who opposed the creation of the State of Israel, desired fraternal bonds between Jews and Arabs in a changing Palestine and, whatever the claims of either people, envisioned a mutually interdependent empowerment.

If Israel, like any other nation-state, is not innocent, if its own trajectories have less to do with an ancient ethical tradition than with modern state-building, if it can, again like any nation-state, only use religion and religiosity for its own purposes, then the dissenters' attempt to call Israel to its Jewishness is a lost battle; its Jewishness can only be dimly perceived as traditional and worthy of discussion in a spiritual way. Instead of encouraging dissenters, that is, instead of encouraging those who wish to reform Judaism from within, we must look to a more radical, prophetic tradition. We must be willing to embrace Jews of conscience who are willing

to abandon the Jewish establishment entirely and go into exile in order to combat the abusive practices of the Jewish state.

Constantinian Judaism

The Judaism which is presently practiced in Israel and among the Jewish leadership in America parallels the ties that Christianity has had in nation-states after it was elevated from a persecuted sect to a state religion. Historians call the linking of the Christian Church to the state Constantinian Christianity. We must begin to consider that, in the State of Israel, we now have a Constantinian Judaism.

Constantinian Christianity transformed its ethical and spiritual witness into a set of policies that legitimated the state and elevated its own respectability. Though the texts of the Christian spiritual tradition and the symbolism of its deepest impulses remained, in fact a new religion evolved that used the subversive message of its early years as a cover for the development of a theocratic orthodoxy that would have scandalized the early followers of Jesus.

Is not this what has happened to Judaism in our time, the initiation of a Constantinian Judaism in service to the state and to power? Are not Jewish dissidents in the same position that Christian dissidents find themselves? Of course, since Judaism has developed this sensibility only in the last decades, and as its population is minuscule compared to global Christianity, the scope of Jewish Constantinianism is much smaller. At the same time, though, there is less on the line for Christians than for Jews, for the Constantinianism of Christianity has become so widespread and diffused that no one Christian community seems immediately concerned about

the other. Nor has the Christian community, at least in the West, come through an experience of suffering like the Holocaust.

What is clear is that the Jewish leadership is fully assimilated to this Constantinianism in Israel and America, and most Jews follow this path to achieve security and affluence.

In concrete terms, Jewish Constantinianism means that, no matter what agreements Israel finally signs with the Palestinians, justice will be distant and secondary. At any moment Israel can declare another emergency, real or imagined, and continue on its way. Jewish dissidents are permanently within a cycle they did not begin and cannot control, for they can only react rather than chart new directions.

What are Jewish dissenters to do? On the one hand, they seek to argue as Jews, within the Jewish tradition and for a Jewish future. On the other hand, by competing for the same terrain as Jewish leadership, dissenters enter into compromise, arguing ethics within a Constantinian Judaism that is beholden to the state and to power. Any ethical challenge, any headway that Jewish dissenters make, will be within a united framework acceptable to and defined by the leaders of Constantinian Judaism.

Trying to prove one's Jewishness in this arrangement is to be on the defensive and destined to fail the test. For how much more can ethics be challenged than the wholesale dislocation of a people, aerial bombardments of defenseless cities, closures of towns and villages for weeks and months at a time, assassination squads and torture legitimated by the courts? How long before an ethical tradition is simply declared dead rather than argued for in compromise?

This ethical challenge is highlighted in the arena that should be the freest from *realpolitik*, the university. Jewish leadership is most often thought to reside within Jewish organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and rabbinic associations. As important, however, is the network of university-affiliated academics in administration, in Jewish Studies programs, and in Holocaust Studies chairs. More than any other group, university-affiliated Jewish administrators and scholars, though mostly liberal in orientation, have stifled debate on university campuses around the country. Competing for their own legitimacy as Jewish scholars, they have often silenced their own voices and voices to the left of their positions. They, too, have been caught in the bind that forces compromise, twisted into a position which allows them to criticize without effectively challenging the dominant establishment. In fact, dissenting Jews, whether identified with the university or identified with “Tikkun”, have not only helped stifle dissent to the left of them, but in doing so have helped shield the Jewish world from a deeper understanding of the dilemmas Jews face as a people and a possible movement beyond the present impasse.

Dissenters have been engulfed by the establishment before; in fact, in our lifetime. Constantinian Judaism arose out of Rabbinic Judaism only through the alchemy of changing historical circumstances matched with a vigorous theology of dissent formulated in response to the Holocaust. A glance back at this recent history explains why we cannot trust the current surge of dissent against the State of Israel’s policies to usher in anything other than a renewed establishment.

Holocaust Theology as Dissent

Rabbinic Judaism is a Judaism of textuality and hope framed by a larger society that at best tolerates the presence of Jews, and at worst seeks their removal. It began to break down as a response to the emergence of Jewish power in America and Israel, and particularly with the end of the adversarial character of Western Christianity. Without the ongoing experience of ghettoization, Rabbinic Judaism lost its contextual grounding; correspondingly, the canonical texts of Judaism, formed, affirmed, and studied only within Rabbinic Judaism, lost their hold on Jews and Judaism.

Though the experience of the Holocaust would seem to have reinforced Rabbinic Judaism - after all, what better example could there be of a society eager to purge Jews from its presence than Nazi Germany - the Jewish response to the Holocaust was framed as a dissent from Rabbinic Judaism based precisely on that theology's inability to respond either to the extreme purgation of Jews during the Holocaust or to the growth of Jewish power after the Holocaust. Within Holocaust theology, Rabbinic Judaism becomes a lost world of beauty and limitations; the Torah becomes a place of challenge where the very claims and tensions of the text are used as springboards for a radical questioning of God and God's fidelity found there.

Yet Holocaust theology becomes dominant because it preserves and transforms key elements of Rabbinic Judaism, particularly the rabbinic belief in the chosenness of Jews and Jewish life, a chosenness paradoxically heightened by God's inability to protect Jews and the Nazi attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. Holocaust theology follows the pattern of dissent in which the prophetic - that is, a

truly radical reworking of the tradition based on the call of conscience - remains unannounced in specific terms or figures, at least as traditionally recognized by the rabbis. Rather, the 'prophets' become the Holocaust theologians themselves: Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, for example, or those who further Jewish survival and empowerment, such as David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel. Israel itself becomes the new center of the canon, invoked with a regularity that is reminiscent of the cycle of Torah readings. A new Torah comes into being, with the tension in the traditional canon replaced by an alternating rhythm of suffering and empowerment in the contemporary world. Of the ancient Torah and the rabbinic framework, only that which speaks to the Holocaust and Israel is relevant. The ancient bends to the contemporary or is rejected.

Neither the Rabbinic era nor the era of dissent following the Holocaust allow room for the prophetic without restraint. Their respective theologies began as subversive and insurgent, only to become orthodoxies that diminish and refuse the context that evolves within their own ascendancy. Rabbinic Judaism initially refuses the Holocaust as a category that is religiously charged with depth and consequence; Holocaust theology refuses the critique of Jewish empowerment as worthwhile of consideration. Rabbinic Judaism refuses to see the contemporary history of suffering and empowerment as defining; Holocaust theology refuses to acknowledge the arrival of Constantinian Judaism, or its complicity in that arrival.

Only in the last phase of Holocaust theology are the ethics of Jewish power discussed, and only in terms of defending an Israel undergoing a relentless cri-

tique by a new wave of Jewish dissenters in the wake of the invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s and the policy of beatings instituted to crush the Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Moving beyond the earlier theologies of Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim that saw Israel as an innocent dream and only in relation to the suffering of the Holocaust, Irving Greenberg, an Orthodox rabbi and president of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, sought to reconcile the uses of Israeli power with Jewish ethics. But in an interesting and instructive way, Greenberg, in spite of his orthodoxy, does not surface the tensions of the biblical text important for this discussion. Rather, he divides Jewish history into eras where the determining factor for Jewish ethics becomes the present crisis revolving around the Holocaust and the survival of Israel. This allows Greenberg the freedom to demote the prophetic from a revolutionary model to a fascinating and limited anachronism.

For Holocaust theologians like Greenberg in an era when the commanding voice of Jewish life issues not from Sinai but from Auschwitz, in an era when the central religious commandment of our time is empowerment rather than the critique of power, the prophetic call to conscience must be disciplined and relegated to a secondary status. For the unintended consequences of the prophetic demand to put ethics before nation-building, when applied to the state of Israel, can only lead in his view to the destruction of Israel and thus a second Holocaust. In what has now clearly become a Constantinian Judaism, Jewish life takes precedence over the prophetic and the ethics of Jewish power trumps the power of Jewish ethics. After the Holocaust, no one, not even God, can override the Jewish nation-state in understand-

ing and maintaining this mission. A theology of dissent has become the new establishment.

Current Jewish Dissent

In the face of Constantinian Judaism's ban on the prophetic, Jewish dissenters against current Israeli policies are in a difficult, perhaps impossible, bind. Like the Holocaust theologians, they affirm the end of the Rabbinic era, or at least Rabbinic Judaism as it was practiced in Jewish history. Also, like the Holocaust theologians and the Constantinian theology to which they gave rise, Jewish dissenters affirm the centrality of the Holocaust for contemporary Jewish experience. It is true that dissenters use the Holocaust to call for an end to Palestinian suffering, on the basis that if the suffering of the Holocaust justifies Israel as a nation state for the survivors, it also mandates the refusal to cause others to suffer. However, that position traps dissenters into also confirming the need for an Israeli state based on the very ethics of suffering and power that they must also condemn.

Clearly, the critique by Jewish dissenters of Israel is limited to the post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the 'aberrational' policies that followed. Despite the suffering caused the Palestinians in the creation of Israel, Jews, in the dissenters' view, had no choice but to found a nation-state after the Holocaust. Like Holocaust theologians, Jewish dissenters limit the prophetic in time and tone. They agree with each other that the undermining of Israel's *raison d'être* and the power to maintain its existence is an unpardonable sin to be punished with excommunication from the Jewish world. Where Jewish dissenters of Israel and Holocaust theologians disagree is over the nature of Is-

rael's current policies. To combat Holocaust theology's embrace of the ethics of power, today's dissenters have turned back to religious language. Here talmudic interpretation is found again, but is mixed with a new age sensibility which eclipses the hard judgements and theological intervention of the prophets and God in Jewish life. Torah and Talmud are cited, that is, not in a prophetic manner which would question the very foundation of the Jewish state, but instead to merely shore up that foundation. Indeed, the dissenters' very belief that 'Jewishness', rather than the imperatives of the nation-state itself, is determining current policies, shows how deep their denial of the force of Constantinian Judaism is, and how complicit they ultimately are with it.

Like all renewal movements, the current wave of Jewish dissenters seek to renew Judaism by calling it back to its best intentions and possibilities. Constantinian religiosity, however, typically fights this renewal, absorbs part of it, and then claims it as its own even as the critique is transformed and vitiated. This is the fate of Christian reformers. How will Jewish dissenters escape this fate; how will they be able to avoid losing the battle they rage while becoming fuel for the continuation and expansion of the very establishment they fight? The answer is that the agreed-upon parameters of the civil war, Jew vs. Jew, are obsolete, and can only result in a continuation of a cycle of legitimation and critique that leaves the Palestinian people suffering and the Jewish ethical tradition gutted. To succeed in loosening itself from Constantinian Judaism, Jewish dissent must free itself from the 'acceptable parameters' of Jewish dissent. This means that the hoped-for return to Jewish innocence must be left behind.

Prophetic Judaism

Instead of choosing to dissent from within the tradition, Renewal Jews must take the step to prophecy and become Jews of conscience. Jews of conscience refuse the hypocrisy of the Jewish establishment and the compromises of Jewish dissenters. They abandon the rearguard arguments about Jewish identity. In the main, Jews of conscience are secular Jews because religious language itself has become so compromised that the very notion of religiosity, no matter how beautifully rendered and appealingly presented, is anathema. In essence, Jews of conscience flee the Jewish world even as they act and organize against Israeli policies of displacement and occupation. Jews of conscience are in an exile that has no expectation and perhaps, because of their situation, no possibility of return.

What Jews of conscience seem to be saying to the Jewish establishment is that Jewish history *as we have known it and inherited it* is over. The fight is no longer for Jewish survival or Jewish innocence; the very category of Jewishness is now a quagmire that admits of no resolution or forward movement. For these new prophets, a level of hypocrisy has entered Jewish life from which there is no recovery. The Jewish world as it has been known and inherited is no longer able to provide a future worth bequeathing to the next generation. In 1969, Emmanuel Levinas, the French Jewish philosopher, wrote an essay titled *Judaism and the Present*. In this essay, Levinas discerns the central trajectory of the Judaic sensibility and the role of the Jewish prophet. Judaism, he writes, is a “non-coincidence with its time, within coincidence: in the radical sense of the term it is an anachronism, the

In Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme, A. Michel, Paris 1994; Difficult freedom: essays on Judaism, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore 1990, trans. Seán Hand.

simultaneous presence of a youth that is attentive to reality and impatient to change it, an old age that has seen it all and is returning to the origins of things”. Of the prophetic within Judaism, Levinas writes that the “most deeply committed man, one who can never be silent, the prophet, is also the most separate being, and the person least capable of becoming an institution. Only the false prophet has an official function”. Levinas concludes his discussion of Judaism and the prophetic with this haunting and perceptive challenge: “But this essential content [of Judaism and the prophetic] cannot be learned like a catechism or summarized like a credo... It is acquired through a way of living that is a ritual and heartfelt generosity, wherein a human fraternity and an attention to the present are reconciled with an eternal distance in relation to the contemporary world. It is an asceticism, like the training of a fighter”.

This summation of Judaism and the prophetic is for Levinas the essence of the Judaic and its contribution to the world. On the threshold of the twenty-first century, prophetic Judaism is at one and the same time in danger of disappearing and reappearing with incredible force. Constantinian Judaism signals the prophetic’s disappearance in an announced Jewish form; Jewish dissenters raise the prophetic possibilities inherent in the Judaic in a fascinating and compromised form; Jews of conscience testify to the survival of the prophetic without being able to articulate this sensibility in symbol or meaning.

The procession of Judaism and the prophetic, this Judaic sensibility which, according to Levinas, refuses idols, mystery, and magic, accompanies these Jews of conscience into exile. Determinedly agnos-

tic toward eschatological claims made by religion and the state, and refusing a predestined and confined pattern of worship and loyalty, Jews of conscience proceed into an uncertain future. The questions of symbolic representation to self and others, of fulfilling and passing the tradition down to their children, of proclaiming a special status or even deriving an ascendant status from the popularity of Judaism and Jewish life in our time - these remain unaddressed by Jews in exile. Unlike Jewish dissenters, who always leave the door open for a return and an inheritance of Jewish establishment life, Jews of conscience are far afield, without signposts or destination. The Holocaust is rarely discussed and Israel is seen as a lost land, a foreign territory. They are the basis of a new diaspora of conscience.

The End of (Jewish) History?

What does this reassertion of the diaspora mean for Jewish life and for the prophetic? Does it mean that Judaism is fundamentally diaspora in its sensibility and that the tensions found in its canonical text make it almost impossible to maintain a faithful religiosity in a nation-state claiming Jewish affiliation? Now that the prophetic has been lifted from the canon, now that the claim of God's instrumentality and voice have been muted, must we acknowledge that the very source of the prophetic and the very claims of the prophets can no longer be made?

The arrival of helicopter gunships as the witness of the Jewish people, as central to Jewish life as the Torah once was, and the gathering of millions of Jews in a nation-state that in its creation caused a catastrophe for the Palestinian people, do not demonize Jewish history or relegate it only to a colonial and imperial power. The militarization of Jew-

ish life and thought can be recognized and opposed without condemning the struggles and limitations of Jewish history as told through the biblical canon or through a history of rejection and ghettoization.

The idea that a people's history is unidirectional, without evolution of thought and practice, and without choices that have been made and can be made again, is a form of determinism and racism that others have used against Jews and Jews have used against others. So, too, the idea of separation of peoples as desirable and permanent for the protection and projection of identity. That Jewish history has come to an end as we have known it and inherited it does not mean that Judaism, the very touchstone of the Judaic, has lost its force in the world. It only means that the contemporary expression in Jewish life masks a deeper sensibility that in its renewed expression cannot be articulated in language identifiably Jewish.

Militarization of religious discourse, like the militarization of social and political discourse, does not vitiate core values or witness. On the contrary, it heightens the need for such expression even as it severs the language and conceptual framework that has been the vehicle for its expression. Thus the Jewish exile without religious language is absolutely to be expected. It is inevitable that after the experience of Constantinian Christianity, the refusal of Constantinian Judaism in its starkest and most consistent form should be found among secular Jews of conscience who have come into solidarity with the Palestinian people.

