
JUAN GOYTISOLO

Vision of the 'day after'

in Djemaa el Fna

Translated from the
Spanish by Peter Bush

He was
in his centre,
his dwelling and
delight, at the
heart of a world
palpitating
with life

sought out there by voices, smells, gestures, touches, the taste of brochettes and bowls of *harira*, conscious of the uniqueness and diversity of each one of its particles, of its radical equality with the protean mass of bodies, object of its magnetic power, pity or desire, a shared destiny assumed in the nakedness of birth and passage, bunches of human beauty beyond words, of brilliance suddenly eclipsed.

Was it perhaps old age or tiredness that had gradually led him away from the compelling territory of the *halqa*? The melancholy feeling that in his writing he had exhausted its original, diaphonous beauty. The fact is one day he gave up

grazing among the rings of people, his instinctive, fertile nomadism, to settle down and watch the spectacle from the corner of the cafe. Did he need to distance himself from everyone else or to be distanced from himself? Was he suddenly, acutely aware of his precariousness, of the inexorable obliteration of everything he sadly perceived as still near but already beyond reach? All in all a mere observer of the fleeting whirl of passers-by twisting between the stalls, awnings, portable stoves, plastic mats and their entire range of proliferating, heterogeneous merchandise. Was the space whose flame had enlightened him in times of blissful plenitude also condemned to disappear? Was the fruitful theatre of lights and shadows, of daily dramas and play-acting that nourished his life and creative appetite to be mercilessly swept away?

And he went one step further: he withdrew to his house adjacent to the Square and, from his look-out post on the flat terrace roof, his greedy eyes were happy to store away scenes of the crowd, living not yet annihilated, *ifna* or *fana*, his binoculars honing in on Saruh's sturdy, perfectly shaved craneum, the ring around Gherkaun and his trained pigeons, shadows from scuddling little clouds, blown along and scattered by a light breeze around the ghost of the last jugglers, child acrobats, doctors endowed with innate knowledge, reciters of spells, fortune-tellers, story-tellers, snake charmers, smiling dancers, *gnawas*. A very delicate thread still linked him to that of the universe of spectres directly threatened by a steam roller the roar from which was gradually drowning the hum of voices, and even the muezzins' call to prayer from the minarets that encircled the Square.

It was on that afternoon of January 18 when, shivering, wrapped up against the north wind from the gleaming snow on the mountain peaks, he saw the first cartloads of corpses arriving along its bare, deserted perimeter. They came without mules or drivers from Bab Ftuh and Semmarin, Riad Ez-Zitun and Mohammed el-Khamis with a timing that was impeccably synchronised, as if guided by remote control or driven by some supernatural force. He began to count them, first singly and then by the dozen as they converged on the centre and emptied out their loads, huge piles of stiff or dislocated bodies, mouths

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half-opened as if to let out a final cry, eyes terrified out of their sockets. No pious soul had dutifully washed and wrapped them in shrouds, closed their eye-lids, blocked their ears and nostrils with cotton, tied their feet and jaws with a piece of string, decorously crossed their hands over their chests or leaned them to the right according to holy precept. Little by little, the space of the *halqa* and bartering traders had changed as in the legendary baptism of the square, into an assembly of corpses whose number was growing at the mechanical, regular rate of mass-production lines in a large factory. Was it a violent evocation of *Night and Fog* engraved forever on his memory, in all its naked horror? His binoculars briefly framed a succession of raw images of shackled bodies, gunshot holes in the nape of necks, chests riddled by machine gun fire, backs hacked to pieces by bayonets, faces set by toxic gases into grimaces of unspeakable pain. Only then did he notice the first still silent waves of the flood. A tide of blood, as if overflowing from a large lake or reservoir, was slowly advancing from the streets near the Bank of the Maghreb and Post Office Building, spreading, gently turning the ground red between the human pyramids piled high by the constantly arriving carts. *Who could give voice even with random words, / to so much bloodshed and so much injury! / even though he turned language inside out?* he murmured. The flow was visibly increasing, now covered the car park and the terrace of the Glacier café, getting higher by the minute! From which immense web of veins and arteries was it pouring? From the poverty-stricken people of Ben Suda? The demonstrators machine-gunned down on the streets of Oran? The humiliated, insulted inhabitants of the poor districts of Cairo? The martyrs of Sabra and Chatila? Mothers caught shopping by the savage bombing of Beirut? Adolescent stone-throwers from Kafr Malik? Exterminated villagers from Halabya? Children trapped in the inferno of El Chatti? Or was it simply the beds of the Tigris and the Euphrates, with their alluvium of blood and corpses gushing impetuously into the Medina of the Seven Holy Men, engulfing gardens, markets, avenues and cafés? He looked at the Kutubia and noticed a scorched shirt soaked in blood waving from the pole of the flag that had been raised

during prayers. What angry angel or messenger of death could have planted it there? Stationed in his fragile watch-tower, he had no need of binoculars to see the threatening swell of the tide as it flooded the bazaars opposite and swept away their goods and merchandise. Was it now submerging the basement in the Hotel de France, was it turning unchecked the corner on towards Riad Ez-Zitun? He listened to the flood surging along the narrow passage-way and saw it stain red the entrance to the Eden cinema, rushing like a drove of bewildered oxen through the labyrinth of alley-ways that led to his house. The crash, the crash of waters bursting through the barriers of a dam, climbed brutally and threateningly up the walls of the rooms. Had the city suddenly been emptied of all its inhabitants? Did no-one, apart from himself, see that bloody deluge? He attuned his ears to catch the cries and wailing, searched in vain for some labial sign of life. The mass of water had burst into the porch from the street, was pouring into the patio, covering the potted plants and the little fountain! Come on, quick, Abdelhadi, Latifa, Abdelhaqq, fetch buckets and cloths, make a dam, stop that blood from coming up the stairs. Can't you see it's going to get into the library and soak the books? Save at least the Hebrew, Christian, Islamic mystics, the work of Cervantes and Ibn Arabi, the conciliatory, ecumenical proposals of Juan de Segovia! Don't let it cover over and obliterate the expression of human understanding and feeling, don't let the words of substance, *of peace and concord* be abolished!

Was he talking to himself? Was any fearful soul listening to him? But already everything was red and from the crimson sky and its hostile coalition of purple clouds rained a similar downpour of blood, drops bursting like ripe fruit over the precarious signs he had traced, the scattered manuscript pages of his work that was unfinished and now drowned for ever. He had time only to open the book of poems he was holding and read *Gently walk the earth, it will soon be your grave*, before being sucked into the whirlpool eddying towards the plethora, the corpses and the exterminating angel in the Square.

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