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# WHAT HAPPENED to our difference? Howard Jacobson's *J*[1]

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**Abstract**. *The essay explores Howard Jacobson's latest novel "J" with a view to demonstrating that the homogenous society that is depicted in it functions on the principle of exclusion of difference and repression of individuality. It is claimed here that the novel plays with the conventions of the genre of postapocalypse in order to emphasize that what constitutes the core of humanity is our capacity for embodying and expressing difference even though that difference at the same time remains a crucial reason behind our predicament.*

**Key words***: Howard Jacobson, contemporary English novel, postapocalyptic novel, agonistic politics*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of postapocalypse has enjoyed its heyday over the past several years and it is the novel and the film that have proven particularly fecund ground for the genre. For the major part of the last few decades disaster fiction was relegated to pulp literature or ambitious mass-product market at best, with Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954) opening a trend for a mock-documentary style that was employed to good effect in, for example, Max Brooks's *World War Z* (2006). Much of the appeal of the two novels has of course come from their film adaptations that featured Will Smith and Brad Pitt, blockbuster names with a penchant for serious drama which also underlies the two films' side-plots. However, postapocalypse was explored with a view to creating a thought-provoking story in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and again rose to prominence with Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Whereas Atwood imbued her post-catastrophe world with concerns that had long been on her mind, like biohazard and concerns for the environment, McCarthy made unexpected inroads into the genre after years of writing about harsh realities of the US South. For him, a postapocalypse world was less interesting in its potential for inspired speculation as to the reasons for the catastrophe, as were Matheson, Brooks and to some extent Atwood, than in the possible gruelling hardships it could offer for his protagonists. As a result, we received a novel of subtle lyricism and quasi-religious redemption amid harrowingly hopeless desolation of a

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world destroyed in an unexplained conflagration. One could go on with numerous other novels, short stories and cinema as well as TV productions that added to the ever-growing body of postapocalyptic works but the few already mentioned as well as the popular success they enjoyed despite touching on some extremely sensitive issues for the contemporary world go to show how important the genre has become. Of all novelists who have tried their hand in the genre it is perhaps McCarthy who has breathed a new lease of life into it, showing the kind of possibilities it opens for an in-depth investigation of human nature and the foundations of the Western societies.

Still, no other addition to the postapocalypse tradition may have been as surprising as *J* (2014) by Howard Jacobson. Jacobson has made a name for himself as a writer of comedy that does not shun painful matters such as the Holocaust, identity crisis and the precarious position of Jews. After *The Finkler Question* (2010), a profoundly empathetic novel that brought him the Man Booker prize, and *Zoo Time* (2012), a vitriolic denunciation of the demise of literature in the modern world, Jacobson's latest novel is a swerve one could hardly have expected. And yet, the novel responds to the crises that the previous two centred around: identity melt-down and slow fading of the importance of the novel in particular and literature in general. Framed in a broadly post-catastrophe reality, *J* plays with the conventions of the genre in order to emphasise that what constitutes the core of humanity is our capacity for embodying and expressing difference even though that difference at the same time remains a crucial reason behind our predicament, which in another context Andre Malraux termed *condition humaine*.

## 2. WHAT HAPPENED IF IT HAPPENED, OR TWITTERNACHT

The world of *J* is overhung by a cloud of a past catastrophic event that is now referred to as WHAT HAPPENED IF IT HAPPENED. Throughout the novel we are kept in the dark as to what really happened but on several occasions the characters give their own account of what it could have been, if there had actually been anything. All that is known is that for some reason everybody's names as well as the name of the town, Port Rueben, in which the main characters, Ailinn Solomons and Kevern "Coco" Cohen, live are of Semitic origin. Moreover, "The past exists in order that we forget it" (Jacobson 2014, 19), as Esme Nussbaum, a character who is introduced in a flashback and will play a central role in the plot, is told by her professor, Luther Rabinowitz. There is also a prohibition on the possession of objects that are older than one hundred years, with only one antique object no older than one hundred being permitted. The experiments with forgetting the past suggest a similar treatment of history in Orwell's *1984* but whereas the Ministry of Truth deliberately changes the approved version of history to suit the needs of its propaganda, in the world of *J* the knowledge of history is banned completely for the sake of the society's wellbeing.