For some these exiles are an example of abandoning the difficult path of empowerment and the language that path could embrace beyond oppression. But the experience, borne out again during the Al Aqsa inti-

fada, is that operating within is simply attempting to hold the line on the amount of oppression, the percentage of loss of Palestinian land and freedom, the degree to which militarization of Jewish life will be tolerated.

At this point in our history, only the prophets can point the way forward. Their power is limited, to be sure, and the cycle of violence will, at least for the foreseeable future, continue. In this cycle more Palestinians, and some Jews, will die. Those deaths will be accompanied by the delay of freedom for a people and the destruction of a long and eventful history of suffering and struggle. The prophets have no power to grant this freedom or to salvage this history, only to witness to the possibility of another way that joins Palestinians and Jews in a bond that brings forth life rather than death.

Zionism versus Judaism!

Here

notes from the present

It is indeed amazing how much has changed since the early years of the twentieth century in the manner in which Jews see or define themselves. What was once loathed or feared to say the least has become a source of pride and identity. Zionism, which was once a minority-response to European anti-Semitism rejected by a great majority of world Jewry, is today inseparable in the minds of the na-

Azzam Tamimi

majority of Jews from Judaism itself. A recent encounter with a leading figure in the British Jewish community has been of great educating value in this regard. My interlocutor had come to the meeting armed with research material about me that informed him of my anti-Semitism. He told me that an acquaintance of his frowned when he learned from him that he was coming to meet me; how could a leading Jewish figure like him sit with an anti-Semite like me?

I protested his claim and challenged him to prove it. I always thought of myself as a Semite, I explained; a pure one, whose Arab ancestry is well defined. Genealogy aside, nowhere in my writings or speeches do I express hatred for the Jews let alone incite such sentiment against them. Ah, said my Jewish friend, but you do not believe in Israel's right to exist, and that to me is anti-Semitism. He labored to explain to me that this for people like him was an issue of paramount importance, not for any specific religious reasons - for his arguments were not based on religious claims - but because Israel today, as he put it, is the reason why the Jews continue to exist. Since the Holocaust, he added, Israel has been the source of inspiration for young men, like his own son who has joined the Israeli army and is intent on settling down in Palestine, to maintain their Jewish identity.

I protested once more; for I know many Jews who do not see Israel the way he does. He said "forget about the Naturi Karta for they do not represent much". I said not only them but there are others as well who believe in what the majority of the Jews once believed in, namely that Zionism was a disaster and not a solution to the problems facing the Jews. Why, I asked him, should the Jews define

A group of the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community.

themselves in terms of a political project that ‘was not’ at one time and ‘will not’ be in the future. Could he not see, I thought, that this was extremely dangerous and gravely wrongful? The Jews were in existence for two thousands years before Israel was created on land stolen from the Palestinians and they will remain in existence when the Palestinians return to their homes and Israel ceases to exist.

And what will you do then, he asked; throw the Jews into the sea? Far from it, I said. The Jews lived in Muslim lands for centuries where they enjoyed security and prosperity and may stay there should they wish to but not through aggression. “I am obliged by my religion, Islam, to recognize the Jews and to coexist with them in peace and harmony but I cannot, and my religion forbids me as does common sense, to recognize the legitimacy of the illegitimate and to accept the unacceptable. How can any Palestinian recognize the right of invaders to occupy his mother’s house or his father’s land? Should the dreams and aspirations of one people be accomplished at the expense of the basic rights of another people?

The belief that Judaism and Zionism are one and the same constitutes a major hindrance to any Muslim-Jewish rapprochement. This is a belief that is paradoxically shared by people across the divide and is the main source of distrust and hatred.

I have for the past ten years or so been writing on the importance of making a distinction between Zionism and Judaism. In particular, I have been urging Muslims to stop referring to fake documents, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, in explaining the conflict in the Middle East.

My efforts and the efforts of those who share my concern are undermined by a great deal of literature

that is still seen by many Muslims as a source of inspiration on the topic. There is an abundance of writings by Muslim as well as non-Muslim authors that seek to explain the nature of the conflict in the Middle East through conspiracy theory. Without necessarily meaning it, such writings are most detrimental to the just cause of the Palestinians.

Much of the Muslim literature that promotes conspiracy theory, and that at the same time expresses hostility toward the Jews and Judaism, is based on imports from Christian anti-Jewish writings. The most influential document in this regard has been the aforementioned "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which concludes that Jews have hatched a global conspiracy aimed at imposing their control over the world and at subjugating all else to their influence so as to serve their own interests.

The occupation of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state in it are claimed by the believers in this theory to be a crucial part of this Jewish conspiracy. Some Muslim writers have gone as far as interpreting the Qur'anic narrative vis-à-vis the Israelites and the Jews in light of what the Protocols allege. Hostility to the Zionist project may have blurred the eyes of many Muslims from seeing the difference between the Qur'anic chastisement of bad conduct and ill-manners, which some Israelites and some Jews practised - and which Muslims and Christians have been warned from copying, and the Qur'anic injunction concerning the entitlement of Jews, as well as Christians, to Covenant rights the violation of which by Muslims is a sin in the eyes of God.

Undoubtedly, the Zionist project bears full responsibility for the Arab and Muslim misperception of Jews and Judaism. Never were relations between

Muslims and Jews worldwide this bad. Nothing explains the current bitterness and alienation but the problem of Palestine that is the outcome of the creation of a Zionist state on land usurped from the Muslims either by force or through deception.

An increasing number of Jews accept today that the Zionist project embroiled Judaism in its intrigues so as to bestow religious legitimacy on itself. Despite the secular and anti-religious nature of Zionism, it found it convenient to use, or abuse, religious doctrines such as the 'Land of Promise' and the 'Chosen People of God' in order to convince the Jews, most of whom had initially been opposed to Zionism, to adopt the Zionist solution to the Jewish problem in Europe. The ultimate objective had been to persuade the Jews to sponsor the State of Israel, which had been given a theological significance superseding that of the long-awaited Messiah who is supposed to appear toward the end of time.

This ideology was in the beginning condemned by Jewish religious leaders as an adulteration of Jewish faith that had been predominant until the beginning of the twentieth century and which forbade Jewish migration to Palestine with the purpose of settling there permanently. Jewish Orthodoxy viewed such migration as a violation that entailed the forcing of the will of God and that amounted to the sin of apostasy.

Jews who insist that Zionism and Israel are essential components of the identity of their community do a great disservice to world Jewry and undermine the efforts to build bridges between the Jews and Muslims. Similarly, Muslims who insist that Judaism and Zionism are inseparable and who believe in a 'global Jewish conspiracy' gravely

harm the just cause of the Palestinians.

Muslim intellectuals have an obligation to develop a coherent and convincing discourse that is capable of promoting and defending the right of the Palestinian people to resist occupation while at the same time gaining the sympathy and understanding of non-Zionist Jews who are only likely to increase in number as Israel shrinks and falters.

Defective and unfounded claims, which may be exploited by the pro-Zionist camp, must be avoided. To be able to capture new grounds in exposing the injustice and inhumanity of the Zionist project in Palestine a number of issues need to be presented to the public with simplicity and clarity:

1. Muslims need to trace the roots of the conflict. History here is of the essence since media coverage of the conflict fails miserably to teach the public anything about how it all began. The media usually give the impression that two neighboring communities, one Arab and one Jewish, seem unable to resolve a dispute over territory or resources. The facts of history prove that this was never a territorial dispute or a dispute over resources. The Zionist project is rather an invasion or a colonial campaign in which the Jews act more like a functional group, or a spearhead, whereas the real players are the leading decision makers of the world order. The explanation would have to touch briefly on ancient history and then more profoundly on nineteenth century Europe since the rise of nationalism and later Zionism all the way to the First World War, and British Mandate, the Balfour Declaration, the Nazis and the Holocaust, the Second World War and the creation of the state of Israel.

2. The attitude of the Muslims toward the Jews throughout history was based on recognizing them

as a people of the Book who had inalienable rights explicitly stated in Islamic law. The conflict in the Middle East is not a conflict between Islam and Judaism or between the Muslims and the Jews. Some of the Jews today are opposed to the Zionist project on religious grounds. At the turn of the twentieth century most of world Jewry was opposed to Zionism. Had it not been for the Holocaust Israel would never have come to being and the majority of the Jews would have continued to oppose the idea of a Jewish state.

3. Muslims must keep the door open for dialogue with even those who support Israel in the West. Appealing to their humanity it may be possible to convince some of them of the true nature of Zionism and its evil repercussions not only to the Palestinians but also to humanity as a whole. Zionism can easily be compared to Apartheid. The objective would be to shake and weaken the camp of Israel's supporters whether Jewish or non-Jewish.

4. The Palestinians are not the first in history to be subjected to foreign occupation, to an invasion by an alien power. Therefore, they have the right, like those who went through the same experience, to resist and fight back. The Palestinians need to heed the examples of the French resistance against the Nazis, the Vietnamese resistance against American occupation, and the South African struggle against Apartheid. In spite of the failure of the international community to stand by what is right and just, the Palestinians are supported by all international instruments and conventions in their right to resist until they are free and their land is liberated.

The Zionist State, by its very nature, is unviable on the long term. Occupation will eventually come to an end and Zionism will be dismantled just as

Apartheid was. However, the end of Zionism does not, and should not, mean the end of the Jews; they've always been part of the region and will continue to be so. The problem is not with the Jews but with the racist political order that claims to represent them. Muslims, Christians and Jews co-existed together peacefully for many centuries before and will coexist peacefully for many centuries to come.

Back to the diaries

Here

notes from the present

Luino, Italy, July 1st

One ought to say everything or else hold one's tongue. To say everything, a letter is no good. And I'm only angry and worried, feelings that taper away and run the risk of naivety. We feel powerless. We are, and we're so powerful. I open my arms and my throat to you, I can't just sit here and listen. I know that in your daily lives, many of you do something, make choices, stretch out your hands, change paths. Let's try to put it all together. I'm not offering a solution, but opening a question. Let's do something to snatch ourselves away from the brink of destruction. I want to see the faces of the people who think all of this is right, in what name they believe it, in what pit they see the thing they believe in. Where do they see the peace, the justice, the values, the path of righteousness. Where are they? In whose hands? In whose heart? In whose land? The faces, I say, because all I'm left with are those of the men in power, almost none of them with any visible difference, and in them I see the part they play, one that rots away the soul. I mean the faces of people like me, the small, stupid people on the street, each with their own soul. I'm asking why what counts most of all is heroism, why the most important thing is not to give in to blackmail, why the superman is to be defended as an

Paola Turrone

July 6. The first day of the G8 conference opens with discussion of the Kyoto treaty, aimed at reducing carbon gas emissions 5.2% from 1990 levels by 2012. According to experts, to contain global warming we would need to cut emissions 30% from 1990 levels by 2020. According to the UN, by 2010 emissions will have increased 10% compared to 1990. The country that contributes the most to this pollution is the United States (China is second). And on June 8, the "New York Times" revealed that Philip Cooney, a former oil industry lobbyist whom George Bush appointed chief of staff for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, manipulated several reports from 2002 and 2003 which had already been approved by government scientists, modifying the text to defend the Bush administration's stance against the Kyoto treaty.

mail, why the superman is to be defended as an ethical, moral, and just principle, and life, on the other hand, is just a tool. The heroism of fighting in peace. And that's how we start to talk. I'm only expressing rage and discouragement, and I'm wondering if being able to share it can help us look together for a way to react. What are we waiting for? Who are we waiting for? We're waiting for the fighting to stop in Iraq (while in Iraq the fighting doesn't stop, but intensifies all the more, and the fighting continues in almost all of Africa, millions of deaths that leave people indifferent, as it does in Indonesia, Myanmar, most of Latin America), we're waiting for the fighting to stop in Iraq, but what needs to happen for the fighting to stop? For someone to be the first to kill off all the others? Are we waiting for a saviour to be born? What seed is germinating amid the ashes of the Middle East and the bombs of the West? We're waiting for the next rhetorical statement from Bush, the next terrorist attack, the next soldiers and civilians to be killed, all necessary collateral effects, abstract effects, in the name of the principle, the concrete principle, of democracy. One is inevitably left with the question: does this mean, after all the isms, that defending a reason of state - whatever name you give it and history has given it, in your own country or that of others - does this mean that a reason of state is worth killing people?

Rome, July 7th

The news of the bombs in London caught me while at work, between pop songs on an intolerable radio station, and I pricked up my ears trying to glean

On the occasion of the G8 conference, at which Africa is a central topic, Italian NGOs pointed out that "in the last 20 years, Africa's share of world trade has dropped from 6% to 2%. Rich countries spend 300 million dollars to protect their trade through government subsidies. If Africa could increase its exports by only 1%, that would entail growth amounting to 70 billion dollars. While a cow in Europe receives 2 dollars of subsidies every day, and a cow in Japan receives 4, the average daily wage of half the African population is one dollar". And in June, Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, declared that the goal of halting the spread of the virus by 2015 is unlikely to be achieved. Due in large part to a lack of funds, 88% of those with the disease do not have access to treatment. They are primarily Africans.

Lucianna Argentino

Today, July 7, three bombs in the underground and one on a bus kill dozens of people and wound hun-

more from the brief news bulletins, to understand what exactly had happened; meanwhile, the event unravelled, at times clearer, at times more confused, and with varying accuracy, in the accounts of the succession of customers at my register. Amid a growing feeling of unease and the work I still had to do, came a gentleman telling me about how he'd just gotten back from his holidays, and the complaints he had heard from hotel owners about the lack of vacationers; he told me about the grown children who wouldn't go there with him anymore, about how he lost his wife seven years ago, about his eldest son graduating from university, and then he paid me with luncheon vouchers from the Ministry of Defense that bore at the bottom the disturbing words "land armaments division", leading me to think that we really do live on an armed planet, where bombs and weapons are exploding every day, kamikazes are blowing themselves up... then at two o'clock, the TV news told me all about the atrocity.

Milan, July 9th

The photo of Tavistock Square, just after the explosion; in the background is the gutted carcass of the bus, and in the foreground, two people, witnesses to the bombing, who happened to be in the space of the scene framed by the lens. One of them, the girl, is running towards me - that is, the viewer - towards the space 'outside' the scene; in short, she's running away. Just behind her, in the space of the photo, a young man with a yellow backpack is instead running towards the bus... Two opposite movements. two different impulses of the

dreds in London. Al Qaeda is responsible for the attack.

July 12. Dozens of people are killed in northeast Kenya during clashes between members of the Borana and Gabra ethnic groups, who for some time now have been fighting over water and grazing land in their region.

July 13. A car bomb explodes in Baghdad at an American checkpoint while soldiers are handing out chocolate. Thirty-two victims, almost all of them children.

Marina Massenz

July 14, from "La Repubblica". Thousands of children in Iraq have been killed by bombs, shrapnel, or stray bullets. They die in the streets, in part because many of them (20%) no longer go to school: the buildings are destroyed, there aren't enough teachers, or their parents don't send them out of fear of kidnappers. But many also die of hunger or disease:

opposite movements, two different impulses of the spirit. The third scene is on the 'outside': me, looking at the picture on the front page of today's paper. And in which direction am I running?

one out of eight do not reach their fifth year. Since the war, Iraq has become a country with one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world.

On the airplane, July 12th

Massimo Parizzi

Flying to Bangkok. Malpensa airport was full of kids. Like the ones shouting on the bus, fifteen or sixteen-year-old boys and girls who would touch each other - nothing sexual, in the strict sense of the word, but they would touch each other's arms and faces: a physical confidence that we didn't have at their age, forty years ago. Nor did we travel by plane. Nor would I ever have said to someone, as a boy on the bus said to a girl as an insult - joking, to be sure, but that made it even worse: "you Jew". And he said it with a smile, thoughtlessly, without the intention of hurting her or the suspicion of having said something disgraceful. In a loud voice.

July 22. In London, undercover police kill Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian electrician, with five pistol shots to the head. They had mistaken him for a kamikaze terrorist.

July 22. A string of attacks in Sharm el Sheik, Egypt. Dozens of people are killed, most of them tourists.

From Indochina.

Travel notes

by Massimo Parizzi

Here

notes from the present

Ayuthaya, Thailand, July 15th

An enormous Buddha in gilded bronze. The worshippers here kneel down or sit on their heels, bringing their hands together in front of their heads or chests, then for several minutes they shake a wooden cylinder full of sticks, making it rattle. Last of all, they prostrate themselves several times with their hands together. Nearby, planted in plastic buckets, are tree branches with banknotes hanging from them, almost all twenty-baht bills (half a dollar). Every so often someone will add one, attaching it to the others with a stapler placed nearby. Along a hallway, a few yards from the Buddha, are other plastic buckets full of everyday items: toothpaste, detergent, an umbrella, a flashlight. Worshippers buy them as an offering to the monks.

Lopburi, Thailand, July 21st

This morning at 8:00, the national anthem was played over the loudspeakers at the station. Everyone who was sitting on the benches along the tracks got to their feet, standing in silence until it was over.

