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Dan Jacobson's *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*: A Transnational Allegory

1. Dan Jacobson as a transnational writer

In 1957, at the age of twenty-eight, Dan Jacobson left South Africa for London, where, after an inauspicious start, he established himself as a prolific writer and a professor at UCL. In *Time and Time Again*, he writes about his first arrival in the city, taking in the "spaciousness" (Jacobson 1986: 76) of London streets, marvelling at the "subtle" and "eccentric" (77) faces of the English, and, most importantly, finding in London a post-war reflection of the world that he read about in the books of Virginia Woolf and other writers of the Bloomsbury circle. He also describes London's greatest gift to him: the city offered him "a continuity between past and present, between words and things" (83). In his article about Jacobson as an expatriate writer, Paul Gready writes about "the reality of England" (as typified by London) and "the unreality of South Africa," stemming from their respective statuses as "the metropolitan center" and "a colony/province" (19). He adds that, in Jacobson's fiction, South Africa represents the world from which he became "alienated, liberated" (21). Located at the heart of the metropolitan centre, "Jacobson belongs and absolutely doesn't belong to London too. He is caught between worlds, forever in the act of crossing over, within a double or multiple exposure that implies a state of perpetual negotiation and translation" (21).

"Forever in the act of crossing over," Jacobson can be viewed as a transnational writer – a notion that will be considered in the context of Stephen

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Clingman's understanding of transnationalism. In *The Grammar of Identity*, Clingman formulates a definition of transnational fiction based not on the notions of multiculturalism and hybridity, but on matters that are inherent to those novels – in other words, questions of form. To shed more light on the features that make a given novel transnational, Clingman proposes what he calls "the syntax of the self" (11), the functioning of which he analyses in the context of identity, specifically human spatial and linguistic orientation in the world. Central to Clingman's theory is the notion of boundary. It is the boundary, understood both in the spatial and the cultural sense, that makes crossing, or navigation, possible: "Navigation occurs not despite but because of the boundary" (21). In Clingman's view, navigation enables both movement and speech; it is by navigating that the child learns how to orient itself in the physical space and in the space of language. In this sense, to formulate a sentence is to "navigate your way through its recursive and combinatory possibilities" (18). The role of the boundary is crucial in the act of movement and in the process of communication: "It is the transition across… boundaries that produces meaning" (22). Adopting this understanding of the boundary, briefly outlined here, Clingman goes on to formulate his conception of navigation: "Whether it concerns language, fiction, identity, or location, navigation does not mean crossing or having crossed, but *being in the space of crossing*. It means *being prepared to be* in the space of crossing, in transition, in movement, in journey" (24–25).

Jacobson's transnationalism involved "being in the space of crossing", and his novel *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* (1977) can be read as a representation of this state. The main boundary that Jacobson navigates is the one between the metropole (England and, more specifically, London) and the periphery (South Africa). In Jacobson's understanding, those two places become two states of being: "the metropolitan" and "the provincial."[1] The goal of this article is to show that Jacobson's transnationalism played an important role in his life as a writer. The metropolitan perspective he acquired as a South African writer living in London enabled him to reflect and comment upon the socio-political situation of his native country and the countries of his parents, Lithuania and Latvia, from the position of a detached observer. In *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, apartheid South Africa and communist Eastern Europe are positioned in stark contrast to Britain, not only in the sense of being non-democratic and

1 When asked by Stephen Gray about "the bi-polarity of [his] life – the London life, the South African life," Jacobson begins his answer with the following observation: "I suppose the two states in a way could be generalized as the provincial and the metropolitan" (Gray 77).

authoritarian, but also as constituting the negation of liberal humanist values that Jacobson imbibed as a South African influenced by English culture. In his novel, Jacobson subverts those values in the eloquent and manipulative confessional narrative of Josef Baisz, who, guided by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, discards conventional morality in an attempt to formulate his own code of conduct. By describing the rise and fall of his protagonist, Jacobson explores the moral corruption of an individual consumed by a desire for power and the degeneracy of political systems that wield power over their citizens in authoritarian and unaccountable ways. This discussion of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* will consider both the political and moral dimensions of this intriguing and powerful novel.

