

Review for *Anthropological Quarterly* 2015

Jackson, M. 2015 *Harmattan: A philosophical fiction*, Columbia University Press: New York.

The structure of this book is appealing. It is reminiscent of the Holocaust ‘memoir’, *Fugitive Pieces*, by the Canadian poet Anne Michaels; both are beautifully written books comprised of two unequal parts whose relation is unspecified—and suggestive by virtue of that fact. The explicit concern of both books is the relation between lives despoiled by war and the surface routines that precede and follow the war. Both ponder, too, the relation between individual lives and the narratives that seem to live through those individuals as if possessed of their own identities. Is it not ‘curious’, Michael Jackson writes (pages 45-6), ‘the way in which individuals and their stories metamorphose, each borrowing its identity from elsewhere and leaving us perennially uncertain as to whether we are authors of our own lives and who is the real author of any story told’.

This quotation comes at the beginning of the second part of Jackson’s book, entitled ‘Harmattan’, and extending to 129 pages. ‘Harmattan’ is a West African word for a dry, parching wind, at the turn of the year, blowing an obscuring, red, dusty, fog across the land. The first part of the book of 44 pages is entitled ‘Limitrophes’: a Latin-Greek composite meaning a sustaining frontierland.

Jackson describes his book as a ‘philosophical fiction’. It continues that interrogation, prominent in his recent works (e.g. 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), of how best to write the movement of contemporary lives—their power and freedom to access the wherewithal that enables their continuing to take meaningful shape—while also writing of the global forces apparently ranged against them. This writing could also be termed ‘cosmopolitan’ in ethos. Is it not the case, Jackson urges, that their knowledge of the particularities of individual human lives (*polis*) enables anthropologists to illuminate the general conditions of a universal human nature (*cosmos*)? Our disciplinary focus is, or should be, this dialectic: illuminating the connections between human being and being human. In this enterprise, furthermore, the genre of expression—ethnography, fiction, philosophy, folktale or myth—is less consequential than the author’s sensibility.

Is it not the case, for instance, that everywhere one discerns ‘a human need to live life on one’s own terms’ (pages 10-11). Among the Kuranko of

Sierra Leone, as in Cambridge (England) and Cambridge, Massachusetts, people work to determine for themselves the order of their lives, and not to feel determined by a world they have not created (alongside others). Amid the contingency and unpredictability, the disintegration and humiliation of lives, people endeavour to inhabit a world defined on their own terms and in their own time. It is the fleshing out of this specific human trait—both a capability and a liability—that occupies Jackson in both parts of his text and that gives his book a sense of unity.

The concept of *limitrophe*, of a fecund borderland, pertains to the process by which human beings hope to effect a personal and social order in their lives. Jackson adapts the term to:

‘describe ethnographically and autobiographically, the life-giving potential of places, people, and powers [—also states of mind and genres of expression—] that lie beyond the pale of our established lifeworlds and to show that existential vitality depends on going beyond what has been prescribed by custom, internalized as habit, or enshrined in received ideas of truth and reality’ (page 6).

So as to live on their own terms—to ‘come into their own’—people everywhere *move beyond* the given world of culture, routine and convention, of conformity, normativity and traditionalism. Here is ‘a road of excess’ that gives on to ‘a palace of wisdom’.

Among the Kuranko this limitrophic insight expresses itself as the perceived necessary and complementary relationship between the *myths* that support the status quo and the *folktales* that explore fantastic possibilities. In Classical Greek metaphysics the insight expresses itself as the relationship between *nomos* (law) and *phusis* (life); also between Apollonian constraint and Dionysian revelry. *Every* human situation contains echoes of this antimony and tension and oscillation, Jackson is convinced, as human beings ‘struggle to reconcile the inner imperatives of our own existence and the entrenched, normative demands of a world that precedes, surrounds, and outlasts us’ (page 9). Certainly, the conviction of the need for limitrophic ventures and their potential has personally preoccupied Jackson for a lifetime; but is it not also the relation at the origin of that widespread discourse we call ‘religion’—and hence a way, too, to make sense of Jackson’s current Harvard job title as ‘Distinguished Professor of World Religions’?

Phrased slightly differently, limitrophes pertain to a process by which human beings establish a relationship with what is beyond themselves—

beyond their lifeworlds—and recover from this ‘moreness’, or excess, their own agency and identity. Individuals do this, and communities do it too: a social system tends towards entropy unless the domain of ascribed roles, inherited rules and ancestral values is perennially replenished by drawing from a well of wildness: of supernature and anti-structure. It is ‘the importance of elsewhere’, in the words of the poet (Larkin 1990:104; cf. Rapport 2005).

But then the opposite of orderliness might not only be non-regimentation and spontaneity but also chaos. To find one’s life in what exceeds the banal and routine is also to risk destruction and death. It is not only ‘the pall of routine and habit [that may] settle over us until we can no longer breathe’: a violent chaos may also ‘cut us down’ fatally (2015:174). We are at risk at both ends of the spectrum of human experience, in other words, and to step beyond the despotism of custom might also be to find an indiscriminateness and violence that kills us.