These precautions appear to derive from the belief that the past trauma (if there was any trauma) will be inoculated should it be wiped out from all records and eventually people's memories. Still, speculations abound. On the one hand Detective Gutkind, who is investigating a double murder case of Lowenna Morgenstern and Ythel Weinstock, considers WHAT HAPPENED to have never taken place: "Had it [WHAT HAPPENED] remained an undescribed crime all these years because it was an unsolved crime, and had it been unsolved because it was uncommitted?" (2014, 113). In a conversation with

Densdell Kroplik, the necessarily selective historian of the recent past of Port Rueben and, as it turns out, the murderer of Lowenna and Ythel as well as Gutkind himself, Gutkind argues that "WHAT HAPPENED happened in that there was a minor disturbance and insignificant destruction. To win another of their propaganda wars they did what they had done for centuries and put on another of their pantomimes of persecution" (2014, 220). Who "they" are Gutkind does not reveal but it seems clear that he means some powers that be that reap profits from the situation of universal bafflement they have engineered. On the other hand there are suggestions that the nameless catastrophe was due to a failure of the financial sector, an implication that must ring with rather grim associations in a novel released in 2014 when the banking system and the general state of economy of the Western countries remained in throes of the latest financial crisis. "Many of the oil rich who had been in the Necropolis [the capital city of the unnamed country in which *J* takes places – W. P.], feasting on the decline of the banks (which, by some logic that only the most sophisticated economists understood, made them still richer), and gorging on the best of the new season's fashions, found themselves, when WHAT HAPPENED happened, between the devil of abroad and the deep blue sea of home" (2014, 129). Petrol moguls are thus shown to have been "instrumental" in triggering the failure but here another allusion to the causes of the catastrophe is provided. The "oil rich" were stranded between the collapsing economy of the Necropolis and "the revolutionary fervour sweeping their own countries" (2014, 129). The choice between the devil and the deep blue sea of course looks to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), where Mirza Saed, who represents the Satanic culture of atheist plurality, comes to a head with another embodiment of God, the butterfly-clad prophetess Ayesha. While she speaks on behalf of the monomaniacal *logos*, intending to lead her pilgrimage across the sea like the Biblical Moses, Saed represents *mythos* and chooses to "tell them [the pilgrims] stories;" finally, when the arduous journey begins to take its toll on the pilgrims, including Saed's wife, he confronts Ayesha by putting the matter on a razor's edge: "It's a choice […] between the devil and the deep blue sea" (Rushdie 2006, 484). In *The Satanic Verses*, the devil turns out to be a fallible humanist, who is nonetheless infinitely preferable to the infallibly cruel God, but in J, both these views are implied to have led to tragedy, as the believers stood up in zeal against the Western infidels and the devils of enlightenment brought themselves into a crisis that outgrew them.

While Gutkind's theories and the implication that WHAT HAPPENED happened due to a major financial collapse stay mutually exclusive, *J* persistently implies that something heinous actually did take place. When Kevern and Ailinn visit the Necropolis, they are brought to a part of it that is known as the Cohenstown. Unsure of his identity and many of his parents' actions, Kevern toys with the notion that in the Cohenstown he might actually find some of his family. Yet the taxi driver, Ranajay Margolis (one of few characters in the novel bearing a non-Semitic name), insists that it is impossible, for "There is no one left from [the past inhabitants]. They went away a long time ago. Before memory" (2014, 151). The choice of words and Ranajay's gloom suggest that the people either fled before enemies or were purged from the place. This implication is corroborated by a series of letters that recur throughout *J*, in which we are told that some people were put aboard "the train heading east" (2014, 122). Eventually the people are revealed to be Jews who "arrived to music, laboured to music, trooped to the crematoria music" (2014, 203). One is reminded of the command in Paul Celan's (2005) terrifying

poem to "jab your spades deeper you men you other men play up again for the dance" (, 47).