2. Jacobson's transnational allegory

This article will explore the allegorical dimension of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, arguing that Jacobson's novel can be read as a transnational allegory of political repression and moral corruption. In the task of situating allegory in the context of transnationalism, it is instructive to refer to Fredric Jameson's well-known observation:

> Third-world texts… necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society* (Jameson 1986: 69).

In this formulation, it is inevitable that individual experience in colonial and postcolonial communities would represent the nation's socio-political state. Jameson's privileging of the nation in his understanding of allegory has attracted the criticism of later theorists, most famously Aijaz Ahmad, who, in his celebrated essay "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" argues that the notion of national allegory stems from Jameson's "privileging of the nationalist ideology" (98). Ahmad points to the homogenizing nature of Jameson's approach, which reduces the historical specificity of postcolonial nations to what he calls "the experience of colonialism and imperialism" (102), while at the same time taking for granted that a response to it is invariably national. According to Ahmad, if the notion of the nation is replaced with "collectivity," then it becomes possible to "start thinking of allegorization not in nationalistic terms but simply a relation between private and public, personal and communal" (110). Doing so, argues Ahmad, makes it possible to conceive of allegory beyond the national context.

It is worth noting that while Jameson never directly responded to Ahmad's arguments, he did revise his understanding of allegory, moving from a national to a geopolitical perspective. Formulating the concept of the "geopolitical unconscious," Jameson writes about "attempts to refashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-the-world" (1992: 3). He argues that, on a global scale:

> allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall, with a fluidity that has no equivalent in those older national allegories of which I have spoken elsewhere (1992: 5).

Rescaled from the national to the global context, allegory enables the registration of local and marginal spaces as parts of organized systems, including geopolitical blocs and – especially pertinent in this context – Cold War power structures.

Jameson's contention that allegory, when viewed on a global scale, is capable of representing "the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes" (1992: 5) contrasts with his earlier approach to allegory, understood as a unified and coherent representation of the national experience. Susan Buck-Morss, in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, offers an approach that situates this transnational understanding of allegory within the context of the Cold War. One of the main reasons Buck-Morss is apposite to this discussion is that she offers a comparative analysis of Cold War modernity. She articulates this point in the Preface to her study, where she argues that "rather than stressing the unique pasts of particular human groups, this book tells a story of similarities" (xiii), interpreting "cultural developments of the twentieth century within opposed political regimes as variations of a common theme, the utopian dream that industrial modernity could and would provide happiness for the masses" (xiii-xiv). In her pursuit of similarities between the capitalist nation-states of the West and the communist Eastern Bloc, Buck-Morss provides a transnational perspective on history that goes beyond national historiography and approaches the Cold War not as separate national histories but as a globally shared historical condition. Although Buck-Morss explores the rise and fall of utopian projects in the context of communism and capitalism, this logic can also be applied to apartheid. Apartheid was designed as a system of rational governance, based on the principle of the omniscient state, which was presented as beneficial to all, irrespective of their racial

origin.[2] The policies of racial segregation and separate development were implemented on the strength of the argument that each racial group required "special treatment or protection" (Dubow 64). It is those general characteristics that made apartheid a variation of "the utopian dream… [of] happiness for the masses" (xiii-xiv), although in this case, happiness was presented as strictly contingent on the separate development of racial groups. Buck-Morss is important for this discussion because of her contention that avowedly opposed political systems can create and enforce comparable systems of power and domination over groups and individuals. Based on this premise, this article will present a reading of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* as a transnational allegory, treating Eastern European communism and Afrikaner nationalism not as warring ideologies, but as systems of repression that can be fruitfully juxtaposed.