Sukhothai, Thailand, July 25th

K. took us to the house of his inlaws, a peasant family. It is in a small town that blends into the trees. A wooden house on stilts. The entrance is a

large room with pictures of the king and queen hung on the wall. Then on one side, three bedrooms, on the other, the bathroom: a squat toilet and a bucket for the shower.

Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 29th

The College of Dramatic Arts. The female students are in sarongs, with frogged blouses and blue ribbons holding back their hair. The male students are in blue trousers with a very low crotch. It is their lunch break, and they crowd around the stand that sells drinks and sandwiches. Then outside, in front of the theatre, a dance class begins.

In the afternoon, in a bookshop, I pick up a book about the current prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra. It shows, according to the jacket notes, “how Shinawatra has amassed two billion dollars, how he barely escaped a conviction for corruption, how he promises to bring Thailand into the First World within eight years”, etc. It sounds like it’s about Berlusconi.

Tha Ton, Thailand, August 1st

It rained all night. A heavy rain. The river is flowing swiftly. The trees on the hills trace shapes that are curved, bowed, empty and full. They recall the architectural forms of the temples.

We drink a cup of coffee in a restaurant overlooking the river. The television is on, as it always is everywhere. But at least this seems to be a news program, instead of the usual ads or the equally common romantic soap operas.

Before I could even finish writing that, an advertisement came on. Someone changes the channel: karaoke. He changes it again: a quiz show. The things you see on TV seem even further removed

from reality than in Italy. Not only because you see wealth, but above all because you see a world that is 'polished'. And this one isn't.

Tha Ton, Thailand, August 2nd

The man is a Westerner, tall and slightly overweight. He must be about sixty. The woman is a young Thai, petite, smiling, pretty. We're in the park next to a waterfall. Some people are swimming around in the pool of cool water, or sitting on the rocks. Tourists and Thais.

These two are slightly apart from the others. He is crouching down with his camera ready. She is sitting on a rock, her body in profile, framed by the greenery. That's not enough for him. He asks her to hold a flower.

A butterfly is fluttering around. He waits, hoping it will land on the flower or on her knee. And it does. But in that instant, she jerks in a sudden gesture of annoyance. The pose is lost.

Pakbeng, Laos, August 4th

Six-thirty in the morning. At five o'clock the roosters started crowing, calling to each other. After a half an hour, I got up. Bit by bit the light grew. Over the forests, clouds, mist. Towards a quarter to six a few of the long, narrow fishing boats began to glide by. At a quarter past six, what sounded like a gong.

Luang Prabang, Laos, August 5th

Yesterday's trip, an uneasy one. The boat rolled and creaked. Strange glances and shouts between the helmsman at the bow and the other crew members aft kept me in a state of anxiety. There were eddies, at times violent ones, rapids, shoals, jutting rocks;

on one of them a speedboat had crashed, one of those boats that plough through the Mekong at breakneck speeds, the passengers and helmsman all wearing lifejackets and helmets.

The river is wide, mud-coloured, full of patterns formed by the uneven bottom and the currents, full of debris, pieces of wood, pieces of bamboo that often float motionless in the eddies. On the banks, the entire way, a landscape that must have looked the same a hundred or two hundred years ago: the forest, the tall, nodding green bamboo, palms, a thousand unfamiliar trees; in the clearings, villages, even large ones, of wooden houses built on stilts, without electricity, running water, or roads.

Luang Prabang, Laos, August 6th

A town, at least the center of it, that is focused on tourists. On the young (for the most part) Westerners, beautiful blond girls and tall boys, who go up and down the main street on their bikes or on foot, fill the guesthouses and restaurants, and sit in cafés drinking beer and Coke. For them (for us), as well as hotels, bars, and restaurants, there are Internet cafés, a million of them, and places to do laundry, to rent bikes. And the tuk-tuks, little motorized rickshaws used as taxis, and a market in the evenings. Two young men, one of whom works here at our guesthouse, another that we met in the temple at the top of the hill, told me they are studying English to work in tourism. But neither knows it very well, and the boy from the guesthouse seems to spend more time in front of the TV. Like the owners and everyone else. There are TVs everywhere, always on, and satellite antennas. And TV stations that often play karaoke, just like in Thailand: music videos with the words running across them, in Thai or Lao, which light up as they're sung.

The city is magnificent. It's lovely to walk through it, even if the feeling of being in a tourist enclave is unpleasant, and it's beautiful to look down on it from the top of the hill. A geometric web of a few main streets and many alleyways, invisible from above due to the canopy of trees, flanked by white colonial houses, wooden houses, temples surrounded by palms and banana trees between the Mekong and the Nam Khan, its tributary.

Luang Prabang, Laos, August 7th
Buddhism as a tool.

One. In my room I find a piece of paper that, under the heading "Acquire Merit", invites the guests of the establishment to "join us in the daily offering of food to the Buddhist monks, which takes place every morning at six on the riverside embankment. For the occasion, we would be happy to prepare a special basket for you to offer to the monks, with rice and your choice of Laotian sweets, cookies, or fruit (for 5 US dollars). We can also provide the ladies with a traditional Laotian costume for the occasion (1 dollar). Photography is permitted."

Two. In Thailand I bought a book about the "hill tribes", the ethnic minorities, most of whom live in the mountains in the northwest and southwest of the country. Even on the second page, it explains that they pose "many problems" that have been identified by the Thai authorities. One is the "lack of a sense of national identity", and so, under the heading of "Social and Economic Development", the policy regarding them calls for "the promotion of Buddhism among the tribal societies [most of them animist] in order to build national unity". Other tasks, such as the census and the assignment and requisition of land, are entrusted to the Third Army Corps.

Vientiane, Laos, August 9th

We arrived in Vientiane by bus. Nine hours. Mountains and forests for three quarters of the way. Deserted. Only along the road were there villages every so often, sometimes even large ones, of bamboo houses built on stilts. Not a single car. Very rarely a motorcycle. Naked children. People on foot.

Hanoi, Vietnam, August 13th

Today I visited the bookshops. I was looking for something (in English or French, obviously) by Pham Thi Hoai, whose book *The Crystal Messenger* I had brought from Italy and read. A sales clerk goes off and comes back with five books: photocopies on cheap paper of editions published in Singapore or New York. I bought two: one is an anthology of stories by various authors, and the other, a collection of stories by Nguyen Huy Thiep. But the latter was by mistake... It's so hard for me to remember these names that I got Pham Thi Hoai confused with Nguyen Huy Thiep. And I bought a book by the one thinking it was by the other! And the mistake didn't stop there. I asked the clerk if she could find me this writer's address, and after looking among the books on the shelves, she found the publisher's. That is, of course, the publisher of Nguyen Huy Thiep. I noticed the mix-up only upon paging through the books and finding a photo of my 'female' author: a man! But I didn't have the heart to admit my mistake and left thanking the clerk. Then, this evening, I started reading the stories by Thiep, and after a while, got the feeling that my mistake was a case of serendipity: finding something when you were looking for something else. They're beautiful, really beautiful.

Hanoi, Vietnam, August 14th

Today we went to the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum. You can tell when you're almost there. The souvenir stands (selling busts of 'Uncle Ho', gilded or plaster, small and large, pedestal sized, table sized, pocket sized...) start to multiply. Many young people are visiting it: school groups? The mausoleum is closed (I read in the guidebook that once a year the embalmed body is sent to Moscow for 'touch ups'). Like the museum, it is a marble building in the style we would call 'Fascist' in Italy.

We wait too long to start looking for something to eat, until all that is left is a soft, packaged slab of something that, if we were in Italy, might be a slice of some kind of savoury pie. Maybe this is why I buy it. But it's disgusting. Neither Marina nor I can manage to eat it. Planning to throw it away, we set it down next to us on the bench. We hadn't noticed that a man was watching us from the other side of the path. About forty, not well dressed, to be sure, but not in rags. His face is serious, or sad, or gloomy. He comes up, and with tactful, respectful gestures, pointing to our leftovers, asks if he can have it. Yes, of course. He wolfs it down.

Hanoi, Vietnam, August 14th, in the afternoon

The Temple of Literature is a monument to the mandarins, a Confucian university, and a symbolic architectural representation of the path that leads to knowledge. A few girls are 'praying', bowing three times in a row with joined hands, as one usually does at the foot of the Buddha, not only in front of a statue of Confucius, but also in front of the statues of three great figures in the history of Vietnamese literature.

Hanoi, Vietnam, August 15th

A house turned into a museum. In the small courtyard at the entrance, a man is making beautiful brush and ink paintings: nature scenes, sometimes with tiny people barely sketched in, shafts of bamboo... He needs only a few strokes, using the brush loaded with ink and the way it dries to obtain every conceivable tone. On many of them he recopies classical Vietnamese poems, using ideograms. He reads one to us, modulating his voice, and it is as lovely to listen to him as it is to watch him paint. He paints with skill and reads with pride. He isn't an artist in the usual sense of the word, but neither is he a souvenir-making machine.

Later on, we visit the company that publishes Nguyen Huy Thiep. I called yesterday, and since I couldn't find anyone who spoke English, had the young man from the hotel ask if they could give me the author's phone number. They said they didn't have it. I found that hard to believe. So today we decided to pay a visit. We go in and find ourselves in a bare, shabby room. At a table is a woman. Two more come in upon our arrival. In the background is the noise of a print shop. It isn't easy to understand each other, but after some effort, the phone number we are looking for turns up. I call. But Thiep speaks only Vietnamese. I ask one of the women to be my interpreter: to tell him that I'm the editor of such-and-such a magazine, that I've read his stories and like them, that I would like to publish something by him, and in the meantime, to meet him. She talks for a long time and finally hangs up. But why? I protest. And repeat that I would like to meet him. So she calls back, talks and talks, and finally writes an address down on a little piece of paper. It isn't Thiep's address, however, but the address of the

Italian embassy. To see me, he said, he needs an invitation from the embassy, and the meeting has to take place in their offices.

Hanoi, Vietnam, August 16th

I get up at about half past six. The director of the hotel is sleeping in the lobby on a mattress laid on the floor. I go to the Hoan Kiem lake. Its shores are lined with the figures of men and women, young and old (but especially women and old people) in tank tops, shorts, or pyjamas. Arms, legs, torsos, heads, mostly turned towards the water, move in gestures that are sometimes careless, sometimes precise. Bending, massaging their bellies or ears. Some chat with friends. A girl, her legs crossed in the lotus (or half-lotus) position, her arms in front of her and her palms turned up, is staring at the lake: she is meditating. Another sits motionless in the same position, but has joined the index finger and thumb of one hand to make a ring: the gesture of the 'teaching' Buddha. A few kids have set up a net on the path along the lake and are playing badminton. Further along, there are two teams of old people playing the same game. A group of women are exercising with the movements of a dance, opening and closing large red fans.

Hanoi, Vietnam, August 16th, in the afternoon

At the Women's Museum. Three floors of dusty rooms. The first image, at the entrance, is a towering bronze sculpture: the 'woman as mother'. The last floor is all about women's clothing: traditional costumes. Between maternity and fashion there are photographs from meetings of the Association for Happy Families. But there are also pictures of women who fought in the resistance, first against the French and then against the Americans. And these are moving.

Cat Ba, Vietnam, August 17th

We rent a motorcycle and ride along the road that crosses the island. After many miles we get a flat. A woman and some kids take us to what looks like a garage, from the rolling shutter that closes it. It's actually a house. After a little while the 'mechanic' arrives. As he takes out the inner tube, Marina plays with the children, who start asking for everything: my watch, a pencil, and above all, money, money. The inner tube needs to be replaced. A boy takes me on his motorcycle to buy one a few hundred yards away: 100,000 dong, about seven dollars, is the price the woman in the shop asks for. And the mechanic wants 60,000 dong, four dollars, for the repairs. Later they tell me that inner tubes cost 25,000 and the repairs should have cost 15,000. We get a hundred yards along, the engine sputters and dies. Two young men come up who had been following us on a motorcycle. They take out the spark plug, pretend to clean it, replace it with a used one... and ask for 100,000 dong for the spark plug and 50,000 for their work. I give them 120,000. Later we discover that while the inner tube was being changed, they had closed the gas lever, and then afterwards, pretending to fiddle with the spark plug, they opened it again. A trick that apparently is a common one.

Cat Ba, Vietnam, August 18th

The sky has opened: torrential rain. A small group walks along, covering themselves with a tarp. Some young men carry away the seats from the outdoor café, jumping through the water, which is already ten centimeters high. Some people who are already soaking wet walk along slowly. A few motorcycles go by. Every so often, a car.

I have to leave off writing. A girl who works in the

hotel has come up here to the veranda, where there are only tables and chairs, to tell us she would like to get some sleep: could we let her have the room? Sleep here? Where? I ask her and she makes the gesture of sitting in a chair with her elbow propped on the table. But then she folds up one of the tables and leans it against the wall. Is she going to sleep on the floor?

Cat Ba, Vietnam, August 19th

We get into a rickety boat for a tour of the islands. As we are waiting to set off, laborers carry fifty-kilo bags of sand and cement from a barge, along a narrow wooden walkway, onto the shore. They are dressed in rags. On the barge, a man puts a piece of cloth on the bags and then upends them on the workers' shoulders, one after another.

Nam Dinh, Vietnam, August 20th

Today we're on the ferry to Haiphong. In the port there is not a single boat, large or small, that isn't rusty, battered, flaking. And to go ashore, there are the usual narrow planks of wood with little slats nailed to them as steps. From Haiphong to Nam Dinh by bus. Through rice paddies where peasants in conical hats are bent over the young plants. Not a single piece of motorized farming equipment: just their hands and a few water buffalo. Big and grey. We see many flags, red with a yellow star, and at times, flying above the roofs of houses scattered among the fields, against the emerald green of the rice that is almost ripe, they are a truly enchanting sight.

In Nam Dinh we go to a restaurant in front of the station, a sort of shed open on one side. As the only foreigners, we are the object of curiosity and respect, but at long last, not of constant offers and requests (to take a motorcycle taxi, to buy this or that). Near

our table is an elderly man in pyjamas who has brought his little granddaughter, three or four years old, to the restaurant, and sets her on a chair; her feet don't reach the floor. But he doesn't need to help her with the chopsticks: she has no trouble at all.

On the train, Vietnam, August 21st

On the train we are the only Westerners. As the evening comes on the passengers make themselves more and more at home, and their feet start to appear. Stretched out into the central corridor, pressed against the back of the seats, laid over the legs of a neighbour, propped up on my armrest from behind. The small feet of women, the thick ones of men.

Lang Co, Vietnam, August 23rd

"Very cheap" are the words that explain his cheerful face, the way he stretches out his arms as if to take possession of the sea and the entire beach. I asked him where he's from: Germany. Yes, it's all "very cheap" in Vietnam, like Thailand and Laos: a gift from poor countries to rich ones. What we spend on this trip, which is almost two months long, we would spend in twenty days in Italy, or in a week in Sweden.

Lang Co, Vietnam, August 23rd, in the afternoon

They start to arrive at about three in the afternoon, more and more of them. The beach, which was almost deserted earlier, is now not crowded, to be sure, but lively. Kids, mostly teenagers, and a few families. They sit under the blue awnings, on beach chairs, on the sand. They chat. They don't take off any clothes right away. Despite the heat and humidity, they keep their trousers, shirts, blouses, at times their hats. And the girls, whether women or very small children, never take off any clothes. They go

into the water, the warm, thick water, just as they are, wearing trousers and blouses. Instead, most of the men, whether young or older, strip down to swim. And all of them, boys and girls, stay in the water for a long time, though only where they touch bottom, laughing, chatting, joking around. Meanwhile, under an awning at the edge of the beach, the café tables have filled up with men drinking and talking. They talk a lot, and with animation. And they put their arms around each other's shoulders, they take each other by the arm. Like yesterday evening in the restaurant of our hotel in Hué: a table of people celebrating, singing, making toasts, taking snapshots. Friends.

Hué, Vietnam, August 24th

We have dinner in a restaurant by a pond of lotus flowers, where the customers are almost all Vietnamese. A waiter seats us at our table. He is working to pay for his education, a five-year law degree, so he can be a traffic policeman. He is twenty-two, born in 1983, as he replies when I ask him. His English is stilted, but I persist: "You were born after the war." And, "I was born in 1950." So was my mother, he says, she was born in 1950, my father in 1948. They fought with the Vietcong. They are poor farmers. They live seventy-five kilometers away. My father began fighting - and he makes the gesture of shooting a machine gun - at fifteen. He's very strong, my father.

Hué, Vietnam, August 25th

Where is it, the thing that Vietnam is most famous for? The war. The Vietnam war, which for people my age - I'm now 55 - brings back floods of memories. Of the shouted slogans - Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, Free Vietnam - of moments of revelation: the bombs

on the TV screen, black bombs tumbling through the air from American planes onto Hanoi. And one day, for the first time, in that sky I saw the sky of a city. Why that day, I don't know. But after that the war was no longer a movie.