Therefore WHAT HAPPENED, which may at times sound like a fairy tale evocation of "He who Must Not Be Named," grows in seriousness as the novel unravels, until our lack of knowledge as to the precise details only adds to the horror that must have lain at the core of the event. The only person to try to explain what it was that "they" tried to eradicate from human consciousness apart from history is a loquacious "Benign Arts" professor Edward Everett Phineas Zermansky. His diary entries are interspersed across the main narrative of *J* but already in his first appearance, he seeks to delineate what he understands to have been the causes of WHAT HAPPENED:

> That the dry, embittered colourlessness of the conceptual […] helped harden the nation's heart is accepted as truism by artists today. Art wasn't the cause or centre of the great desensitisation, for which, of course, all artists apologise, but WHAT HAPPENED – or TWITTERNACHT, as I like to call it when I am feeling skittish, by way of reference to... well to many thigs, one of them being the then prevailing mode of social interaction that facilitated, though can by no means be said to have provoked it – WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, I say, happened, if it did, because as a people we'd anaesthetised the feeling parts of ourselves, first through the ugly liberties with form taken by modernism and second through the liberties with emotion by that same modernism in its "post" form. (2014, 31)

For Zermansky, the catastrophe lay not so much in global institutions but in man's unrestrained desire to unveil and epitomise the hidden dark meanderings of psyche. In fact Zermansky follows closely the logic of modernism and postmodernism as described by Frederic Jameson in the famous 1984(!) contribution to the *New Left Review* where he diagnosed the postmodernist "waning of affect," rooting some of his insights in a reading of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Munch's painting, taken as a representative of high modernism (though it was finished in 1893, thus being rather a harbinger of some of the insights of the "men of 1914"), is "a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety" (Jameson 1991, 11). The painting breaks off the bonds of realism and instead of focusing on the harmonies of the world, explores the individual's sense of separatedness from the environment, both social and natural. For Jameson (1991), however, *The Scream* goes beyond the modernist angst and "stands as a complex reflexion on [a] complicated situation: it shows us that expression requires the category of the individual monad, but it also shows us the heavy price to be paid for that precondition, dramatizing the unhappy paradox that when you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm in its own right, you thereby also shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the windless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to the prison-cell without egress" (15). Therefore on the one hand *The Scream* represents the alienation of the self as it tries to give artistic expression to its ideas, making the artist a paradoxical and tormented figure *per se*, on the other hand the various modes of reading the painting (dialectics of essence and appearance, psychoanalytic analysis of latency and manifestness) demonstrate, for Jameson (1991), the transition to a postmodernist "conception of practices, discourses and textual play" (12). Zermansky finds fault with

both these moments of representation, the modernist rebellion against harmony in search for embodiments of anxiety and the postmodern letting-go of the depth-enchanted art of modernists in order to revel in the act of telling and retelling stories (or ideas) that withdraw their claim to originality (another way of pitching the conflict is Mirza Saed's satanic offer to tell stories as opposed to Ayesha's insistence on her contact with God).