3. The political dimension of Jacobson's novel

In his review of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, C.J. Driver described the Republic of Sarmeda as "South Africa-sur-Volga" (qtd. in Kusek 22), thus pointing to the amalgamation of communism and apartheid presented in the novel. The aim of this section is to analyse the references to South Africa and Eastern Europe in Jacobson's novel, with a view to explore the novel's political dimension. The goal is to demonstrate how Jacobson brings together these two distinct yet converging historical contexts, creating a transnational allegory of political repression and moral corruption.

References to apartheid South Africa and communist Eastern Europe are scattered throughout the novel, beginning with the Translator's Preface, in which the nameless frame narrator explains the challenges associated with translating the manuscript left by a mysterious Mr S Koudenhoof into English. Unable to verify the historical accuracy of the record, the translator turns to the Sarmedan Embassy in London, only to receive a cold and formal response, stating that "no record of the birth of any such citizen as Josef Baisz—let alone of his having achieved high office in the service of the state". The unnamed author of the letter then goes on to denounce the manuscript as the creation of "bankrupt and degenerate elements" whose goal is to "slander our country." The official's brusque, defensive response reveals not only the state's defensive posture but also a tendency to deny, perhaps even erase, the existence of individuals who in any way have compromised or ridiculed the system. This tendency

2 "Within nationalist policy-making and political circles there was from the start a view that apartheid had to be presented as a morally defensible system which would be of advantage to all" (Dubow 63).

is reminiscent of the South African apartheid state, which operated by covertly removing individuals and organizations from public life,[3] be it through the censorship of published material or the detention of people whose actions were deemed subversive to the state.[4] The passage quoted from Jacobson's novel can be read as an allegorical representation of effective state censorship, which also functioned in Soviet Russia.[5] While in both cases the repression of information referred primarily to dissidents, Jacobson's novel describes a state whose logic of narrative falsification extends to those who were once servants of the system but, for different reasons, have become an inconvenience, perhaps even a liability, insofar as to expose the destructive effect of that system.

Possessing both "phantasmagorical and 'real' European features" (Kusek 12), the Republic of Sarmeda is a former monarchy, whose current government is intent on eradicating all forms of the former social order, or "relics of feudalism" (Jacobson 2015: 44), as they are referred to in the novel. Such expressions as "politically ineducable cell" and "dissolute aristocratic elements" (Jacobson 2015: 53) are evocative of the propaganda functioning in the Soviet Bloc, and the same can be said of the reference to the "Centraad of the party" (Jacobson 2015: 48) – a thin allusion to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The party holds total and uncontested power in the Republic of Sarmeda, controlling both the country's industries and the media. Among the country's most formidable institutions are the military organisation called Phalanx and the Compresecor, an intelligence service exercising near-total control over the country. Above the state structures is the figure of the passive, almost indifferent dictator referred to as the Heerser, who seems unaffected by the numerous upheavals on the lower levels of power. The hegemonic rule of the party and the propaganda used to indoctrinate the citizens situate the novel broadly in the context of apartheid in its last, most paranoid and combative phase.

The repressive nature of the system is a recurrent theme in Jacobson's novel, most often mentioned in the context of the army. As Josef joins the country's

3 The Publications Act, 42 of 1974 banned works that were considered "prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare or the peace and good order" (qtd. in Dugard 192).

4 Dugard makes this argument in the context of the Terrorism Act of 1967: "The Government generally refuses to provide information about persons detained under the Terrorism Act and has threatened to introduce legislation to prohibit publication of the names of persons so detained" (119).

5 John L. H. Keep and Alter Litvin argue that "in official documents and publications put out at the time [Stalinist Soviet Union] great pains were taken to conceal the real nature of the punitive measures being undertaken" (59).