Along the streets, in the shops, on the sidewalks, there are very, very few faces that have seen the war, ears that have heard it. Everywhere there are children, teenagers, young people. Crowds of them, on the motorbikes that fill the streets along with the bicycles, making the very few cars, but also the buses and trucks, seem like guests that need to ask permission. It is impressive to see this swarm stop at a traffic light, filling the whole width of the street and taking off again in unison, veering around the pedestrians who cross at a steady pace, without stopping or slowing down.

Only from the window of the trains or buses can you recognize, among the distant figures bent in the rice paddies, under their conical hats, the forms of older, aging bodies.

Hué, Vietnam, August 26th

We ride a motorcycle down a country road that runs along a canal. There's a lot of work going on. Peasants are carrying sheaves of rice plants from the fields on long, narrow boats. Women are shaking baskets full of rice grains. The road is covered in threshed plants, strewn on the asphalt to dry. Bikes and motorcycles crush them as they go by.

We reach our destination: an ancient covered Japanese bridge. A tiny old woman, stretched out in the shade on the bench that lines the inside of the bridge, greets us in English. She speaks it well. I ask her why, and she answers that when she was young, at twenty-five, she married an American. Who then died. That was 1960. Now she's seventy years old.

Hué, Vietnam, August 27th

The minibus comes by to pick us up at six. Taped to the rear windshield is a sign saying DMZ TOUR. The DMZ: the demilitarized zone ten kilometers long, five below and five above the 17th parallel, that was once the border between North and South Vietnam. On the dashboard, next to the driver's seat, is an incongruous sticker: an American flag with the words "U.S. Army".

Our first stop is at the tunnels of Vinh Moc. The local population and the Vietcong dug them in the rock to escape the constant bombing. And lived there for six years. Outside are trenches. It's hard to figure out what's original and what isn't: the logs hiding the tunnel entrances are plastic, and inside the tunnels themselves, there are mannequins to represent the former inhabitants.

Then we head towards the mountains and the border with Laos. Strange, mottled mountains: in some places there are tall trees, in others, low brush, or meadows, or bare red earth. This is the area of the 'Ho Chi Minh trail' (actually a network of trails), that was bombed with explosives, napalm, and Orange Agent (which still causes cancer and birth defects). We stop within view of what is now a green hill, which back then the Americans had reduced to what they called the Rockpile.

Finally we get to Khe Sanh, where the United States had a huge military base; in 1968, its attack and defense cost the lives of 10,000 North Vietnamese soldiers, 500 Americans, and who knows how many civilians. Approaching the plateau, it's hard to imagine that a war was fought here: there are roads, houses, woods. Above us is a long strip of packed red earth that was once the airstrip. Scattered around are a helicopter for troop transport, an

other smaller one, pieces of tanks, of artillery. Were they already there back then, or were they brought here afterwards? When they left, the guide explains, the Americans carried away or destroyed everything they could, and afterwards, the inhabitants of the area scavenged scrap iron to sell it. Only in 1990, when Vietnam was opened to tourism, did the government realize the value of its war sites, bringing in wrecked airplanes, tanks, and helicopters wherever they were lacking.

Hoi Han, Vietnam, August 28th

Sitting in front of the canal. Late afternoon. Large boats keep arriving at the dock. Men and women are there waiting for them; the workday is over. Lots of bicycles, which a man picks up and hoists onto a platform in the middle of the deck. There is already a whole stack. Around them, packed fore and aft, stand the passengers.

Hoi Han, Vietnam, August 29th

It has rained, or rather poured, since yesterday evening, all night long, and, less intensely, all day today. A grey sky, the asphalt gleaming with water, cool after the heat of recent days. People go by on foot, on bikes or motorcycles, wearing lightweight, transparent plastic raincoats.

We've stayed in the hotel almost the whole time, going out only in the afternoon, towards five o'clock, to walk through the city, glancing into the open doors of the houses. In almost all of them, in a prominent position, is an altar to the family's ancestors.

Ten-thirty pm. The kiosk in front of the hotel is closing. A woman sweeps the sidewalk, very carefully. A man lights a few sticks of incense and pushes them into cracks in the bark of the two nearest trees, one on either side of the street. Then they leave.

The traveller's ego: upturns and downturns

Here

notes from the present

Many people never travel. They may move around, but only to find the same feeling of security they leave behind (habits, food, house, climate, etc.). They virtually never leave *home*. Travelling means changing homes. The *Ego* sustains transformations. The *Ego* is like a many-sided polyhedron. It is a solid figure, and, as such, it tends to maintain its unity, despite the changes that life, situations, age and experience continuously entail. Some people use a different terminology and speak of a 'brotherhood of souls' to point out how different sides can emerge from this polyhedron each time, and how certain aspects or a certain behaviour that had barely surfaced previously become more prominent. Of course, the *Ego*, in order to accept all of this without breaking its original unity, cannot be too fragile. I believe that we are living in an age in which the *Ego's* fragility is strongly felt and widespread. The number of people that move around - and don't travel - is evidence of this. Organised tours and holiday villages, where everything is on the safe side and assured, provide the same conveniences found at home. On the other hand, if travelling means uprooting ourselves, we must first be willing to subject the various sides of the polyhedron (the various aspects of the *Ego*) to change. We must accept metamorphoses, recognise the *Ego's* weaknesses,

Marina Massenz

anticipate its constant disorientation and adjustments, keep the helm balanced and wait at times for everything to move and take on a new form. We travel unaccompanied. We are not 'booked' anywhere. This terrifies some people. They are afraid of separating the polyhedron into parts without a central structure, like a spineless body, suddenly crushed. We walk with our feet, and each step changes the balance of the whole. It is true that if the inner structure is not sufficiently elastic, we run the risk of a fracture. And so, new experiences do not merge with the old in a new fusion, but collide with each other in chaos and confusion.

THE TRIP

Homes - one

We encounter many homes. Some are *transit homes* where you don't even unpack your rucksack. You only take out the strictly necessary. Even the room only has what is strictly necessary. Then there are the *borrowed homes*. You can immediately tell which ones they are, for different reasons, depending on the sensitivity and personality of each traveller. In any case, you open your rucksack here, empty it out, put away its contents, stake out the area and decide how to use it: in other words, the room is furnished. You find a nail to hang your hat and you have finished taking possession. You do the washing, take a look around and you see that this is a real home, albeit transitory. You give yourselves some latitude and taking a rest becomes natural. You ponder things over. What is it that makes a house a home? It's the amenities, which can either be in or outside the room or, if we are very fortunate, both inside and out.

Borrowed homes

Orchid Hibiscus guest house, Sukhothai, Thailand

Inside is a four-poster bed with a mosquito net. Pulling it down is like being in a crib, in absolute regression, in deep and innocent sleep. But it was the outdoor area of the Orchid Hibiscus that really reached me: flowers everywhere, the lotus pond, and the tall, shady palm and banana trees among others. The small wood houses/rooms, with their Thai roof and two pointed wings where the sloping roofs meet. I always thought they were wings put there for those who wanted to fly. But even more and perhaps most of all, the complete silence and darkness of the night: nothing but the alternate cries of animals and the calls of birds and insects with unknown names.

Gap's House, Chiang Mai, Thailand

It's like entering a jungle; we make our way through tall and thick trees and bushes, the intense density of the greenery, its ancientness. Everything is in the shade in this outdoor area where you can find Hindu statues, bas-reliefs to decorate beams, small Buddhas partly hidden among the leaves of the flowerbeds. You never tire of being in this garden. Your eyes relax and linger gently on the surroundings, in order to discover the details of the small houses, the alleyways and the furnishings. The room inside is grandiose; the teak floor is dark and, like the furniture, spacious. There is a lot of space and a lot of care. Hanging on the wall is a painting that I look at for a long time; it shows several monks who are kneeling, wrapped in their saffron tunics, their hands in the sign of devotion, at the foot of the Enlightened One. It looks like an

old painting, like everything that is in this house, inside and outside.

It is difficult to leave these homes and we worry a little about continuing our trip.

Time - one

Round departure time

During the first week, the Ego clings to the place it has just left. Thoughts often wander back to work left undone, loved ones and to objects important in daily life; and to the familiar, the reassuring and to what the Ego is usually surrounded with and that are a part of it and make it feel strong. We wonder, for example, if the plants will be watered as they should be, or if there will be any letters or messages waiting for us. Then a change occurs, an internal remoteness frees the mind. We have left. We are travelling. *Ego fluctuation* now steps in, which goes through oscillations that are violent at times. The mood is fickle. We are and we feel unaccompanied and without a booking. What happens, moment after moment penetrates us in a different way. It separates the sides of the polyhedron, flooding them with light or leaves them in the dark, throws them up in the air, projects them to the surface or drives them towards the interior, making them light or heavy. Because the traveller's Ego needs beauty for nourishment. The possible forms are limitless: a pleasant odour, a particular lighting, an unexpected smile, the fine work of a temple, food never tried before. These frequent encounters with unknown beauty nourish the wavering Ego, which is then on its way up, and ascends.

Ego says: This hibiscus flower that I see from the window is there for me, for me to see it... I look at it and I am happy.

Non-ego says: This room is squalid, the bathroom stinks, what about the sheets. (It's called the Non-ego because, by saying these things, it goes numb, tries not to see, not to smell; and to do this it clams up, it contracts). The Non-ego is never satisfied.

Homes - two

After various *transit homes* here we are again in a *borrowed home*.

Luang Prabang, Laos

In the centre of the square is a small garden with a fountain; the sound of falling water is cheerful. All around are many rooms overlooking the vegetation; each one is quite large, with a bathroom, and just outside the door are two small arm chairs in solid wood with a table in the centre on the veranda. On each of them is a cushion made with beautiful Lao woven fabrics with dark colours mixed together with gold yellow, like the curtain hanging on the wall inside the room. 'Setting up house' here is easy; you find a niche to put the books, you see that there is a bedside table with a lamp next to the bed. The house itself is a beautiful restored French colonial building. In the garden, vegetation rises from below, from the ground, and more vegetation drops from above, from the balustrade on the upper floor, in wood baskets or halved coconut shells. The sweet smell is from the *douang champa* or frangipani. It is quite an imposing plant, with large leaves. It is a sacred plant and the symbol of Laos. We left the lotus behind in Thailand.

Time - two

Being far away takes shape

After the first twenty days of the trip, the Ego has now been exposed. Fluctuations occur, in the form of satisfied upturns and downturns. The difficulty is that we are not prepared for this sometimes rapid change of dimension. We have trouble adapting to the movement, which is almost like a pulsation, but without rhythm, recurring with different timing and duration. In the continuous play of fluctuations, little by little, the Ego settles down; it becomes more fluid, more able to accept its own changes with elasticity. Another aspect of the training consists in experiencing how and when and why these downturns and/or upturns occur. For example, we discover how much fatigue we can put up with, how much hardship and lack of comfort we can take and when, on the other hand, it is time to yield to some extra comforts. We quickly learn to recognise our own limits with precision. Trying not to surpass it is a question of balance, because these oscillations (between downturns and upturns) must not exceed a certain magnitude. If we remain within our recognised limits, the traveller appears calm externally, satisfied and always inquisitive and active; movement remains entirely an interior affair. And the trip continues satisfactorily.

Interior movements

Ego says: The half baguette I ate, which should have been with chicken, was stuffed with raw onion and hot sauce and no chicken. It made me feel sick and this barge is rocking. The Mekong's waves are rapid and sharp. The river is marvellous, its uninhabited banks are covered with subtropical vegetation and I don't feel well.

Non-ego says: This boat is filthy! It stinks. The toilet is wide open. There are hard wooden benches for seating, not much room and no way to get rid of the nausea. What am I doing here?

Ego listens to Non-ego... cogitates... finds the solution.

Ego says: Learn from the Laotians, who are laying down sleeping in the hold behind the engine, where all the rucksacks are piled up. I lie down on the floor now with two k-ways, one under my back, one rolled up like a cushion under my head. I immediately feel less nauseous. So I can still watch the jungle skim by up there beyond the rail. I can adjust the position of my body easier, and now that I am comfortable, I can even read. Ego is again happy to be on a barge in the Mekong. Just let yourself be rocked, the internal itinerary has been inverted.

The other passengers passing through think that that *farang* (foreigner) was clever; she made herself comfortable and minds her own business.

Summary: Within half an hour, amidst intense interior movement, the strong destabilising oscillations between downturns and upturns found a new point of balance.

Time - three

We have been travelling for over thirty days. Problems with the itinerary, about-turns... there's no way overland from here, near Luang Prabang to enter Vietnam as planned. Total lack of points of reference beyond the border. So we have to go to Vientiane, a destination not on the agenda and not particularly interesting. Besides, it's hard to leave the house in Luang Prabang.

Ego says: Now I'm going to rest a bit and study the guide. There must be something nice in Vientiane... It reads but the words are garbled and their meaning isn't clear, it reads again and is overcome by deep fatigue and suddenly falls asleep even though it's only six in the afternoon.

Non-ego: The fall of the Ego into a catacomb-like sleep, a refusal, sharpens all the weapons of the Non-ego, which thinks... I don't want to leave this place... I don't want to go to Vientiane... the trip has been long enough, what am I doing here? Return home, that's what we need to do.

Ego: When it wakes up, it loses no time. It needs extra gratification, for example, a nice dinner. But the Non-ego is tough, insistent and irritating. A crisis is in the air; the two aren't able to come to an agreement. So it ends up with Ego suffering insomnia; it stays awake in the pretty courtyard until three. At six we have to wake up to take the bus to Vientiane. So Non-ego has achieved its objective after all: an unhappy departure. Because the fatigue will certainly make the trip more difficult. Perhaps Ego will succumb.

Ego: It starts moving at six, at a snappy pace. It knows it will be a long day, it knows the Non-ego's disrupting tricks well and gets prepared to resist. So the Ego succeeds in observing with an attentive and happy eye the passing expanses of the rice fields of Laos, the mountains further away in a misty blue that serve as a frame, the gentle and patient work of farmers under their traditional cone-shaped hats. Then it falls asleep. Later, it finishes its marvellous book, *Anna and the King*. It arrives in good shape in Vientiane, even if the Non-ego, hidden and sneaky, continuously knocked at the doors of the soul, and hardly had it got onto the tuc-tuc to go to the guest

house that it said: "This city stinks!". The day after, the Ego begins looking for a good 'borrowed house' to defend itself from the assault of the Non-ego. So it decides to retreat for a while, to indulge in another way in the realm of contemplation and meditation amongst the greenery of the garden. So Ego reads and then writes and later writes about itself. It reflects and is reflected. The total contraction requested by Non-ego is averted; an area of brief respite takes shape, to rest the body, for pleasant regeneration. This is how a new refreshing balance is slowly reached.

Summary: Non-ego's opinions should be heeded, but not taken literally; they are calls from deep down that need a reply. Ego, having become elastic and multiform as the trip's conditions suggest, finds new ways of peaceful existence. After this storm, in the static peace of Vientiane, the polyhedron assumes another overall shape.

Homes - three

We never speak of *transit homes* because no traces of them remain in the memory. The door is shut without turning back to look into the room; the retina does not record any last image, which disappears and merges with thousands of others. On the other hand, we can speak of *borrowed homes without a place* - like 'Manoly' in Vientiane. It's like living in your own home. The eye is moved, observing the huge banana leaves in the garden, the hibiscus, the soaring palm trees, and sniffing the sweet smell of the douang champa, with its small white flowers with yellow centre. But there are at least another twenty species of flowers in the garden.

When rain falls incessantly, we can observe the bright greenery, thankful and dripping (after the day's sultriness). We can hear the changing sounds; the drops scattered on the wide leaves, a delicate background, and the downpour from the sky, a deep beating sound. The sudden downpour of huge bucketfuls of water onto the ground. The garden is filled with many different sounds; full, complex or subtle and delicate, according to the degree of resistance of the vegetal material to the falling drops. As if every plant were replying with its voice to the cry from the sky; water descends, sounds rise. Ego also really likes the row of containers that are located in the corner of each step of the staircase; small covered baskets for sticky rice, palm leaf baskets, weaved bamboo rucksacks, wicker fruit trays, in a sequence that varies continuously in shape and shades of colour. At the top is a series of bamboo musical instruments. Everything is inside the house and its garden; the 'outside' is left outside. The hostile city is left outside. Ego is in the house. The house is in Indochina, but without a specific place in the world. Serenity everywhere.