Moreover, in some places and some times, the ends of the spectrum can seem far closer than at others; and the distance between order and chaos, between routine and violence, be no distance at all. Certainly this has been Jackson’s experience of life in Sierra Leone amid its civil wars (as it has been mine in a State of Israel warring with its neighbours.) ‘In Sierra Leone’, Jackson writes, existence is ‘quotidian struggle’; no long-term guarantees, just existence ‘hard up against the waywardness of life, its concealed pitfalls, its corrosive enmities’ (page 169). One lives life from day to day, aware of the moment, and with an added appreciation and ebullience (the intensity of surviving daily in Israel does not compare to the possibilities for complacency in Britain).

In the second part of the book—‘Harmattan’—the war-torn Sierra-Leonean story of Ezekiel Mansaray is recounted by Tom Lannon, a Cambridge post-graduate and a stray whom Jackson befriends; and then Jackson, erstwhile Cambridge graduate himself and now American professor at Harvard, tells the (British) story of Tom Lannon. Tom leaves Cambridge to find himself in Sierra Leone, where he finds Ezekiel whose erstwhile lifeworld has been decimated by violent insurgency and counter-insurgency; Michael Jackson finds in Tom a ‘son’—a past self—and in Ezekiel a version of his own friends who suffered violent and gruesome ends in the same Sierra Leonean civil war. (In learning of his friends’ fate, we learn, Jackson finds that he too died in part.)

It is fitting that ‘Harmattan’, with its details of the atrocities of war, follows ‘Limitrophes’, as well as lending its name to the title of the book as a whole. In ‘Limitrophes’ Jackson weaves a discursive account from strands

of autobiography and anthropology and philosophy and literature. Charlotte Bronte, Montaigne, Pessoa, Lorca and Henry Miller join hands with Evans-Pritchard and Levi-Strauss, Bakhtin and Bergson, and with mythic accounts of Blackfoot, Maori, Azande, Nyamwezi and Kuranko origin. In ‘Limitrophes’ Jackson writes an honest and brave (and revealing) personal account. If human beings find the need to stage an existential protest against ascribed hierarchical orders, statuses and roles, and to be the authors of their own identities and life-projects, Jackson explains, then where an individual is born matters less than where he or she is ‘reborn’, into themselves. ‘Our humanity is only fully realized when we suffer the ordeal of a second birth’ (page 26)—something with which Kuranko initiation rituals, for instance, are also fully conversant.

Whimsically, Jackson might trace back his own lifelong aversion to ‘bullshit’—to prolixity, pretension, academic posing and doing ‘the done thing’—to a near-death experience he had as a boy in New Zealand when he fell into a deep vat of liquid manure at a neighbourhood farm and only barely re-emerged. This was a New Zealand, moreover, that he could not wait to put behind him, increasingly convinced that he had to reinvent himself fully by journeying somewhere less (apparently) intellectually impoverished. Paradoxically, however, fifty years on, it is New Zealand that Jackson now imagines as a place of replenishment; while the USA appears rule-bound and oppressive. What is ‘routine’ and what is nourishingly ‘spontaneous’ can swop places in a life, since both concern an individual perception. Certainly, this is more irony than tragedy in his own case, Jackson admits. Nevertheless, being at once physically secure *and* existentially sustained has eluded him; he has always had to reach for what lay beyond what he actually possessed, enchanted by that distance; a limitrophic quest has drawn him always in opposed directions and into antonymous situations. ‘An unabated sense of mourning rules my inner life’, Jackson concludes (2015:34-5), as it seems to have done similarly in the lives of those writers to whom he has been especially drawn—including Hannah Arendt, D. H Lawrence and W. G. Sebald—and also explaining his gravitating towards remote societies, and towards refugees, drifters and derelicts. Here have been his means to write (and temporarily right) his own sense of alienation.

But ‘Limitrophe’ is followed by ‘Harmattan’... There is a kind of violence that an individual life might encounter that lends itself less to negotiation. If we designate as ‘democratic’ (and demotic) a violence of creativity by which each individual human being establishes for himself or herself a life-project that bears the stamp of their own authorship and

authority—even at the expense of ‘violating’ the structures and the emotions of those who have preceded that individual—then there is also to be recognised a kind of ‘nihilistic violence’ that cannot be accommodated within a life. The individual’s limitrophic search can end by confronting a nihilistic violence that does not accommodate individual interpretation since it brooks nothing less than that individual’s destruction (Rapport 2000). The individual invents and reinvents himself or herself, journeying ‘elsewhere’—to different places, different times, different people, different mental spaces, different aesthetic genres—and so procures the resources for this invention. But the obscuring red dust-fog of nihilistic violence and war can cut short this existential journeying in inhumane ways.

## References

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