armed forces, he is quick – and proud – to highlight his role in the Republican Guard: "We represented the central power of the state. We were the army of the interior, so to speak" (14). The phrase "army of the interior," used by Josef as an unofficial explanation of their function, indicates that their role is not to defend against an external enemy, but to monitor and control the country's population. As Josef adds, the duty of this elite unit is to put down any manifestations of opposition to state policies, including "strikes, riots, army mutinies, prison breakouts, guerrilla activities, uprisings among the Kuni or Sedi…" (14). Significantly, the Kuni and the Sedi are treated not as part of the nation, but as ethnic groups that may pose a collective security problem. To pre-empt potential problems with those tribes, the state carefully controls their movements. This mechanism is signalled earlier in the novel, in which Josef, with some nostalgia, describes his childhood memory: "every autumn we watched the mounted Kuni tribesmen, in their multi-colored blankets and wide straw hats, driving their cattle on the long trek down from the Middelbergen toward the winter grazing grounds which our enlightened government carefully preserved for them" (7). The rhetoric of the passage conveys the language of rationality and paternalism[6] that the apartheid state adopted with regard to ethnic minorities so as to justify its policy of separate development, which classified African populations into tribes, forcing them to live in designated homelands.

It is worth noting that Jacobson's novel explores racism not only at the level of state legislation, but also as a social attitude shared among white communities. This is evident once again in Josef's description of his childhood memories, specifically those connected with his schoolfriend, Luis. As he notes, "Luis's mother has 'Kuni blood', and therefore neither she, nor her husband, nor Luis himself are what you would call highly regarded in the community" (9). Josef goes on to reminisce about his relationship with Luis, describing a moment of sexual intimacy between them, only to reject the notion that they were friends. "Like all the other boys at school," he writes, "I called him 'Kuni-creeper,'" "and gave him a rougher time in the schoolyard" (9). By describing a relationship in which moments of physical closeness are intertwined with aggression, on a verbal and physical level, Jacobson lays bare an inner conflict as experienced by a child, torn between friendship and internalized racist bias. This brief description of an interracial relationship shows how institutional racism, as

6 William Beinart traces the policy of paternalism to H. F. Verwoerd, who, acting as Minister of Native Affairs from 1950 and Prime Minister in the years 1958–1966, changed the discourse on racial segregation from that driven by the language of mastery to state-regulated rationality (146–7).

evident in the policy of segregation and separate development, reinforces and amplifies attitudes of discrimination among adults and children.

In a subtler way, Jacobson's novel explores the covertly repressive functioning of authoritarian systems by reproducing an ambiguous, fragmented rhetoric reminiscent of both apartheid and communism. This becomes evident later in the novel, when Josef is offered a position in a security unit assigned to guard a prominent government official. Speaking in the language of "dutiful fanaticism" (26), the functionary gives Josef a list of threats facing the state:

> Economic crises. Mistakes in certain circles. Management failures. Opposition elements. Regroupings. Uncontrolled, personal ambitions. Purification. Renewal. Corruption. Danger from many quarters. Left and right. Vested interests. Treachery. Revenge. Desperation. (26)

Most of this brief, truncated, and highly ambiguous description of dangers harks back to the rhetoric of apartheid, which, in its euphemism and abstraction, anticipated what Deborah Posel describes as "the threat of destabilization through popular unrest" (22). As John L. H. Keep and Alter Litvin observe, this atmosphere of ever-present threat was also present in Soviet Russia, in which "the media were full of slogans about the need to combat 'counter-revolutionaries', 'enemies of the people' and so forth" (59). Analysed more closely, the quoted passage reveals the panic-induced search for solutions ("Purification. Renewal" [26]) to the list of vague but omnipresent dangers enumerated at the beginning. Somewhat ironically, it also reproduces, on a stylistic level, how the atmosphere of threat and insecurity influenced the officials who disseminated it, triggering in them a growing paranoia from "left and right" (26). "Desperation" concludes this paranoid speech, proving the ultimate failure of the measures that the system seeks to implement to avert the numerous dangers to its existence. Since the passage is narrated in free indirect discourse, it is possible, indeed likely, that the conclusion constitutes Josef's commentary on his employers' sense of increasing insecurity. In a deeply ironic turn of events, it is Josef who, having conspired against his employer, ultimately kills him by pushing him off the stairs. This event proves that danger comes inside the increasingly paranoid system.