Homes - four

We never speak of *transit homes*, because in fact we aren't setting up house. There is only one type that is worth speaking of, namely *transit homes with a city home*. Unlike Vientiane, where *Ego* lives entirely indoors, here in Hanoi it lives entirely outdoors. The house where it sleeps is actually just a room, nothing much to attract the eye, or garden to spend some time. On the contrary, after the disinfectant provided for the purpose has done its work, some small dead black bugs are found. But Ego

doesn't care and sleeps peacefully in the squalor of the Prince Hotel, because it feels at home outside. The old town in Hanoi is like the bowels of Naples, the Spanish Quarter, oriental style. Smells, tastes, colours of the Orient; Asian gestures, movements and faces. Ego asks why the place communicates such exciting nervous tension; no real reason! Traffic with thousands of motorbikes, noise, pollution, streams of filth line the street, smoke and quiet poverty in the shacks along the road, huddled together in the densely populated alley; a crowd of humanity busy 'scraping along' with any possible means. And yet... there is a cheerful and contagious vitality, people bustle about in a thousand ways, both those from the older and newer generations and technology. Though they easily stop, play Chinese draughts, waste time, chat and smoke on low stools along the sidewalk, peel fruit and grill chickens, tinker around the *thuoc lao* - a large bamboo water pipe - while grimy children run about like street urchins, often shouting and playing... A humanity that lives intensely in the scars of the decaying city, while the old and the new mix and stand side by side. The new motorbike and mobile accompany the shared bowl of rice and smoke grey indoors filled with objects piled up in the shop-home. Everything and everyone move in a bustling chaotic way, but there are internal rules, special laws that govern everything; the chaos is only apparent. At 11 pm street sweepers with gloves and mask pushing a dustcart pass by collecting, cleaning, calmly and patiently, unconcerned with the only partial effectiveness of their work. Everything is closing as if there were a curfew; after 11, in Hanoi, everyone is asleep. There are undoubtedly areas and places for night owls, *farang* or not, but, in any case, the

secret order has begun; end of the day. Special laws exist; you just have to know what they are. For example, if there are no stoplights and traffic police and a hundred roaring motorbikes whiz along the wide avenue, the pedestrian should just start crossing anyway, but very slowly, without ever accelerating his pace. That way the motorbikes pass by him without slowing down, swerving to the right and left of the pedestrian concerned. It's like a Zen stroll; you feel like running, just close your eyes for a moment and keep going, very slowly, with an interior gaze, and you will find yourself on the other side of the road. In this way Ego isn't looking for a home; it loves the city. As for the rest, all you need is a bed to sleep in. And Non-ego doesn't protest; its voice isn't even heard. In these cases, Ego's enthusiasm stuns it.

Time - four

The impossibility of informing the police

We realise that there are no policemen to report the fact to. Who will listen benevolently to us for a moment. Who will shake his head from the very beginning. Who will conclude with an ironic grin. Meaning: "Dreamers! There's no way, even for matters much more important than yours!". The guidebook on Vietnam, left absent-mindedly on a step for five minutes, is no longer there. Ego falls into a state of profound distress and dejection. The guidebook was not only *the* guidebook for the trip, but also the object we were most attached to during the trip. Held in our hands, away from the sun and rain, in our bag, rucksack, at lunch and dinner, leafed through and written in, underlined... it was all there, the entire last part of the trip, the last twenty

days in Vietnam, those already past and those still to come. Ego feels lost, even when its faithful travelling companion arrives with a new guidebook, written in French, a Vietnamese edition.

Two dreams

Dismay

The place isn't the one we planned, it looks different from what we expected. There's a mistake, there must be a mistake somewhere. The feeling is like being in a place we shouldn't be in, but from which it is impossible to leave. There are no points of reference at all, we don't know what to do...

Ego: Trying to be rational, *Ego* tries to have confidence in the new guidebook, reads it the evening before. But the emotional *Ego* is torn apart, it has suffered a serious loss. *Non-ego* makes an unusual alliance with this part of the *Ego*, which, for the first time, is split down the middle. It is more than a bad mood. It's the start of a nervous and disheartened phase of contraction. The gusto for the trip is gone. *Ego* no longer manages to look around with curiosity.

The flight

I feel projected ahead, like in a fast, hedgehopping flight. I fly over land that looks like the moon; it shines with a white mother-of-pearl brightness. Peaks, black ridges and high mountain chains rise here and there. A radiant light illuminates me. I am surprised and in a daze. What's happening? Where am I? Non-pressing questions remain in the background because the happiness that overcomes me, like the light that overcomes me, is more intense than any question. Later I must stop at a house, because

now a strange white mass is moving quickly; it's like a stream of snowflakes going against the general trend. I am so amazed and fascinated by this event that I don't feel like closing the door. But I'd be buried in it, and so I do it slowly, without rushing. I know I'll be able to open it a little later, when the stream stops. Then I'll see all that white light again, like a gift of nature flooding me, enveloping me, supporting me.

Ego: Only one day has passed, and the dream about the flight puts some luster back into the trip the morning after. Ego penetrates into the marvellous garden of this world to see its marvels and to get to know its people. Ego knows how to appreciate all the diversities it encounters, tastes, smells, sounds, nature's shapes, people's ways of living on this earth. Ego accepts and smiles. It lets itself be duped with serenity. Ego thinks that this earth is the Garden of Eden from which man was never expelled, but it is not aware it is living in it. Non-ego remains silent; it has received the flood of the dream's lunar light; it floats senselessly in remote regions of the soul; it is reduced to silence; we can't even hear it breathe. Perhaps it has vanished - for now.

Back to the diaries

Here

notes from the present

Vijayawada, India, August 8th

After the tragedy of the tsunami, here we are once again, facing the fury of water! This time it's the river Krishna in flood. Ten percent of the population of Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh) are losing their humble houses and almost everything they owned. Moreover, as I write this, it's pouring rain, and there's the risk that the whole city will be flooded.

The Krishna, which runs through Vijayawada, is the fourth major river in India and one of the sacred waterways. Its source is in Maharashtra. After the flooding in Bombay, water filled up the massive dam in Nagarjuna Sagar, one of the largest in the world (twenty meters high and twenty kilometers wide). The levels went over the safety limits and the authorities decided to open the sluice gates. So approximately thirty thousand cubic meters of water per second came gushing out into the Krishna, and are now causing a disaster. A completely predictable disaster.

The ones paying the price are the thousands of families who live in the immediate vicinity of the river, families without housing who have built modest huts on the banks of the Krishna out of leaves and mud, creating a slum. To help them, we

Carol Faison

August 1. King Fahd dies in Saudi Arabia. His personal net worth totalled eighteen billion dollars.

August 1. George Bush appoints John Bolton, a leading neo-conservative, to be the new US ambassador to the UN.

August 1. A helicopter crash in Sudan kills John Garang, the leader of the animist and Christian South in the civil war which has pitted it against the Muslim North for almost twenty years now. After a peace treaty in January, he had become vice president in the national unity government. His death, thought by many to be an assassination, is followed by clashes in which dozens of people lose their lives.

set up the small school of Brahmarembapuram, attended by children who live in the slum and who otherwise wouldn't go to school at all.

Starting last week, I would visit the slum several times a day, begging people to pack up and leave. They couldn't believe that the water would get so high it would sweep them away. Leaving their huts meant leaving land that was practically theirs by right, without anywhere else to live. But now that's happening anyway, because the huts are being swept away by the current. If we don't lose our school, it will definitely be damaged. We've toted away the desks and what furniture there is, and we've also cut off the power.

For three days now we've been handing out two meals a day to two thousand people. In the morning we take milk to the children, and then at lunch, rice, pureed lentils, an egg or a banana. We've also started up a medical service. Two babies, twenty months and nine months old, were transferred to the hospital because they were dying of hunger and dysentery.

Thousands of people are packed into the big bus station in front of the slum, and more keep arriving. It's a pitiful scene; the smell is nauseating and there aren't adequate facilities. There are people lying everywhere, guarding the meagre possessions they've managed to salvage.

This tragedy has also come during the vacation season in Europe, this time in the summer, and unfortunately the media aren't paying attention to it.

August 3, from "La Repubblica": Last autumn's drought has led to a famine in Niger which threatens to kill four million people, including 800,000 children under five. The government of Niger sounded the alarm nine months ago, and the World Food Program asked international donors for approximately four million dollars, which would have helped feed 480,000 people. They never came.

August 3. The London Metropolitan Police reveal that since July 7, the date of the bombings in the underground and on a bus, there have been 269 attacks on mosques, on Muslims, or on people mistaken for Muslims (whereas there were 40 in the same period last year). In the interest of safety, Zaki Badawi, director of the Muslim College of London, has authorized observant Muslim women not to wear head scarves and veils.

Vijayawada, India, August 9th

Carol Faison

The Krishna is still in full flood, and by now the huts have almost all disappeared, swept away by

August 6. Miners in the South African gold indus-

the current. Among the few trees that are left, you can see only the blue roof of our school. We climbed up on the bank to look at the water level there. It's as high as it was yesterday. One step more and it will enter the school.

Going back through the alleyways, we found an middle-aged man sitting under a tree, covered in flies, emaciated, dying. With only a piece of paper covering his genitals. He was delirious. A man told us he'd been there for three days. We asked why he hadn't been taken to Mother Teresa's sisters, or to the hospital. The answer was that there are always a lot of complications and they want it reported to the police. The average person on the street is not willing to deal with these kinds of problems. If you do it, they told us, it's different. After five minutes our jeep arrived with some people from Care & Share. They found a big piece of plastic and wrapped it around the man so they could hoist him up and put him in the jeep. As they were lifting him, the piece of paper over his legs fell away. I was horrified to see he no longer had any genitals: only a big hole, crawling with worms. I wondered how it was possible for him to still be alive. The sisters took him in five minutes later, saying that they would wash him to start with... Then, who knows. A scene I'll never be able to forget.

Then we moved on to the bus station, where our van was waiting to distribute food. People were waiting in an orderly line, three hundred meters long. Usually a single family member comes to get food for all the rest. During the night five hundred more people arrived, so food must have been distributed to 2500. Our staff started getting tired. They do their regular office work, and then morning, afternoon, and evening they all help hand out

trygo on strike. They are asking for a 10% raise in their salary, and are currently paid 333 dollars a month for working three kilometers underground. It is the first strike in eighteen years, and the first to see the participation of both white and black miners.

August 10. From "La Repubblica". A housekeeping agency in Shanghai has hired four English butlers to train Chinese maids, known as 'ayi', or aunts, to improve the quality of their service. Ayi are usually peasant women who work full time for middle-class urban families, earning 120 dollars a month. "The level of service for ayi in Shanghai is fairly low," explained Zhu Wei, director of the agency, "and there aren't people qualified to work for the elite and for foreign families."

food. Many people thanked me as I went around. Today the whole medical staff arrived, and they examined patients and distributed medicine for hours, in the midst of tremendous chaos: dust, honking horns, people yelling. People with fever, vomiting, dysentery, scabies. There was also a medical station set up by the city government, but they didn't have any medicine, so they would prescribe it and then tell people to come get it from us!

Vijayawada, India, August 11th

Two days ago we organised a major operation with our staff, teachers, and other volunteers to give a bath to all the children, who haven't had the chance to wash themselves for five days now. There were fifty of us. We asked the city to provide water and a tanker truck, and they made repeated trips to supply it. Ten barbers cut the hair of all the men and women who asked them to: in this kind of situation, the shorter your hair is, the less subject you are to catching lice and scabies.

There were really a lot of children. I don't know how many, but definitely over three hundred. After the haircut, they moved on to a group of us who washed them and shampooed them. Then they were dried off and sent for a check-up with the doctor. Last of all they got a new set of clothes. Afterwards I took a walk around the bus station, and it was funny to see all of those 'elegant' children among the refugees, clean and tidily dressed, with a perfect haircut. It was very satisfying. Of course, just a drop in the bucket...

This morning I saw that the water level had gone down thirty centimeters in front of our school,

Carol Faison

August 10. Pinochet's wife and one of his sons are arrested in Chile. They are accused of evading taxes amounting to over 12 million dollars. The investigation that led to their arrest also revealed that during his regime, Pinochet had accumulated a fortune of over 100 million dollars, mostly in bribes from industry owners, which was deposited in at least 128 foreign bank accounts.

August 13. Thirteen people, including eight children, are killed in Nasaf, Iraq, as they are coming out of a mosque. The massacre is blamed on US marines, who apparently fired at random into the crowd after an attack; their spokesperson denies it.

which is intact. Everything else is gone. We'll have to hand out meals for a few days yet, but we're already thinking about the next step. All these people have lost their 'houses', so they'll be needing wooden poles, palm leaves, and plastic tarps to cover their huts (a modern technique that shelters them from the rain and makes the leaves last longer). Every 'finished' hut costs two hundred euros. That's not a small sum, considering the number of people who have lost their homes.

Rome, August 22nd

I see with melancholy that the days are getting shorter. I notice it when I get out of work, around half past eight, from the colour of the sky; it now has a tired pallor from the effort of holding back the evening, which is already spreading out its cloak of shadows as the young Indians and Arabs are taking down their stands of clothes, shoes, and other trinkets. The same stands that just a little while ago - after the bombs in London, to be exact - had disappeared for security reasons because they were close to the subway station. For the days they were gone, there was something disturbing about the street, because those stands, filled with clothes hung up to flutter in the wind, pyramids of shoe boxes, necklaces, bracelets, barrettes, colourful lingerie, the foreign faces and voices of the young vendors, have by now become a part of the landscape in that stretch of the Appian Way. Not seeing them any more, not seeing the crowd of people thronging around, not being able to cast even a hasty glance at the cheap wares on my way back to work after my break, gave a stronger, more visceral feeling of

Lucianna Argentino

August 17. Three car bombs explode in Baghdad, the first two inside and outside a bus station, and the third near the emergency room of the hospital where the wounded were being taken. Over 40 people are killed.

August 18. Six American soldiers from the 1st Armoured Division have formed a rap group. Last year, in the Baghdad airport, they were bombarded daily by mortar and rocket fire. They turned the explosions into rhythm, recording a music video.

menace, the menace of something terrible that could happen at any moment. That absence was like an omen that heightened the fear and anguish. Fortunately now they're back again, where they were before, and I saw their return as something that encourages hope; because courage needs hope, and hope needs courage.

Rome, August 29th

Lucianna Argentino

I'm really tired, tired and also angry, because at work the situation has gotten truly burdensome. Not that it was better before; in fact, for eight years - that is, since the supermarket opened - I worked nine and a half hours a day, then the owner gave it to another company to manage, who gave us a work schedule closer to the contractual one, and also managed to create a climate of solidarity and collaboration with the workers, making us feel like we had an important role in the company's success (read: more respect for the people who are working for you). However, this lasted only a little over two years, because at the end of last January the owner took back the supermarket and now we're worse off than we were before. Now, in fact, for two weeks I work fifty-one hours, and then for two I work fifty-six; given that they pay me for Sunday (I work every other Sunday morning), I don't get that time off in another way, so I go fourteen days without a full day's rest. What's shown on my paycheck, of course, are the legendary six and a half hours I've never worked; basically, now, it's as if I worked eight days out of six, and even more... Then if you go to the unions, they tell you to join, or better yet, to get three members to join so that

August 20. From "La Repubblica". "An enormous refrigerator truck parked near Tucson, in southern Arizona, is packed with the corpses of 60 pollos, immigrants who braved the border crossing between Mexico and the United States. 'We had to fall back on the truck system because there was no more room in the local morgues,' sighed Sgt. Vincent Garcia. 'Once it was rare for illegal immigrants to die in the Sonoran Desert, but now it's almost routine.' Exhausted, frightened, under stress, with little water and no shelter, at the mercy of the pitiless sun of the Southwest, often abandoned by their coyotes, or smugglers, immigrants wander over the dunes, weaving between the cactus, until they can go no further. Then they collapse. This year, along the 389-mile southern border of Arizona, the border patrol has already found the bodies of 201 people killed by the heat.

you can try (?!) to do something, and tell you about the risk of reprisals from the boss, like being transferred to another store far from home, as happened to a young man who was here for just a few months. And honestly, given that the positive side to this job, aside from the human contact, is that it's so close to my house, that's something I really don't feel like risking. On the other hand, talking about it directly with the new director also turned out to be a failure, because his answer was that it's company policy and can't be changed, which in other words, means: that's how it is, and if you don't like it you can leave. But I need a job, and finding another one isn't easy, though I'm trying. In the meantime, I just grit my teeth and keep going.

Modena, Italy, undated

Maria Granati

Politics. Politics as an ideal, a passion, a drive, to plunge in, lose yourself in, discover yourself, stake it all, die trying; sleepless nights writing documents, talking them over with the others, getting them 'passed'; no good, starting over: to lay down a line, toe the line, *nulla dies* without a line, every so often someone dies for the line... and then again, politics as impossible spiderwebs of incredible delicacy to be patiently, painstakingly spun, so ephemeral, but no matter, something will endure, a job for the Beguine sisterhood, *sedulae fornicatae*, a glass of water given for the love of God can save the soul - Thérèse de Lisieux - in the evening of this life you will be judged on love alone - St. John of the Cross - and so on; stop worrying about terrorists, there are the 'average people' too, not to mention the guards who are worse off than the prisoners; enough with

civil liberties, concentrate on the budget, etc. Repeat ad nauseam that the sentences can't consist in cruel and inhuman punishment; right, fine, but so many of them slit their wrists and things like that, hundreds, especially in the summer, others rape, kill, informers knifed, the cells frescoed with pom shots like the Sistine Chapel, dismal ways of finding relief, tattoos everywhere, getting high on butane cans...