For Zermansky, and this seems to be the generally-approved version (advocated by the cryptic organisation with a telling name: Ofnow), in order to prevent catastrophes like the one that happened, if it did (the very conditional is an ingenious way to always keep the discussion of preventive measures in the realm of abstract possibility), artists must give up "ersatz Negroid art; obsession with the fractured body as reflection of tormented mind; excessive devotion to biblical themes not rendered pietistically; asymmetry, violent oppositions of colour or form, counterpart shapes, dread, menace, anxiety, expressive dualities, basket-case subject matter" and embrace "Hellenistic proportion" (Jacobson 2014, 283). Just as artists must cease to pander to people's psychotic and destructive drives, so the society must forget the history of violence so as to become perfectly compliant, which in *J* means "that every section of it consented with gratitude – the gratitude of the providentially spared – to the principle of group aptitude" (Jacobson 2014, 14). This Huxleyan recipe for happiness is, however, rendered not by means of medicine and scientific progress as in *The Brave New World*, but by the emphasis on the divine luck of the people who managed to survive WHAT HAPPENED. Despite the fact that the logic behind this idea is at best wobbly, for the people should not so much be grateful for surviving as grateful only if the premise on which their gratefulness rests should be accepted as true, the society seem to accept it. Except barring "sickly art" and inducing compliance, Zermansky explains that it was crucial that the symbolic (though expressed quite practically) difference between "us" and "them" be abolished; it was to that end "that OPERATION ISHMAEL was instituted. It granted a universal amnesty, dispensing once and for all with invidious distinctions between the doers and the done-to. […] Now that we are one family, and cannot remember when we were anything else, there can be no question of a repetition of whatever happened, if it did, because there is no one left to do to again whatever was or wasn't done" (2014, 87). According to Zermansky, a silent ideologue of the new state of affairs, the new society is safe from massive eruptions of violence thanks to its homogeneity, which he admits may have been imposed in a sweeping and not entirely innocuous campaign in which authorities as well as professionals and academics participated. Thus the world of *J* enjoys peace and brotherly affection but, as it transpires, only on the surface.

### 3. CIVILISATION OF DISCONTENTS

To maintain the civilisation of brotherly affection all citizens are required to perpetually say sorry, even if there is nothing to be sorry for. The cultivation of blame apportions the possible blame for WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED to every living person, thereby ensuring that while all keep the air of civility, nobody can claim complete exculpation. This stands in obvious contrast to degenerate theories of "will to power" and it is Nietzsche's insistence on "the overcoming of morality" that is particularly resented. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche (1989) says that "one must shed the bad taste of wanting to agree with many" (, 53) and thus "*genuine philosophers*

[…] *are commanders and legislators* […] Their 'knowing' is *creating*, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is – *will to power*" (1989, 136, emphasis in original). In this curiously Shelleyan flourish, Nietzsche deplores homogeneity in favour of creative spirits who are able to overcome the dominant "truths" in whatever field and instigate their own "poem of power." For Zermansky and more generally for Ofnow, just such an approach is a key to reigniting the individual differences that would incite violence.

However, the world of *J* is not free from violence. The novel briefly becomes a crime story when Lowenna and Ythel are murdered and we follow Detective Gutkind's investigation; more importantly, there are moments when characters fly into a rage that the situation does not merit at all. At one point Zermansky argues with his wife, the noble Demelza, who takes exception to his remark that men tire easily; what seemed a slight argument suddenly turns into row but still nothing suggests that tempers have flown beyond measure until Zermansky leaves her and goes into his studio:

> She followed me into my studio.
> I wondered if she was carrying a knife from the kitchen. The carver she'd recently had sharpened. I closed my eyes.
> "I'm sorry, Phinny," I heard her say.
> I turned around abruptly. She started. Was she afraid of what I might be carrying? A trimming knife? A hammer?
> "Me too, Demelza," I said.
> We were both sorry, and made love whimpering how sorry we were into each other's ears. I kissed her lovely little nose. She gave me her breast to nibble. Sorry, sorry. Sorry, for what, exactly? Neither of us knew. (Jacobson 2014, 37)

The contrast is stunning as they speak of contrition but imagine (at least Zermansky does) killing. The surface repentance that unexpectedly terminates in sex covers up the pent-up anger that most people in *J* struggle with. This repression is compounded by the societal insistence on homogeneity and complaisance, both of which are to help preserve the society. Thus the world in the novel is underlain by the mechanisms that Freud theorised in *Civilisation and its Discontents*.