Josef's covert murder of his superior, for which he is never suspected, is a significant episode insofar as it illustrates the dynamics of power in the Republic of Sarmeda, which, in short, combines the covert with the spectacular. Describing the fluctuations of power in Sarmeda, Josef emphasizes that the only permanent feature of the political landscape was the unquestionable power of the party: "The position of the party within the country…

remained unassailable" (83). As he adds, all institutions, schools, the church, the army, and the press were subordinate to the party, which also controlled all state appointments, so that social advancement was only possible through party-regulated channels. While the power of the state is presented as constant, the people in power, representing "various factions and fiefdoms" (83–4), remained in what seems to be a state of constant rotation: "Whenever a feudal overlord grew too mighty, or too independent, he was cut down; then all those who served him were involved in his ruin" (84). A willing participant in this state of constant political flux, Josef is a curious, even fascinated, observer of this reality, writing about it in the mode of the spectacle. In his opinion, the "convulsions" (84) of power were designed to "entertain the masses": "To see the bosses tumble and the mighty ones tremble... made up for a lot of humiliation and deprivation out there" (84). In this sense, the authorities maintain power by creating, in frustrated subjects, vicarious pleasure from the punishment of the wicked and the re-establishment of both socio-political and moral order. Josef emphasizes that this positive change was only an illusion created for the viewers, who were so removed from the spectacle that they would never gauge the true nature of the political upheavals. It can be added here that the mode of the spectacular, as adopted in politics, has the important function of maintaining social legitimacy: the creation of conspirators and traitors concentrates the dysphoric emotions of frustration, irritation, and anger on the enemies of the state, at the same time giving the satisfaction of seeing those people eliminated. This mechanism of internal consolidation through elimination is pertinent, especially in the context of Soviet communism, which manufactured enemies on a regular basis.[7] In South Africa, the political mechanism of repression operated more covertly and was, from the 1950s, based on a legal mechanism that avoided unnecessary exposure.[8]

Many of Josef's reflections on the turbulent workings of power in Sarmeda concentrate on periods of political turmoil. The last such reference discussed here concerns how such times are experienced by ordinary citizens, who try to continue their business despite the uncertainty and precariousness of their

7 As John L. H. Keep and Alter Litvin observe of Stalinist discourse, "the media were full of slogans about the need to combat 'counter-revolutionaries', 'enemies of the people' and so forth" (59).

8 This policy officially began in 1950, with the "Suppression of Communism Act," which "gave the Minister of Justice the power to ban any person or organization he viewed as 'communist', a broad definition which included almost all opposition to apartheid" (Dugard 106).

position. In his characteristic tone of morbid fascination, Josef points out that what characterizes the times of political crisis is "their calm, not their disorder; their tedium, not their violence. For the most part people simply seem to feel themselves suspended, at a loose end" (133). The citizens of Sarmeda, reduced to the role of helpless spectators, have little choice but to learn how to live with a deep sense of uncertainty: "They no longer know what their roles will be when they see each other next" (133). No doubt, those general observations contribute to the allegorical dimension of Jacobson's novel, but they can also be interpreted within the political framework of late apartheid South Africa. In her essay "Living in the Interregnum," originally a 1982 lecture delivered in New York, Nadine Gordimer referred to the late 1970s and early 1980s as a period of *interregnum*. Adopting the term from Antonio Gramsci, Gordimer argues that the times of political turmoil in her country have raised questions about the future roles of her and her contemporaries in South Africa. As she writes, "In the eyes of the black majority which will rule, whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures" (264). While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss Gordimer's rich essay, it can be argued that one of the things that characterizes it is the sense of suspension that she and her fellow white intellectuals experienced at the time. This sense of uncertainty is conveyed in Josef's hyperbolic comment about the citizens of Sarmeda, who are unsure of their future roles in the country. It should be emphasized here that Gordimer's description of the interregnum does not allow for simple analogies with South Africa; indeed, Jacobson's dystopian vision seems to rule out any possibility of positive political change. Nonetheless, Jacobson does manage to capture the affective atmosphere of uncertainty that Gordimer associated with the interregnum.