But can people change? The utopian ideal of re-education, etc., nothing to be done.

And then there's politics as the violence of power, "*di che lagrime grondi*", the tears and blood, tricks, plots, and guile, pettiness, egotism, conformity, ambition, giving the big interview. No, comrade x is dealing with that, you need to talk to comrade y. The nights in committee meetings, marathon sessions to break a filibuster, a thousand amendments; four o'clock in the morning, all it takes is for one person, just one person, to get ticked off and leave, and you don't have the quorum, everyone gets sent to bed.

Piazza Navona under a pale dawn in May '78, a beggar sleeping on the ground with his dog in front of the bar "Tre Scalini"; the rubbish bins still full; we go to bed, Moro's body is already in the trunk of that Renault, they'll find it a few hours later, right there only a stone's throw from my hotel, where I'm sleeping the sleep of the just.

Italian politician, killed by the Red Brigades.

Everything in politics, the vital fluids and the smelly ejections, nothing gets thrown away, like a pig, so "precious, filthy, unique...".

Does the left already know everything?

Here

notes from the present

In the latest issue of our review, a Danish pacifist, Flemming Dyrman - in relating “a Power Point lecture” on his experience as a volunteer in Palestine, which he had organized in Uldalsvej, where he lives, for “a group of Christians belonging to the Baptist Church” - remarked: “My earlier shows had been for leftwing political societies, where, I’m sorry to say, the need of ‘enlightenment’ about the situation in Palestine didn’t quite match that of the Baptists. The Baptists didn’t try - as some of the left-wings did - to foist their own based-on-nothing opinions on me. The feeling the left-wings had given me was that they already knew everything.” Since I strongly feel that “many of us have had such an experience as Flemming’s”, as I wrote in that same issue, I encouraged our readers to send us their remarks and reflections and offered the following question as a cue or prompt: “Why does the Left often give the impression of already knowing everything?”. Here are their contributions.

Massimo Parizzi

What does the left already know?

I should mention immediately that I don’t personally know Flemming or the lectures he organized

Christian Grecco

about Palestine, much less how they were conducted. I read his page, as I did Massimo's response. Then I thought it over, and I have to say: the left knows *something else*.

So, *just what does the left know?* I think it's a good idea to reflect on that. All the more in times like these, when criticizing the left is a universal trend. Because today, fifteen years after the collapse of what gets called "real socialism", the discourse of the bourgeoisie, as it has been built up over the centuries - one need only read the depictions it gave of the European workers' movement in the nineteenth century, and those which followed throughout the twentieth - has consolidated itself to the point that it seems dominant. Because not even the men and women of the left are exempt from this bourgeois hysteria in which it is blamed for all the world's troubles, identifying their 'professed' ideological convictions as the source of all their personal frustrations. This does not mean we should not recognize the errors we have made, and which, being human, we will certainly continue to make.

But I emphasize: there is something that must not be forgotten. I emphasize: we must make history. I emphasize: *What does the left already know?* It knows all it has learned in over two centuries of utopias, of organizing, of struggles, of victories and defeats. It knows what experience has made it learn, and in many cases, made it suffer. It knows how to make mistakes, and also, of course, how to overcome them, though not always as quickly as many of us would like. It knows it must continue to fight for a more equitable world, that capitalism is not the right solution for humanity, that the class struggle is seen in the lives of comrades murdered by repression and starvation wages, that it is hard to fight

on the left when media and ideological control are in the hands of the right, it knows that the right can be ruthless, it knows that the bourgeoisie will kill to protect its interests, it knows about exile, life in hiding, torture, the suffering of the people, the bare face of squalor that the capitalist system continues to present to us.

It also knows, because it has learned it in years of struggle, how to resist and how to insist. It knows it must not move back without remembering that afterwards, it will need to move forward, and that it is indeed possible to change the world. That it is possible to conceive and construct societies with greater justice, without poverty, and with more signs of social equality. It also knows that this is a process, and that it cannot be the work of one person, but of an entire collective of men and women. It knows that the left is something we are all building together, and that it is not the property of one group or another.

Another thing it has learned is that with participation and popular struggle one can proudly show the world: the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the Cuban Revolution, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Vietnamese people's struggle against the Americans, the Chicago workers' fight for the eight-hour day, the People's Army of Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, the African and Asian armies of decolonialization, the Paris Commune, the thousands of active labour unions in the past and present, the unemployed workers' movement in Argentina, the European resistance to Nazism and Fascism, the Latin American guerrilla organizations, the anti-globalization movement, the Spanish Republican Army, and the thousands of men and

men and women of the international brigades who gave their lives for the Socialist revolution.

All of this and much more - it's impossible to mention everything and everyone here - is also part of what the left knows and is. That's quite a bit. It's not everything. Much is lacking. But we have a past we can be proud of. We have a schooling that does us credit. Do we know everything? Of course not. But neither do we know nothing. At least we can feel fairly commendable for having done and continuing to do our utmost to improve this shitty world. And if I say this, I also say it with the knowledge that, despite all the mistakes, no other part of society has produced movements or social transformations on behalf of humanity to match the scale of those generated by the left.

From here in the third world, I can say that social changes are not achieved through well-intentioned words and gestures, but by throwing one's body into the struggle. And I'm convinced that this, too, is something the left knows.

The politics of results

The absolute priority given to results, whether on the large scale (the Third International) or the small (the organization of a neighbourhood demonstration, for example) is an attribute common to all politics, and, I believe, to the entire left. And I'm afraid it necessarily leads to the following things,

Massimo Parizzi

though to a greater or lesser extent, and above all, with a greater or lesser degree of perversion: the rise of a group or class of specialists (officials, activists); the reduction of others to a mass or an audience; an excessive value placed on qualities like decisiveness, charisma, etc.; and in communication, the uncontrolled growth of propaganda, persuasive rhetoric, etc. It is a perversion, because the kind of process that all of this brings about is one which perverts: it perverts the urge towards emancipation (shouldn't this be the goal of the left?) turning it into its opposite, and perverts or risks perverting those who are caught up in it.

There is, however, another possible consequence: That the 'politics of results' brings about acquiescence to the dominant political, economic, and social way of thought, which is by definition an active one, and as it is, envisions a range of possible results and the ways to arrive at them or at least attempt to do so. That it leads, in other words, to a 'politics of reform', a laudable thing in which I currently place all hope in the short and medium term (is long-term hope really hope, or is it more a question of trusting in God?), though a despairing hope, because this is a kind of politics that cannot help being to some degree realpolitik, incapable of getting to the core, and therefore doomed to follow the dominant way of thought into the ecological, military, populist, and plutocratic disasters it creates.

The process of cultural, intellectual, mental, and even existential emancipation, of learning how to think, to use critical judgement, to nurture doubt, to participate, the process of moving out of the minority, which the left has identified itself with at least since the Enlightenment, cannot be placed second to any kind of 'results'. In this regard, 're-

sults' are more a form of blackmail. The only thing that can point the way here is a kind of *politics with no strings attached*: one that in every party, group, and movement accompanies the other kind based on 'results' (which, despite everything, remains essential), but truly accompanies it, even at the price of inevitable contradictions between one form and the other (very lofty contradictions), acting as a proposition, a path of action and communication, a form of discourse.

But there is no trace of this, anywhere. A while ago, at a public event, a leftwing intellectual asked, "Do you ever hear a politician state a simple truth if it could hurt his own policy?" The obvious answer was "no". He was talking about party politicians. But if you look at grassroots politics, you find the same obsession with results. The sea of appeals, circulars, and so on, that arrive by e-mail, for example, what language do they use? The kind that tries to convince you at any cost and by any means, playing on guilt, rattling off sufferings, and data that are always partial or incorrect, drawing on the vocabulary of pure rhetoric. But as it is, the sheer number of these appeals - and, for the most part, their pointlessness - indicates a kind of neurotic fixation on action, a religious zeal for 'doing something'. And yet one could use very different methods to talk to people, readily available ones that are simple and even more efficient: greater informality, more sincerity about your own doubts and uncertainties...

But that's the point; we would have to change our outlook: to stay on the subject of communication, that means trying to talk 'to' people and not 'at' people, knowing that the way you talk to someone strengthens or weakens something in them, that it's absurd to treat people like mailboxes while criti-

cizing the way TV encourages passivity, etc. And to consider all of this at least as important as one more signature on a petition, or one more person at a demonstration. This is on the small scale. On the larger scale, one could say that along with denouncing the television monopolies of Berlusconi and Murdoch, along with denouncing television's control by political parties, it would be a good idea to propose that television become something truly public, something that can truly offer a voice to the thousand different realities in this world, and to fight against it being political only in the sense of swaying the viewer towards one political party or the other. And we should think about how this could be done, etc. Could it become an arena for real politics?

The left that knows too much

I think there are two answers to the question “Does the left already know everything?”, which are not alternatives, but on the contrary, complementary. The first is very simple and is already implicit in the episode described by Flemming Dyrman: the left, like all groups with shared values, shows a certain degree of such conformism, which obviously also includes ready-made judgements that often cover a considerable portion of human experience. If I remember correctly, there was a song by Giorgio Gaber that mocked this tendency. One could add that a historical phase like this one,

Giorgio Mascitelli

where the left and its values have almost no impact, sees an increase in verbal signs of this conformism, in order to make up for the lost feeling of community and solidarity that once came from shared action, in historical epochs when certain goals seemed within reach. Personally, I have always encountered this kind of atmosphere in my limited political experiences and consider it almost inevitable: for example, when as a young man I belonged to Democrazia Proletaria, an organization of the far left, I remember that when the party secretary's name was mentioned at meetings, everyone called him by his first name; since I don't usually call people I don't know by their given names, especially when they aren't present, I would call him by his surname, and I noticed that people there would wince, even if only for an instant, at this slight infraction of an established rule. Of course these episodes are innocuous, but conformity can cause greater damage: I'm thinking of the incident a few years ago in Verona, where a religion teacher of Jewish descent claimed he had been attacked by a group of right-wing extremists, and a newspaper of which I'm particularly fond compromised itself with a campaign in defense of the victim, who eventually admitted to having made it all up. In this case it's clear that leftist prejudices about the world (Verona is considered one of the Italian capitals of the far right) got in the way of that standard journalistic practice of checking the reliability of sources, which I believe is always necessary in cases like this. Still, I think a certain amount of conformism is inevitable when people with shared ideas come together, and that it's not entirely a bad idea, because group cohesion requires a certain amount of conformity.

The second answer, on the other hand, is more complex, and relates to issues that seem far removed, but seeing that Massimo Paizzi mentions Marxism, we should start with Marx himself. Indeed, Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach says: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it". With this thesis Marx makes a contrast between an approach of inquiry and interpretation, that is, the attitude of someone who does not know everything, with transformation, this being the field of action of someone who may not know everything, but surely knows enough to act. Marx, though he went on to interpret the world in a manner that was innovative for his time, identifies an essential factor in the problematic nature of action: the need to judge the world, and thus at some point, to affirm by implication that you know enough about it to do so. Of course, having some certainties - some firm ground for analysis and judgement - does not automatically mean thinking you know everything or assuming an obtuse, biased attitude like the one Dyrman alludes to, and in the history of the left, groups have shown a varying degree of narrow-mindedness. But if this distinction is always clear and cogent in the starry sky of theory, when you move on to dealing with flesh-and-blood people - maybe just that small group who decides to spend an evening at a debate on Palestine rather than going out to a club - it becomes much more complex and difficult. People who want to change the world by working towards greater justice (though a bit generic, this will do here as a definition of the left) must be strong-willed, and a strong will is not forged out of a mass of doubts and anxieties, except for the minute fraction of humanity that believes in a moral obligation to

choose action, even when one lacks absolute certainties, and that is willing to shoulder the burden of contradiction.

In *Sentimental Education*, Flaubert, who was not a liberal but was a great writer, offers a dramatic example of this divergence with the characters of Moreau and Dussardier. Moreau, full of spirit and with a sizeable private income, frequents the political clubs before the revolution of '48 and distinguishes himself as an orator. He is admired by Dussardier, a commoner with sincere convictions who believes in the theses argued by Moreau and others; the upshot is that when revolution breaks out, Moreau defends it in the drawing rooms of bankers and Dussardier dies in the streets of Paris. Careful now: Moreau is not a cynical intellectual, a corrupting influence, but is rather a figure with his own kind of intellectual integrity. The problem is that Moreau is a person with doubts, and to him the nuances matter, whereas Dussardier, as decent and mild-mannered as he is, has no uncertainties about his vision of the world. Dussardier has just that, a strong will. And even now that historical circumstances do not impose such dramatic choices, at least in Europe, one can legitimately wonder whether it's better to have a Dussardier or a Moreau at your side when organizing a strike.

Constantly questioning one's own certainties very often fosters a high degree of inactivity, and the figure of the leftist militant - as implied by the term itself, which derives from a religious, biblical metaphor that employs military language - cannot number curiosity and independent thinking among his primary virtues. When a militant is a non-conformist in regard to the opinion of society at large, it is in the name of a different creed. And, one could add,

the most anti-conformist militants happen to be those who have run into trouble from the left. Nor do I think that replacing the figure of the militant with the volunteer, as has been suggested in recent years, could resolve the contradiction; at the very most it would be mitigated, in that a volunteer does not consider himself the expression and instrument of a necessary law of history.

Actually, it is the very role of the volunteer that brings up another issue, a new one, though closely interwoven with what I was speaking of earlier, because talking about this figure obviously means talking about the conditions that make it possible to practice a new kind of politics, one that does not fall into the errors of the twentieth century. Marco Revelli, in a book that is very debatable - in the etymological sense of being worthy of much discussion - and very important, *Oltre il novecento*, writes that this new role is characterized by a fundamental autonomy from the productivity-focused mindset which instead dominates the militant; by an ability to adapt to different situations; by a model of 'otherness' that favours living over construction (i.e., something new and concrete to be built day by day, rather than vast projects that plan out the future); and lastly, by the awareness that one cannot systematically sacrifice the sphere of emotions in the interest of rationalization (and I think this means, first and foremost, inventing a kind of social practice that respects the life of individuals, far removed from the Machiavellianism of Bolshevik tradition). These attributes derive in part from the new social and economic conditions in which we live, and in part from a widespread cultural awareness of certain limits to the experience of traditional political militancy. In short, according to Revelli,

ing to Revelli, volunteers “are not soldiers (like militants). They are rather, in the deepest sense of the word, ‘civilians’. Nor do they possess the same strength as militants. [...] On the contrary, they seem to make weakness into their own subtle resource”.

Militants, on the other hand, are endowed with a determination, a systematic nature, a violence, and a skill in planning that stem from a productivity-based approach, the result of complete absorption in the sphere of work.

The odd thing about this description of the militant, though, is that it does not correspond in the least to what militants thought of themselves - with the exception perhaps of Victor Serge - which in the end is obvious, but nor does it match the ideas of theorists. And indeed, many militants and ex-militants were angered by this book, even though some of Revelli’s opinions were based on incontrovertible historical arguments. But this is not an unusual problem: it’s natural that when a historical experience is criticized, those who played a leading role will defend it fiercely. Actually, the biggest problem is that in Marxist, and, I would say, revolutionary tradition, no specific reference is made to the militant, except for a partial reference in Lenin, who, unlike other theorists, also had practical tasks to deal with. According to this tradition, certain social conditions produce a class that is naturally revolutionary, and in it sprout socially conscious militants, like mushrooms after a rainstorm - without any particular problems regarding moral choice, which is obviously a sphere that clashes with the rigid sociological determinism used in approaching issues of militancy. At the most, one acknowledges that some workers have a stronger social con-

sciousness than others, and they earn the title of vanguards of their class. A series of concrete truths are ignored: for example, the fact that a significant part of the 'vanguard' does not come from the proletariat at all, or, on the other hand, the fact that some countries fulfill the social conditions considered revolutionary, but do not produce many militants. Paradoxically, to understand what militancy was, one needs to turn to the pages - often filled with spite, but also with admiration - of their opponents, or at least non-partisan observers, like Tocqueville writing about the Parisian Socialists of 1848. What is always highlighted there is a moral energy, considered by some a deception or a form of resentment, which has little to do with the class struggle. Naturally, these authors are ideologues themselves, and do not accept the degree of truth there is in a class-based analysis, but that's not my issue here. What I want to point out is that the strength of the militant, which Revelli also mentions, arises from a moral choice - facilitated, but not caused, by certain social conditions - and that this pivotal choice is not acknowledged by theorists who write about militancy, and often not even by militants themselves (the best foundations for this sort of observation is to be found in Bourdieu's criticisms of the Marxian concept of class).