One of the central insights that Freud offers about the functioning of civilisation is that it is predicated on strictures imposed on man's primitive drives, mainly towards love (symbolised by Eros) and destruction (symbolised by Thanatos). In the case of love, Freud emphasises a distinction between love understood as genital and "aim-inhibited," which is more appropriately described as "affection" (Freud 1961, 49). Whereas the former "leads to the formation of new families," thus extending the reach of civilisation, the latter leads to "friendships which become valuable from a cultural standpoint because they escape some of the imitations of genital love, as, for example, its exclusiveness" (Freud 1961, 50). Relations of friendship (expressed in the counterintuitive commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself") include, in an ideal situation, all members of the civilisation, thereby ensuring that everybody works towards similar (if not the same) goals, while maintaining the family unit helps to stabilise the future development of the civilisation as new members enter it. As far as the inclination to aggression is concerned, Freud (1961) observes that "civilisation has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychical reaction-formations" (59). He goes on to assert that these

psychical mechanisms that are summoned to life so as to prevent aggression from undermining the working of civilisation are conscience and the sense of guilt.

> [Man's] aggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from – that is, it is directed towards his own ego. There it is taken over by a proportion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as super-ego, and which now, in the form of "conscience," is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon the other, extraneous individuals. The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city. (Freud 1961, 70-71)

Once established, conscience and the sense of guilt become self-perpetuating mechanisms in that by making certain desires illicit (eventually not only completed acts but even thinking of them), they amplify the feeling of remorse, which in turn strengthens them. As a result man's inclination to aggression as well as possible rebellion against the strictures that are imposed on him by the civilisation are forestalled, which ensures that the civilisation will endure despite the serious demands it puts on its members.

If the contemporary society, for Freud in 1939, thrives on the repression of man's inner drives to satisfaction of primitive desires and redirection of the instinctual energies to labour for the accumulation of goods, then the society in *J* is induced to go a step further. The social requirement extends not only to keeping one's primitive drives in check but to self-expression, also in its artistic form, which for Freud constitutes one of "substitutive satisfactions" that may be illusory but "are none the less psychically effective" in reducing the unbearable burden that civilisation places on man (Freud 1961, 22; see also 26-27). As a result, the new world, which in theory was meant to pre-emptively stifle violence, proves a cure that is more deadly than the disease; as Feud predicted, "If civilisation is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole, then […] there is inextricably bound up with it an increase of the sense of guilt, which will perhaps reach heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate" (Freud 1961, 80). Perhaps nothing invokes the repressed anxiety of the whole society than Kevern's mother's sketches, which he unwittily discovers in one of her notebooks that he illicitly holds on to despite the fact it is a record of the past that ought to be forgotten. After some insignificant notes, Kevern finds

> [S]trong charcoal portraits […] of people he didn't recognise, squatting careworn women in turbans, angular men in long beards, carcasses of slaughtered animals, executioners in blood aprons standing over them, a child looking out of the barred window of a train, figures huddled in fear, and one of herself, […] with her mouth open and a hand not hers, over it, pressing hard into her face. And then, at the back of the book, half a dozen small crayoned studies in a style so different he marvelled the same person could have done them […], cityscapes a couple of them seemed to be, whores, or were they birds, cranes or storks, sanding under phosphorescent yellow lamp posts, their scarves or feathers blowing about their necks, their bodies rendered

> in patches of the most vivid colour, purple shoulders and breasts, vermilion bellies, attenuated lime-green legs, the stones they stood on as black as night. Two were more abstract still, mere blobs of violent colour, like pools of blood, and one a nude, somehow African in conception, primitive certainly, painted freely, her eyes orange, her skin a throbbing pink, her hands stretched towards… towards whom? (2014, 268-69).