This part of the discussion has considered *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* as a transnational allegory in which Jacobson brings together two distinct and opposing political systems and explores their repressive natures. Concluding this part of the discussion, it is worth noting that this complex juxtaposition has an important political dimension. The conflation of the two regimes can be considered a response to apartheid propaganda, with its strategy of consolidating support for the National Party by indoctrinating the citizens with the prospect of a communist threat.[9] Situated in opposition to this binary view of apartheid propaganda, Jacobson explores the two systems as one orchestrated attempt to enslave the individual and subjugate populations.

9 See Rob Nixon's *Selling Apartheid: South Africa's Global Propaganda War*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2015.

4. The moral dimension of Jacobson's novel

So far, this article has considered *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* as a transnational allegory of political repression, in which Soviet communism and Afrikaner nationalism are presented not as warring ideologies but as systems of repression that can be fruitfully juxtaposed. This part of the discussion offers a close reading of Jacobson's novel as a study of corruption against the backdrop of the authoritarian system described earlier. I will argue that the novel can be read as a transnational allegory of how authoritarian systems foster a stance of moral degradation across different political contexts. Unlike the discussion above, the focus here will not be on the structures and institutions, but on the individual and his role in the functioning of repressive political systems. This is an important qualification, as it indicates that the goal of this discussion is not to absolve the protagonist of his moral responsibility by presenting him as a person enslaved by the system. Such a move – turning an allegorical reading of Jacobson's novel into an exculpatory one – would be a misinterpretation of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, in which the question of individual moral culpability is explicitly addressed. That Jacobson was deeply interested in this issue becomes apparent in *Heshel's Kingdom*, in which he wrote about Nazism and communism not so much in terms of their socio-political conditions, but chiefly in terms of injustice and oppression. His focus is on the continuity between the two totalitarian orders, which he attributes to petty functionaries loyal to the regime:

> Servants of the regime, they remained the masters still: party members; secret policemen; labour-camp kings; movers-about of papers and populations, governors of a realm where the individual had no recourse against state and party. (Jacobson 1998: 94)

This passage, quoted from *Heshel's Kingdom*, sheds interesting light on *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* in at least two aspects: first of all, in both works, the focus is neither on dictators nor on victims of the regimes, but on the people working silently within the system to perpetuate injustice and unfreedom. Josef Baisz is precisely such a person – indeed, through his immorality and his monstrous political opportunism, he is the ideal product of his time and place. In this sense, Jacobson's goal is to explore the corrupt political system from within the individual psyche. The mode of confession adopted for this exploration suggests honesty and candour in its description, both in its analysis of individual motivations and of the socio-political reality of Sarmeda. This interpretation is, to some extent, encouraged by narratorial commentary: in the Translator's

Preface, the frame narrator claims that although he has no "irrefutable evidence" to prove the accuracy of Josef's confession, his personal view is that both his description of the "ramshackle dictatorship" (Jacobson 2015) in which he lived and his strong and conflicting emotions are true and accurate. In Jacobson's vision of the "South Africa-sur-Volga," Baisz, the consummate political opportunist who manages to survive several political upheavals, decides to commit suicide. No longer capable of finding a solution to his problems other than death, he is ultimately destroyed by the system whose mechanisms he so perfectly internalised. The novel highlights the impact of a destructive socio-political order, as reflected in individual morality, without absolving the individual of his responsibility.

This part of the discussion will show that, in exploring the immorality of his narrator, Jacobson considers, as a point of reference, the degree to which he departs from the values of liberal humanism.[10] Before analyzing *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, it is worthwhile to provide a background for this discussion by outlining Jacobson's engagement with this ethical and political stance. First of all, it should be noted that Jacobson imbibed liberal humanist values during his English-style education. In his autobiography, he observes that, growing up in Kimberley he "was being brought up to speak English and to go to a school which modelled itself as much as it dared on some vague notion of an English public school" (Jacobson 1985: 8). As Andrea Thorpe notes, "Jacobson's education entailed a valorisation of canonical English literature and 'culture', and a tradition of liberal humanism interwoven through these texts and cultural values" (Thorpe 60). She adds that his background as a South African of Jewish origin also played its role in the adoption of the liberal humanist beliefs, insofar as it made him more empathetic towards "other types of 'outsiders' within South African society" (Thorpe 61).