In short, the personal or ethical motives for their commitment were never addressed in public discussion about militants; this is not just a philological detail, but entails a failure to understand the experience of militancy, from the outside or the inside. Revelli's portrait of the volunteer certainly has many aspects which are far removed from that of the militant, starting with the fact that volunteers do not consider themselves soldiers, and thus show

a healthy caution when it comes to dangerous areas such as justified violence; but volunteers also run the risk of considering themselves merely the expression of certain social conditions, without truly grasping the meaning of their experience. In their case, the risk is not of slipping into violence, but of losing track of the reasons for their commitment, closing themselves off to the rest of society in the name of carrying out sectorial projects (and the debate on the third sector's drift towards corporatization grants a truly concrete nature to these risks). I should add that a mere reference to the aspect of personal choice is not much help, without an effort to collectively reflect on the construction of what we could provisionally call a culture of commitment.

Of course, culture of commitment is a nice, catchy phrase, but in and of itself it doesn't mean anything. That's why I would like to try here to list a few areas of discussion which could be used as pivotal points in the attempt to construct such a philosophy.

1. For the most part, the radical choice of commitment has been considered the result of an unshakable religious or secular faith, perhaps stemming from analysis that is thought to be scientific, and thereby infallible; in any case, it has been linked to a perspective that leaves no room for doubt, and borders dangerously on fanaticism (and let it be clear, this is indeed a danger). Actually, the choice of commitment is an aspect of how one experiences existence, and can, albeit with difficulty, be reconciled with a critical, non-faith-based approach. In the third canto of the *Inferno*, Dante defines the slothful, those who never made up their minds or made a choice, as "these wretched ones who never were alive". This definition conveys the idea that they have sacrificed a part of existence; they are not

the object of censure, but almost of pity, because they have not really experienced life. I realize it's a provocation to drag out a suggestion of this kind from the depths of the Middle Ages, from a poet who was molded by the internal struggles of thirteenth-century city-states, but I do so deliberately, because in contemporary culture, making up one's mind and choosing sides has now become synonymous with narrow-mindedness, due to the reigning individualism of our society.

2. As is well known, in the dominant contemporary culture, a global vision of the world, a generalized system of values, is not only no longer possible, but not even desirable (at least on the left), in that it is synonymous with all-pervasive violence. As an ideology of modernity, this position, which became much stronger after the crisis in Marxism, tends to brand any attempt to take a stance as a potential harbinger of totalitarian violence, reconciling itself instead with the various forms of contemporary individualism. This position - and I'm not referring to a specific theory, but a widespread sentiment - obviously interprets the history of the twentieth century as a reign of violence based essentially on ideology, and this type of argument, which originated with De Maistre at the time of the Restoration, tends to link the historical outbreak of violence, or of new, qualitatively superior violence, to the introduction of a historically concrete demand for justice. But the most serious thing is the widespread conviction that certain questions, which have accompanied the entire path of modernity, have now been exhausted with the end of the historical forms in which they were expressed. A culture of commitment has the task of criticizing this outlook, though without sacrificing its awareness

of the Communist tradition's responsibilities in some of the tragedies of the past century. In this sense, I think that in the book by Revelli mentioned above, one could find at least partial indications of this task being carried out.

3. It is impossible to attain justice for the violence of oppression; it is not possible, because that violence is irrevocable and irresolvable, not only for groups of people, but for the anonymous historical laws that guide human action. It is possible to avenge that violence, or take measures so that it will never be repeated, but that doesn't mean attaining justice. The historical demand for justice is not the same thing as achieving justice (otherwise human action would become divine); the demand for justice only sews a patch on a rent that is irreparable, and keeps alive the very idea of justice, without which there can be no collective life. I'd say that this awareness of the limits of human action might be one of the antidotes that the culture of commitment could establish as a concrete measure against the proliferation of ideological violence.

The points listed just above are important ones, and more could be identified, but the true sense of what I call a culture of commitment is to be found first and foremost in the answer to a fundamental question. It can be summed up in a very simple way: is there still the anthropological possibility of a figure who devotes his or her life to political commitment? As I said before, I don't believe that social conditions in and of themselves automatically produce figures of this kind. Moreover, in the current context, both politics and volunteering are dominated by a marked process of professionalization, which entails the implicit expectation, among the motivations of those who choose such a path, if not of a

career in the accepted sense, at least of achieving certain personal goals. In every era, personal motivations have played a role, even a significant one, in politics, and there is nothing new in that, yet in a society where the highest degree of ethical self-perception is the imperative to do one's job well, one can legitimately wonder whether the prospect of dedicating one's life to a commitment is even comprehensible for most people. I don't want to mythicize the past by saying this, but even in times of greater hope, militants have been a minority that was often very tiny, but a minority who nevertheless expressed the feeling of their own era. Today, the experience of volunteering, if it is to have a place of its own and not be absorbed by the various reigning social mechanisms, requires a certain type of human creature at its base; people who are not only critical of dominant practice and values, but above all, aware that they are making a choice that cannot be understood in the individualistic terms through which our culture perceives the meaning of life. In other words, they must not only affirm that rebellion is right, but first and foremost, must discover what rebellion means for themselves and for others. They will then have before them an extremely complex path, but a practicable one; a path that will become more and more difficult the less hope there is, as always happens in life.

Note

In the current debate about ethical values and so-called relativism that has filled the pages of Italian newspapers in recent months, one can see a surprising simplification, whereby anyone who takes a dogmatic or religious stance is necessarily someone who upholds ethical values, and anyone

who espouses a position of dialogue is wishy-washy and flighty. The absurd thing is that many left-wing pundits accept this framing of the problem, at least from a terminological standpoint. The tragic thing is that this simplification, obviously laughable when taken as a historical, theoretical truth, is the expression of a social truth. By abandoning its focus on justice and equality, the left has created a vacuum to be filled by the worst kind of religious dogmatism, in a world, moreover, that is increasingly competitive and thus desperate for strong values. In short, while some of us were fiddling around with the 'opportunity society', there were others who addressed problems by dusting off God, Family, and the Fatherland.

How is all of this relevant to what I was saying earlier? It is relevant because this situation, which is clearly the result of extremely complex historical dynamics, is also due in part to the conformism of the left; not, of course, the conformism of a few militants who think they already know all there is to know about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the conformism of those who dogmatically believed in pragmatism, without even realizing they were elevating it to become their only principle, contributing to a political and cultural devastation of our society for which now we risk paying the very concrete consequences.

August 24th. The remaining 99.5%

Here

notes from the present

“I want to ask you as a Jew to a Jewess” the young man said a few days ago. In these days, a beginning such as this invites a dialogue of the kind in which we have been drowning for several weeks now - a dialogue in which the definition ‘Jew’ has been appropriated to describe some type of unique entity, one that is set apart from the other human species, a superior one. Sometimes it’s the Jewish boy with his arms raised from the Warsaw Ghetto; sometimes it’s the young girl whose orange shirt bears the slogan, “We won’t forget and we won’t forgive”; and sometimes it’s the soldier who refuses to evacuate a Jew. A unique entity of ties of blood, sacredness and land.

“As a Jew to a Jewess”, said the young man, who turned out to be a tourist from South America who has family in Israel and also understands Hebrew. It was at the Erez crossing, among the barbed-wire fencing, the locked gates, the revolving gates, the intimidating guard towers, the soldiers using special cameras to keep an eye on the handful of individuals passing through, and the booming loudspeakers through which they bark out their orders in Hebrew to women who have been waiting in the heat for five hours to go visit their sons imprisoned at the Be’er Sheva jail.

“Is it possible” he continued with his question “that the Israelis, who are so nice and good - after all, I

Amira Hass

From the Israeli newspaper “Ha’aretz”, 24 August 2005.

The day before yesterday, August 22, saw completion of the evacuation of the settlements and the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

have family here - are unaware of the injustice they have caused here?" The images of destruction left behind by Israel in Palestinian Gaza and witnessed by him in the past few days have left a look of shock in his eyes. "I am a Jew, and my father is a Holocaust survivor, and I grew up on totally different values of Judaism - social justice, equality and concern for one's fellow man".

As naive as it may have been, the question was like a breath of fresh air. Here was a Jew who was voicing his opinion on the fate of 1,300,000 people, while the entire world appeared to be focused on every one of the 8,000 Jews who are moving house. Here was a Jew who was moved by what have become dry numbers - 1,719 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip from the end of September 2000 until today; and according to various estimates, some two-thirds of them were unarmed and were not killed in battles or during the course of attempts to attack a military position or a settlement.

Based on figures from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, of those killed, 379 were children under the age of 18; 236 were younger than 16; 96 were women; and 102 were the objectives of targeted liquidations during the course of which the Israel Defense Forces also killed another 95 individuals who, according to the military too, were "innocent bystanders".

Some 9,000 Gaza residents were injured; 2,704 homes to some 20,000 people were razed by the IDF's bulldozers and assault helicopters; 2,187 were partially destroyed. Some 31,650 dunams [7821 acres] of agricultural land were left scorched.

The Israeli responses to these numbers are standard: They invited it upon themselves, or: What do they expect when they fire Qassams at children and

peaceful homes, or try to infiltrate and murder citizens in their houses - that the IDF won't come to their defense?

A direct line is drawn between these questions, which expressed the public's support for the Israeli assault policy, and participating in the sorrow of the evacuees and the wonderment at this "magnificent chapter" in the history of the Zionist settlement enterprise - a direct line of fundamental belief in the Jews' super-rights in this land. Indeed, one can join those who are amazed by the settlers in general, and the Gaza Strip settlers in particular.

What talent it takes to live for 35 years in a flourishing park and splendid villas just 20 meters from overcrowded, suffocated refugee camps. What talent it takes to turn on the sprinklers on the lawns, while just across the way 20,000 other people are dependent on the distribution of drinking water in tankers; to know that you deserve it, that your government will pave magnificent roads for you and neglect (prior to Oslo, before 1994) to the point of destruction the Palestinian infrastructure. What skill it takes to step out of your well-cared-for greenhouse and walk unmoved past 60-year-old fruit-bearing date trees that are uprooted for you, roads that are blocked for you, homes that are demolished for you, the children who are shelled from helicopters and tanks and buried alongside you, for the sake of the safety of your children and the preservation of your super-rights.

For the sake of about half a percent of the population of the Gaza Strip, a Jewish half-percent, the lives of the remaining 99.5 percent were totally disrupted and destroyed - worthy of wonderment indeed. And also amazing is how most of the other Israelis, who did not go themselves to settle the

homeland, suffered this reality and did not demand that their government put an end to it - before the Qassams.

A big, well-fed goat was removed from the Gaza Strip this week. And therefore, the sense of relief felt by many of the 99.5 percent is understandable - although it is a far cry from the reality emerging from the so-superficial media reports that are focusing on the celebrations of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. In the words last week in the Khan Yunis refugee camp of a former worker at one of the settlements: "The settlements divided the Strip into three or four prisons. Now, we will live in one big prison - a more comfortable one, but a prison nevertheless".

Back to the diaries

Here

notes from the present

Malga Valpiana, Italy, August 24th

Laura Zanetti

Today I climbed up to Malga Valpiana, an Alpine pasture of the Lagorai mountains that was once run by my maternal great-grandfather. I had barely left the group of buildings when the hands of Francesco, the shepherd, waved me further to the left. He was pointing me towards the right path to Montalon. I ignored both Francesco and his hands. Further down, between the edge of the wood and the beginning of the pasture, I had glimpsed a long trench, filled in here and there with rubble, softened by small bushes of bilberries that were already ripe. I feel a sudden emotional connection with another August 24, in 1915, when my people had only two hours to evacuate the town, or to put it more accurately, to flee wildly through the chestnut woods, amidst the bombs and dismembered bodies.

I sat down to pick bilberries. "They're so sweet", I said to myself, thinking that a catharsis comes for everything, even the trenches: ninety years ago, continual, agonizing wounds; now, if the sun shines on them, covered with gentian in the spring, rhododendrons in July, amica and bilberries in August.

Sitting there, I thought of Ungaretti, of the seminal element of his poetry, these very trenches; of the first light of dawn after a night spent in hunger and

August 26. A fire breaks out in Paris in an old building which is home to African families, originally from Mali, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, and Gambia. Seventeen people are killed, thirteen of them children. A few months ago, on April 15, a downtown hotel caught fire; it was also inhabited by immigrants. Twenty-four of them died. On August 30, another fire in a building which houses Africans from the Ivory Coast will kill seven people, four of them children.

first light of dawn after a night spent in hunger and in the mud: “I crouched / beside my grimy / battle clothes / and like a bedouin / bent to greet / the sun”. Or: “Trapped / inside these bowels / of rubble / hours and hours / I dragged / my carcass / worn down by mud / like a shoe sole / or like a seed / of white thorn” [from “The Rivers”, and “Pilgrimage”, August 16, 1916, in *Joy*, transl. Andrew Frisardi].

My gaze moved to the opposite horizon, to the point where, between a strip of sky and the upper edge of the wood, a small, venerable cloud, the ‘zibina’ (the Sybil) as the old people have always called it, rises from the lake of Erdemolo. Further off, another of the hundred Lagorai lakes, Ezze. My thoughts turn to Musil, to that page in his diary: “A night ride on Lago d’Ezze... The horses pull harder than usual on the reins during night rides in the mountains. Felt fatigued up at the top and slept for 3 hours among the soldiers; next to an old rifleman, grateful for the warmth he bestowed”. The war over there along the Isonzo, over here on the mountains of Trentino.

I run my gaze along the entire Val Calamento that leads to Cagnon, then go back to Valpiana, to the little ‘stoi’, the ammunition shelters, later transformed into cool pantries for storing butter. Up here, everything that was actually left after the “model disaster” was reused. And not always wisely. Almost a preview of what was to come with real estate development in the mountains, in contrast with the ethic of the traditional culture: the corrugated roofing of Austrian military shacks gradually replaced larch shingles, and barbed wire took the place of firwood fences.

In the evening, I go back to Malga Valpiana. Fran-

cesco is gazing at the sky and his animals. He talks about his cheese, which “this year is outstanding” he says “like the grass”. His voice resembles those of the old people from an earlier time, like my grandfather, my father, the last ones left. At the end of the sentences, it has preserved a suppressed but perceptible groan, a sort of ‘linguistic trench’, as if the echo of all that horror was somehow imprinted on the language shared by all the communities of this borderland.

I walk back down, still with the sound inside me of the water you hear in all the pastures of Montalon. I go into the woods. These woods which are never hostile, which in Lagorai are never monotonous, and which make room for everything: larches and firs, beeches and goldenchain trees, poplars and alders, the smell of resin and of moss, green leaves and dry leaves, swathes of light and of shadow, snakes and birds. The woods, I think to myself, are the finest expression of democracy in nature. The woods know how to bide their time and put everything back together, even the old mule tracks from the First World War, that now, on this August 24, seem like pleasant strolls through the history of my mountain.

Further down, where the trail widens and joins the valley road, the question comes to me spontaneously: if war, if all wars, even those within the everyday existentialities of life, have an objective confirmation in reality, couldn’t the same be true for peace, and for its complex advance? Peace, as learned from this August 24, is not such an abstract thing: today I saw it, touched it, heard it, tasted it, and even smelled it, my mind’s eye found it in Ungaretti’s poetry, in his glosses of epiphany. Why not

bring it back down to the valley?

Palazzuolo sul Senio, Italy, August 25th

Alfredo Menghetti

A letter from the depths of the countryside. The countryside gets deeper the higher it is (above sea level). My message, with the strength (or weakness) of a mongrel cultural substratum - hybrid or amphoteric, depending on whether you want to borrow terms from biology or chemistry - emerges from the middle depths of mountains that are not imposing or impassable: "They are not very high, nor are their crags particularly steep, yet they have a deep evocative power" said a poet of a distant place and time; still, they are walls that encircle a prison, or guard a realm of freedom. *Romagna-Toscana*, a geographical oxymoron. A province teetering between Tuscany and Romagna. Romagna, not Emilia-Romagna, because that was its historic identification, and because the Emilian-Romagnol populations are not given to mixing, proud of that hyphen between the two terms; the sign, in this case, of a division that some wish were complete.

The co-existence of two dialects that it's an understatement to call antithetical. Romagnol, barely softened by over six hundred years of Tuscan presence, and the full, round Tuscan dialect, with the harshness, if you can call it that, of the aspirated *c* that derives from Etruscan (so they say).