The first set of sketches evokes familiar images of suffering that could be associated with Jews (except the turbaned women), while the image of Kevern's mother with her mouth suppressed implies her inability to speak of the pain that she may have witnessed or known about. The latter abstract set brings to mind the fauvist work of Henri Matisse (like *Nu Bleu. Souvenir de Biska* [1907]) or Picasso's cubist *Les Damoiselles D'Avignon* (1907) filtered through Munch (except *The Scream*, also *Workers on their Way Home* (1915). Whereas the former may represent Kevern's mother's suppressed memories, the latter seem a symbolic return of the repressed in that their horror visionary power expresses the likely violence of WHAT HAPPENED.

The sketches invoke the psychical foundation on which the world of *J* has been built. Despite the best efforts of Ofnow and academics like Zermansky to bury the anxieties that derive from both the probable nature of WHAT HAPPENED and the actual fact that the entire society lives under the doom-cloud of a sinister event for which all are led to take the blame, the simmering traumas begin to come flooding back. Moreover, the induced homogeneity and complaisance together with the prohibition of unrestricted artistic self-expression have resulted in a culture of repression and universal guilt, which thrives on domestic violence while openly deploring it. Also, with the general approval of duplicity, it transpires that the changeover of names into Semitic ones, which is revealed to have been part of the Operation Ishmael, is in fact an attempt to cover up the fact that Jews WHAT HAPPENED was that, among others, Jews were almost successfully exterminated. As it turns out, there are two left: the troubled couple of Kevern and Ailinn.

## 4. ANTAGONISM UNBOUND

Kevern and Ailinn are suspiciously thrown into each other's arms but in spite of that seem to enjoy a reasonably happy relationship, given much encouragement from Ailinn's friend Ez. In fact Ez is Esme Nussbaum who appeared at the beginning of the novel in a conversation with Rabinowitz. Esme has learnt of the true nature of WHAT HAPPENED, for which Ofnow unsuccessfully attempted to murder her. She sets out to repair the harm done to the society, which leads her to Kevern and Ailinn, the last living Jews. Because of the law of matrilinearity it is Ailinn who matters most to Esme. Since she is an orphan who does not remember her parents Esme needs first to locate her ancestors, which she does and the terrifying letters that recur throughout *J* appear to have been sent to Ailinn's grandmother, Rebecca, by her estranged parents who knew that they were being taken to death.

As probably the last Jew, Ailinn becomes Esme's last hope for restarting a nation whose identity has been drowned in the flood of homogeneity; for Esme, as a former employee Ofnow that tried to kill her but only succeeded in seriously injuring for her

desire to contradict them, firmly believes in the necessity to tell the truth not of WHAT HAPPENED but of WHAT HAD BEEN DONE and, as a result, to restore the difference that people have been deprived of: "We cannot, she had argued, glide over the past with an IF. We must confront WHAT HAPPENED, not to apportion blame – it was too late for that, anyway – but to know what it was and why time hadn't healed it" (Jacobson 2014, 225). Aware that "anger and unhappiness seeped out from under every doorway of every house in every town and every village in the country" (Jacobson 2014, 226), Esme trusts that what the society needs is to cast away the spurious unanimity:

> They [Ofnow] were acting out of best motives. They wanted a harmonious society. Their mistake was not to see that she wanted a harmonious society too. The difference was that they saw harmony as something you attained by leaving things out – contrariety and contradiction, argument, variety – and she saw it as something you achieved by keeping everything in. (Jacobson 2014, 225-26)

Acceptance of contrariety and variety that cannot be subsumed under a unifying concept that would disarm and deprive them of their potentially subversive and thus creative nature shows Esme to be a self-taught follower of the line of Michel Foucault (and the postcolonial continuators of his work like Homi Bhabha). Like Foucault, Esme realises that the key to understanding the present lies in a careful study of actual documents from the past; though J's is a specially policed world, her task is surprisingly similar to Foucault's in that both have difficulty assembling data and even more difficulty shaking the convictions about social praxis that has come to be viewed as natural (Kevern for example only begins to wonder about his gesture of putting two fingers to his mouth as he is saying a word containing the letter "j" when he is asked about it by Ailinn).