It is worth noting that liberal humanism was by no means an exceptional stance in his country. To give just one example, Jacobson's great contemporary – Nadine Gordimer – was also brought up and educated (mostly self-educated) in the same tradition as Jacobson, although it should be added that the comparison ends there. After a period of belief in liberal humanism in the late 1940s and the 1950s, Gordimer entered a phase of Marxist-inspired political radicalisation. Jacobson, on the other hand, never gave up liberal humanism; indeed, it was

10 The key values of liberal humanism can be summarised as follows: "a commitment to the fundamental human rights," "a commitment to constitutionalism" (Welsh 1), "a belief in equality" (2), "tolerance of conflicting viewpoints" (2), "an optimistic belief in the possibilities of individual and human 'improvement'" (Welsh 2), and "compassion" (2).

his liberal humanist stance and his rootedness in English culture and literature that gave him a sense of belonging as a South African living in Britain.[11] At the same time, Jacobson was inspired by other views, incorporating them into his novels. In *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, the key references are to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

In an interview by Richard Lansdown, Jacobson acknowledges the influence of Nietzsche on his works, contrasting his philosophy with liberal humanism. As he writes, what drew him to Nietzsche was "his appetite for conflict, his belief that it was a condition of all invention and innovation" (Lansdown 123). Part of the attraction, Jacobson adds, was that Nietzsche's philosophy was a far cry from the liberalism and rationalism in which he was raised by his mother. He concludes his reflection with the following words:

> I've incorporated him [Nietzsche] into a private conflict of my own: that between my inclination towards liberal-rationalist politics on the one hand and a Nietzschean excitement in the idea of never-ending struggles and overcomings on the other. (Lansdown 123)

Two concepts from Nietzsche's philosophy are especially resonant in the context of Jacobson's work, and specifically *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*: struggle and overcoming, or "self-overcoming" (*Selbst-Überwindung*) (Nietzsche 2003: 86), as the term is translated into English. In Nietzsche's philosophy, self-overcoming is closely connected with "will to power" (Nietzsche 2003: 86), understood as the power over oneself. By exercising this power, the subject is capable of self-transcending, in other words, overcoming the self that is attached to old and outdated values. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche associates the process of self-overcoming with an internal and never-ending struggle, insofar as he does not entertain the possibility of reaching an endpoint in this continual process of self-transcendence. In an illuminating article about the notion of self-overcoming in Nietzsche, Jonathan Mitchell argues that "self-overcoming involves both questioning and ultimately abandoning a self-evaluative framework, that is overcoming some set of fundamental evaluations through which we make assessments of our ethical conduct" (328–329). For Mitchell, self-overcoming involves "a stance of openness" (337) not unlike

11 In *Time and Time Again*, he emphasises the significance of F.R. Leavis in his life as a young colonial living in Britain. In his work, Leavis offered a model of "ideal community" (Jacobson 1986: 126), which was open to every reader and critic, irrespective of their social origins.

the scientist's readiness to revise, improve and – at times – abandon critical paradigms. Mitchell's characterization of self-overcoming as "a commitment to openness" (340) is in the spirit of Jacobson's understanding of Nietzschean *Selbst-Überwindung*. No doubt, what would also not be lost on Jacobson was Nietzsche's critique of European morality, especially Christianity, as a "slave morality" based on *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, the self-evaluative framework of European morality had to be overcome, and this, no doubt, involves also the liberal humanist standpoint, as derived from the moral philosophy of Christianity.