Influences travel over the peaks and the frontier between the two areas migrates on the heels of administrative custom, slowly winning a covert war thousands of years old that has been entrusted more to the slow work of sandpaper than to the slice of a sword. Since the Second World War, the Tuscan

August 29. Hurricane Katrina strikes the South of the United States, destroying New Orleans. "The whole country is praying for you," President Bush tells the population of the areas affected. New Orleans is a city of 485,000 people, 130,000 of whom live below the poverty line. As of August 30, there hundreds of deaths and over a million refugees are reported: because the levees protecting the city have given way, 80% of it is under six meters of water. Looting is rampant and the army arrives to patrol the streets. The Superdome, an immense covered stadium where at least ten thousand people have found refuge, seems to be ruled by criminals: there are episodes of theft, extortion, rape, violence. Along with the emotions aroused by all huge disasters - from sorrow to solidarity, from awe to anger, and many others - there is dismay at seeing all of this happen in the heart of the world's only remaining super-power. This will need to be discussed. In the next issue.

dialect has conquered a few villages beyond the ridge, on the Padanian side, aided by its contiguity with the national language and by its long literary tradition. In the same era in which Dante had ties, albeit virtual ones, to Bologna, and long before he found himself dying in Ravenna against his will, the rustic lords of these mountains were to be found - often girded for battle - frequenting both sides, influencing and, at times, deciding their history.

Love?

Can one love a land, a place, an entity that is abstract and concrete at the same time?

A place that changes due to the natural course of things, the action of man, the advance of one over the other, but which always remains the same. A place with broken horizons, uncertain boundaries, a landscape that renews and repeats itself from valley to valley. The arguments of nature, with an almost uterine power of generation, take different and conflicting forms, germinating apodictic substance.

The river.

The road that runs along the river, its twin and parallel current, a route of escape. An escape long dreamed of, long pondered, long anticipated. Long attempted. The trauma of an escape that ends when you turn yourself over with lowered eyes and a heart heavy with the shame of defeat, or bursting with relief, joy, and homesickness assuaged. A route that for many has instead been a path of desertion and oblivion.

But perhaps it is the community, the commonality, the secret inflection of the word that binds a person to this place, like anyone else is bound to any other. Or it is a form of imprinting, based on smells, voices, colours, names, shapes, skies. An un-

conscious, arbitrary kind of memory.

Not infrequently - sometimes as a joke, sometimes out of distraction - though far away, one refers to distant winds using local names that have a meaning here, but nowhere else, based on a vague similarity that is not identity; or one measures approximate distances using a familiar place as the reference.

Exposed to the wind on the crests are churches clad in slabs of stone (hewn from quarries with even and accessible strata of rock that were hunted out through repeated probing of the rugged mountain slopes); on them, centuries-old layers of lichen have traced a random, multicoloured cosmography. An ancient, humble church surrounded by laurel and ash trees has a facade that flaunts, next to a door eroded by rain and frost, an epitaph to the dead of a distant war, calling to mind the verses of Ungaretti:

*Like this stone
of San Michele
so cold
so hard...*

One or another of them set out “with all his death on his shoulders” and found himself - without really knowing where or why, with no knowledge of his country or of Ungaretti - ending his march in Val-lone San Michele, the same name as this church, surrounded by mountains so different from his own, so bitter and glacial that they snatch your breath away at every step.

And not far away, the mad Dino Campana, who could not fight that war (on which side would he have wanted to?), consummated his romantic folly with the voracious Sibilla Alermo, a crazed sylvan deity with tawny hair and raging eyes.

The steep slopes open out onto the valley until they offer a glimpse of the sea, far away, towards Ravenna; at night, the lights of the city and the flames of the refinery smokestacks kindle the horizon with an unsettling artificial sunset. On the brink of the sheer cliffs are the traces of trenches that seem almost tombs, spaced at regular intervals, shelter in harsh, desperate battles and trusted allies in the resistance against grim, ruthless, inflexible invaders. And in cemeteries that now lie in ruins at the edge of beech woods, fragments of tombstones recount the massacre of those who were the innocent victims of an inhuman plan.

A landscape of small houses, in one place propped against each other as if looking for mutual support, in another, standing lone and proud, despite their shabby poverty, perched on a hill, a butte, or a ridge, and often bearing the stigmata of what used to be a tower or a small fortress: a loophole, a narrow door, thick, solid walls, the remains of a cistern. Or their origin is evoked in their names: Castellina, Casté, Castellare, Rocca.

And forts, fortresses, bastions, castles - witnesses to other, more ancient battles that were of no avail in defending these towns from the interests of the Florentine Commune, and from an imposed peace that went too far - find lodging on high ground, brief protrusions along that uneven line that shifts and defines the horizon.

And yet back then, when the roads were only paths through woods and along precipices, and communication or commerce happened by foot or on muleback, they reached even distant towns, towns that might have thought themselves unfamiliar to most, and brought news, people, and commodities. These roads were travelled by the steadfast warrior pope

Della Rovere in the company of Machiavelli, or by Garibaldi, the orphan of the Roman Republic and the newly bereaved widower of the legendary Anita, accompanied by Major 'Leggero' and the priest Giovanni Verità, the guest of mysterious patriotic waystations spread throughout the two regions. These plains were swept by the unrest of 1848 and the rivalry between Republican revolutionaries and *codini* reactionaries (there is still a town whose inhabitants call themselves *codini* in memory of those uprisings), when those "who saw the Provisional Government come accompanied by German bayonets, gave free and honest vent to their repressed grudges, and denounced words and deeds that could only be called imprudent, pronounced under the previous regime".

How many of those roads, now reverted to the condition of paths, still run through these valleys, leading who knows where?

Contributors and translators

Here

notes from the present

Ennio Abate was born in Baronissi (Salerno) in 1941. Since 1961 he has lived in Milan, where he completed his studies in art and literature. He has worked in an office and as a telephone operator, and taught until 1998, painting as an outsider artist and actively involved in poetry, politics, and history. He works with various journals and cultural associations.

p. 14

Lucianna Argentino was born in 1962 in Rome, where she lives. She has published several poetry collections; the latest is *Verso Penuel*, Edizioni dell'Oleandro, Roma-L'Aquila 2004. She works as a cashier in a supermarket.

pp. 6, 27, 62, 99, 100

Johanna Bishop (icchiojo@tiscali.it) was born in Chicago in 1974, and lived in Pennsylvania and New York before moving to Tuscany in 1998. She translates from Italian into English. She translated all the articles in the present issue unless otherwise specified.

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cover

Brigitte Ciaramella (brigitte.ciaramella@tin.it) was born in 1966 and was brought up bilingual Italian/English. She is a Philosophy graduate and an EFL teacher, as well as a freelance translator with a special interest in literary works. In this issue she has translated the texts by Drazen Gunjaca (May 30), and Maria Granati (June 12).

pp. 7, 28

Marc H. Ellis was born in North Miami Beach, Florida, in 1952. He is University Professor of American and Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for American and Jewish Studies at Baylor University (Waco, Texas). He has authored fifteen books and edited five others, among them: *Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in Our Time*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999; *O Jerusalem: The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999; *Practicing Exile: The Religious Odyssey of an American Jew*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2002; *Israel and Palestine: Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century*, Pluto Press, London-Sterling, Va., 2002; and *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: the Challenge of the the Twenty-First Century*, 3rd expanded ed., Baylor University Press, Waco, Tex., 2004. Ellis' many articles have been published in diverse American and international publications, including "International Herald Tribune", "European Judaism", "Ha'aretz", "Jordan Times", "Christian Century", and "Journal of Palestine Studies".

p. 37

Carol Faison was born in Alexandria, Virginia, Usa, in 1951, and lives in Venice, Italy. She is the founder (1991) and director of "Care and Share", a

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pp. 95, 96, 98

Marco Giovenale was born in 1969 in Rome, where he lives. He has contributed to many magazines and has published three books of poetry. His website is www.slow-forward.splinder.com. His bibliography can be found at www.biobiblio.splinder.com (where one can also read his writings). The text published in this issue of “Here” is part of a longer prose piece, *Transito pieno*.

p. 3

Maria Granati was born in Potenza Picena and lives in Modena, Italy. For many years a political militant in the Italian Communist Party, she has been elected many times in provincial administrations and in the municipal administration of the town where she lives, as well as in Parliament, for three periods of legislature. She is now involved in cultural activities with associations that deal with adult education.

pp. 5, 28, 30, 101

Christian Grecco was born in Buenos Aires in 1976. After having taken part in the *Asambleas Populares* that followed the uprising on 19 and 20 December 2001, he is now a popular ‘alphabetizer’ and a History teacher within the unemployed people movements. He has published three poetry books and two volumes of short stories.

p. 103

Drazan Gunjaca was born in 1958 in Sinj, in Croatia. A former officer in the Yugoslav Military Navy, he is now a lawyer in Pula. He has published several novels, short stories, plays and collections of poetry against the war. Among them: *Balkan Farewells*, Moondance Publishing, Upper Black Eddy, PA, 2003, and *Balkan roulette*, Spuyten Duyvil, New York 2004.

p. 7

Dorothy Lale (a pseudonym) is an American woman who volunteered in Palestine with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in the autumn of 2004. She went back this summer to travel around the region.

p. 30

Giorgio Mascitelli was born in 1966 in Milan, Italy, where he lives. He is a teacher. Apart from short stories and writings that appeared in magazines, he has published the novels *Nel silenzio delle merci*, Edis, Orzinuovi (Brescia) 1996, and *L'arte della capriola*, Piero Manni, Lecce 1999.

pp. 20, 109

Marina Massenz was born in 1955 in Milan, Italy, where she lives. She's a therapist of psychomotricity, and is the author of several essays on this subject. She has also published the poetry collection *Nomadi, viandanti, filanti*, Amadeus, Cittadella (Padova) 1995. Her "The traveller's ego" was translated by Don Var Green, whom we thank.

pp. 63, 81

Alfredo Menghetti was born in Palazzuolo sul Senio, Italy, where he still lives. Poetry is his primary interest. He has published three short collections, the most recent being *Attraversamenti personali*, Moby Dick, Faenza 2004.

p. 128

Massimo Parizzi was born in 1950 in Milan, Italy, where he lives. A translator, his writings have appeared in various newspapers and periodicals. He is also the founder and editor of this magazine.

pp. 11, 64, 65, 103, 106

Germana Pisa was born in 1941 in Milan, Italy, where she lives. A housewife “with a lot of interests”, as she describes herself, she is actively involved in the Seattle movements.

p. 3

Lelio Scanavini was born in 1939 in Milan, where he still lives. He has published two collections of poetry, *Quattro ‘M!’ per voce sola*, I dispari, Milan 1969, and *Litosfera*, I dispari, Milan 1978. In the 1980s he founded the journal “Il segnale”, of which he is still co-director.

p. 24

Azzam Tamimi was born in 1955 in Hebron, Palestine, and lives in London. He’s the director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought and spokesman of the Muslim Association of Britain. He has published several books, the most recent of which is *Rachid Ghannouchi, Democrat within Islamism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2001. He also co-edited *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, Hurst, London-New York University Press, New York 2000. He is a regular commentator on the Arabic satellite channel Al-Jazeera.

p. 52

Jáchym Topol was born in Prague in 1962. His writing began with lyrics for a rock band called “Pší vojáci” (Dog Soldiers), in the late 70s. In 1982 he co-founded the samizdat magazine “Violit”, and in 1985 “Revolver Revue”, a samizdat review that specialized in new Czech writing. Several times he was imprisoned for short periods, both for his

samizdat publishing activities and for his smuggling across the Polish border in cooperation with Polish Solidarity. He was also a signatory of the Charter 77 human rights declaration, and played an active part in the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. He lives in Prague with his wife and daughter. The poem published here is taken from the collection *V úterý bude válka* (The War Will Be On Tuesday), Atlantis, Brno 1992. The translation is by M.B.

p. 9

Paola Turrone was born in 1971 in Monza, Italy. She holds theatre, cinema and communication workshops for children, parents and teachers. She has published a volume of short stories, *Due mani di colore*, Medusa, Milano 2003 (together with the poet and painter Sabrina Foschini) and the poetry collections *animale*, Fara Editore, Santarcangelo di Romagna 2000, and *Il vincolo del volo*, Raffaelli Editore, Rimini 2003.

p. 61

Don Var Green (dv.green@wanadoo.fr.) is a professional translator with a special interest in literary works. His working languages are English, Italian and French. Here, he translated Marina Massenz' "The traveller's ego".

p. 81

Laura Zanetti was born in 1949 in Telve di Val Sugana, Italy. She lives between Verona and Telve. For over twenty years she has been involved with issues related to the protection of the pre-alpine environment. She's an ethnografist, a journalist and writes poetry.

p. 125

Subscription

Here

notes from the present

The cost of a **subscription** to 3 issues, either the Italian or English edition, is 25 Euro in Italy, 30 (\$36) in Europe and the Mediterranean area, 35 (\$42) in the rest of the world. However, since these prices are too high for many countries, you may ask for a **reduced-price subscription**. So far, readers from the United States (for whom we fixed the cost of a subscription at \$38) and from Argentina (\$30) have done so. You can subscribe by **credit card** providing us with its number and expiry date via fax or phone (0039-02-57406574); or you can send the money through a **postal money order** to “Here - notes from the present”, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy; or pay by **bank transfer** on the following bank account registered in the name of “Qui - appunti dal presente”: national bank code (BBAN) V 05584 01624 000000025101; international bank code (IBAN) IT 03 V 05584 01624 000000025101. Please, remember to indicate your name, address, the object of payment and which edition you wish to receive. For further information, please call or send a fax to the number 0039-02-57406574, or write to massimoparizzi@alice.it.

Last issues

Number 10, "and suddenly it's Beslan", February 2005 - Foreword - 1st-5th September 2004: diary pages from Italy (Massimo Parizzi, Adriano Accattino, Maria Granati, Marosia Castaldi, Mariela De Marchi, Marina Massenz, Germana Pisa), Croatia (Drazan Gunjaca), and Finland (Hanna Snellman) - **Children of the underground**, by Marosia Castaldi - **6th-9th September:** from Italy (Lucianna Argentino, Marosia Castaldi, Adriano Accattino, Massimo Parizzi), and Argentina (Gladys Croxatto) - **Migrations**, by Hanna Snellman - **10th-25th September:** from Argentina (Gladys Croxatto), Italy (Adriano Accattino, Giorgio Mascitelli, Lucianna Argentino, Maria Granati, Marosia Castaldi), and Palestine (Cris) - **An unknown warrior's confession**, by Drazan Gunjaca - **30th September-20th October:** from Palestine (Cris, Letizia, Logan), Italy (Massimo Parizzi, Germana Pisa, Marosia Castaldi, Mariela De Marchi, Andrea Arrighi), Argentina (Gladys Croxatto, Christian Grecco), and Finland (Hanna Snellman) - **Power and weakness**, by Franco Toscani - **Mirror**, by Stefano Guglielmin - **20th-22nd October:** from Palestine (Letizia) and Italy (Marosia Castaldi) - **Omnocracy**, by Roberto Taioli - **Michael Moore: soul orthopaedics**, by Andrea Inglese - **1st November-26th December:** from United States (Svetlana Broz, Laura Zanetti, Keren Batiyov), Italy (Mariela De Marchi, Marosia Castaldi, Paola Turrone, Lucianna Argentino, Massimo Parizzi), Palestine (Brett Cohen), and Finland (Hanna Snellman)

Number 11, "after the tsunami", June 2005 - 26th December 2004-10th January 2005: diary pages from Italy (Marina Massenz, Lucianna Argentino, Mariela De Marchi, Maria Granati) - **Of the power to print**, by Massimo Parizzi - **10th January-10th February:** from India (Carol Faison), Palestine (Operation Dove, Logan), Italy (Maria Granati, Mariela De Marchi, Maria Bastanzetti), United States (Silvio Grignaschi, Gery Moyano), France (Andrea Inglese) - **The act of giving**, by Roberto Taioli - **10th-27th February:** from Italy (Germana Pisa, Mariela De Marchi, Maria Granati), and Palestine (Logan, Operation Dove) - **Here is the world**, by Jouni Inkala - **Poetry in the 'time of destitution'**, by Franco Toscani - **1st-6th March:** from France (Maddalena Chataignier), India (Carol Faison), Italy (Mariela De Marchi, Paola Turrone), United States (Benedetta Scardovi), Denmark (Flemming Dyrman) - **Does the Left already know everything?**, by Massimo Parizzi - **9th March-8th April:** from Afghanistan (Graziella Longoni, Laura Quagliolo), Palestine (Julie, Operation Dove), Armenia (Stefano Guglielmin), Italy (Germana Pisa), United States (Benedetta Scardovi, Keren Batiyov), France (Maddalena Chataignier) - **April 9th. On Deir Yassin and the Jewish Future. Remembering and resisting**, by Marc Ellis - **It took a long time**, by Tommy Tabermann - **11th-28th April:** from Italy (Paola Turrone, Donato Salzarulo), and Palestine (Logan)

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