More specifically, the way Ofnow tried to attain a harmonious society resembles the exclusive tactics of the Age of Reason in ridding the body politic of the vermin like sexual deviants and madmen. Thus the symbolic *cogito* (Descartes) elects to purge the inassimilable element and so "when the classical age locked up those who through sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality, debauchery or prodigality had demonstrated a sexual freedom that previous ages might have condemned but had never dreamt of assimilating to forms of insanity, it brought about a strange moral revolution, uncovering a common denominator of unreason among experiences that had long remained separate from each other" (Foucault 2013, 91). This new morality seems to underpin WHAT HAPPENED in the sense that where the common denominator for exclusive practices in the classical age is insanity, in the world of *J* it is different identity (we never know how far this definition of difference stretched but it seems that it covered nationality, perception of the past and individual emotional make-up) that constitutes the ground for exclusive practices. Moreover, in *J* the purge of difference, at least according to Esme, initially followed what Foucault calls "the great ethical pact that underpinned human existence" (Foucault 2013, 73). Like the prisoners of the early penal institutions who could be released on the strength of the "ethical pact" provided they showed they could once more be useful for the society, the society in *J* enjoy complete freedom but the running assumption is that to do so they or rather their ancestors must have fitted tightly-defined formula of an acceptable citizen.

Recognising that the nation has been a victim of institutional homogenisation that is most likely to have started with genocide, even though the word is never used by anyone, Esme has a clear notion of what it is people have lost.

> "What we have lost," she [Esme] will tell them [Ofnow officials], "is the experience of a deep antagonism. Not a casual, take-it-or-leave-it, family or neighbourly antagonism – but something altogether less accidental and arbitrary than that. a shapely, long-ingested, cultural antagonism, in which everything, from who we worship to what we eat, is accounted for and made clear. *We are who we are because we are not them*. (Jacobson 2014, 233-34, emphasis in original)

What Esme here proposes is a radical project of antagonism that eludes the limits of what might be considered a liberal approach to difference. While the society in *J* is under a light rule of an abstracted technocracy personified by Ofnow and professionals together with academics like Zermansky, Esme argues that the cure for that state of affairs is not reinstating a liberal democracy but what Chantal Mouffe (2013) has called "the agonistic model of democracy":

> when we acknowledge the dimension of 'the political', we begin to realize that one of the main challenges for pluralist liberal democratic politics consists in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations. In my view, the fundamental question is not how to arrive at a consensus reached without exclusion, because this would require the construction of an "us" that would not have a corresponding "them." (21-22; see also Mouffe 2000, 98-105)

This distinction seems to undergird Esme's idea that "only when we have a different state to strive against do we have reason to strive at all. I am me because I am not her, or you. […] Identity is just the name we give to the act of making ourselves distinct" (Jacobson 2014, 316). When Esme calls for restitution of the difference between "us" and "them," her project is aimed at embracing the entire nation and in this sense it is a political model at the heart of which lies Mouffe's (2013) idea that the hope of reaching a consensus is in fact just another way of eventually imposing "hegemonic practices" ("the practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed" (2013, 2)) in the public space. Instead, the "shapely, long-ingested, cultural antagonism" is to ensure that in public space "conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation" (Mouffe 2013, 92), thus allowing a democratic space wherein groups of individuals are able to gather around an agenda so as to partake in the struggle for hegemony without sacrificing some of their ideals at the altar of compromise.

There is a crucial distinction to be made here. For Mouffe (2013) antagonism is an essentialist form of conflict that is unwilling to concede defeat in a democratic strife and in extreme cases may lead from a discursive struggle to physical violence. That is why she proposes a distinction between antagonism and agonistics, the latter signifying a continuous battle between parties representing various political goals that goes on through the mediation of democratic institutions, where words, not swords, clash. Despite the fact that Esme refers to antagonism, she also argues that "IT HAPPENED because they forgot, or more likely never understood, that those they were killing performed the

same function as their wives. It was a catastrophe of literal-mindedness. You don't kill the thing you hate just because you hate it" (Jacobson 2014, 232). This is a textualist claim on the idea of conflict in that what threatens the existence of agonistic democracy is the process of literalisation of the militaristic metaphor. Esme seeks to retrieve difference in the hope of restituting a sort of agonistic society that will operate not on the basis of repression-stimulated apologetics but in accordance with what Mouffe (2013), following Derrida's lecture (Derrida 2002, 356-420), termed "hostipitality":

> An agonistic pluralist approach should envisage the pluri-verse in terms of 'hostipitality', as the space where an agonistic encounter takes place between a diversity of poles which engage with each other without any one of them having the pretence of being the superior one. This agonistic encounter is a confrontation where the aim is neither the annihilation nor the assimilation of the other, and where the tensions between the different approaches contribute to enhancing the pluralism that characterizes a multipolar world. (2002, 53)

In spite of this desire to keep fighting without bloodshed, Esme's project hardly follows the path of openness to the other with whom one disagrees but whom one respects, for she puts her theory into practice by deception which after all results in death.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Just as the world of *J* is not simply anti-democratic, so Esme's project remains ambiguous. She steers Ailinn, once she discovers her background, to start the relationship with Kevern without telling Ailinn anything of her agenda. Esme's friendship seems heart-felt and while her motives are good, she fails as a friend and loses Ailinn's trust. It is indirectly due to her manipulation that Ailinn gets pregnant with Kevern, which overwhelms him, leading him to yield to an imaginary call of his mother and leap to his death. Thus the cornerstone of a new beginning that Esme hopes to make is personal tragedy. However, Kevern's death may be viewed in at least a twofold way, either as collateral damage of the battle for an inclusive society or as a consequence of Esme's entrenched idealism.

On the one hand, Kevern is a victim of the homogenous and complaisant society for which he is guilty of "hoarding stuff," as Gutkind tells Zermansky (Jacobson 2014, 181). He stays an outsider to the Port Rueben community and feels awkward even in his relationship with Ailinn. His subconscious yearning for unravelling his identity and origin represents the failing of the unanimous society that does not offer any place for such a fragile figure. In a way, he is the most typical Jacobson character in that he hankers after a clear-cut identity that would allay all his doubts and self-questioning. Like Julian Treslove, the nondescript protagonist of *The Finkler Question* who begins to think that he might be a Jew after a misheard tout addressed to him from a woman who mugs him (He is unsure if she said "Your jewels," "You Jules,' which was the way only his mother addressed him, or "You Ju" [Jacobson 2010, 32-33]), Kevern is ready to trace his identity to a town merely because it has "Cohen" in its name. On the other hand, Kevern is revealed to be a pawn in a game that Esme plays against Ofnow and her machinations, though good in intention, are questionable as far as Kevern's individual fate is concerned.

The world of *J* may thus be taken to be delimited by tragedy. Whereas WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED represents a macro-level catastrophe that lies at the foundation of the present society, Kevern's death is also a symbol of the new beginning. In the former case, the shadowy nature of the event, which is perpetually uncertain, undermines what may be understood as the *illo tempore* of the polity, as a result it appears to be an artificially imposed construct, which is underlined by an almost complete eradication of history from life. In respect of Kevern's suicide, his tragic end, its ambiguity notwithstanding, implies a release of the repressed content as he succumbs to his neurotic desire for attaining a complete identity by plunging for the horizon of death that can here be understood after Lacan as the sole truth of life marred by an unfulfillable desire. In this sense, his death is both a tragedy for which either Ofnow or Esme herself are responsible and a clearing or anti-cathexes of the layers of guilt that have accumulated over the years of apologising for what officially never even took place. Therefore Esme's newly-conceived antagonistic/agonistic world that embraces difference and implicit irreconcilable conflict is shown to be a morally-questionable attempt to restore balance to society. The intended new beginning may not claim to be free of pain, anger and frustration but it does at least promise a possibility, fragile and difficult, for life to stumble on.

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