In *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, Jacobson alludes to Nietzsche's philosophy in his analysis of his protagonist's moral degeneration. In more than one respect, Josef Baisz can be considered a parody of Nietzsche: he is an individual intent on demonstrating his superiority in relation to what he calls "conventional morality" (Jacobson 2015: 85). His constant betrayals of other people – superiors, lovers, and relatives – are presented in terms of triumphant self-overcoming in an attempt to reach a higher, more intense state of existence, and – ultimately – a vaguely defined state of freedom. That Josef has precisely this goal in mind becomes clear when he compares his endless cycle of betrayal to an addiction and himself to an addict:

> And like any other addict I dreamed that precisely that which enslaved me would enable me to burst through the walls of circumstance, through the confines of the self, into a realm of unconditioned freedom. (Jacobson 2015: 123)

The argument that every addict believes that their addiction will one day free them from the confines of their habit is characteristic of the Nietzschean strain in Baisz's thinking: considering himself above conventional– European, Christian-based morality – he believes that by contesting it, he will one day reach a state beyond good and evil. The falsity of this thinking is proven at the end of the novel, in which the guilt and self-loathing generated by his actions lead him to seriously contemplate suicide. If this is not enough to suggest similarities between his protagonist and Nietzsche, Jacobson has his narrator retreat to the mountains to write his confessional narrative, as if Josef's torments and raptures were a distant echo of Nietzsche's turbulent states of mind, as recorded in the Swiss Alps.

In *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, Jacobson's subversion of liberal humanism is effected through the medium of the confessional discourse. It is worthwhile to note here that Jacobson's novel belongs to the broad category of modern confessional writing, which, as Peter Axthelm notes, began with Dostoevsky's

Notes from the Underground. According to Axthelm, one of the distinctive features of the confessional narrator is suffering, which has its source not in the outside world but rather in "the chaos within the self." For the confessional narrator, as Axthelm adds, "the only possible order or value must be found in self-understanding" (9). In modern confessional narratives, self-understanding remains a notoriously elusive goal, because "the 'I'… is more complex, mutable and fluid" (Gill 7). Modern confessional writing is characterised by strategies of "evasion, displacement and obfuscation" (7). Jo Gill's description of the modern confessional subject is apposite in the context of Jacobson's novel, whose confessional narrator manifests a profound knowledge concerning the narrative conventions governing confessional and autobiographical writing, "foregrounding… such knowledge," in a "flamboyant and persistent" (8) way. Nonetheless, despite his considerable self-consciousness, Josef seems unaware of the self-destructive tendencies that manifest themselves in his confessional narrative. In his relentless search for control and power, he is engaged in what seems like a never-ending cycle of betrayals, which generate both intense satisfaction and guilt, giving rise to a combination of sadism and self-loathing. By the end of the novel, having betrayed his sister, Josef's self-hatred leads him to contemplate suicide, which – we may understand – he does commit, making his body "the last and most innocent of all my victims" (Jacobson 2015: 212). Paradoxically, he presents his suicide not as a rupture but as a continuity: in his characteristically metaphysical language, he notes that his death would be simply a continuation of his service for "the gods of falsehood and treachery" (211).

The analysis of silences, suppressions, and projections in Josef's confessional narrative shows that it is the negation of the liberal-rational standpoint in at least two respects. First of all, it questions the notion that self-awareness, understood here as insight into one's innermost thoughts and emotions, leads to rational decisions aimed at one's moral self-development: as we saw, Josef is well aware of the combination of sadistic pleasure and self-loathing generated by his actions, but he fails to see (for lack of will or insight) the self-destructive logic of his actions. The second point concerns Josef's motivations in writing his confession. Contrary to both Christian and psychoanalytic notions of confession, Josef's goal in writing his narrative is neither self-insight nor reintegration into the community but the vicarious experiencing of pleasure that he derived from his sadistic actions. As he points out:

> The only justification I sought for my deeds was the pleasure they gave me.… I use the word "pleasure" to cover many emotions, of course: terror and love among them. Perhaps I should speak of intensity, rather.

> Let that convey what I mean. What I valued above all other ends. And still seek now, in the very act of putting down the word, in these circumstances. (170–171)

Pleasure is presented as an overriding principle of Josef's confession and the ultimate goal that he wishes to attain. In this respect, Josef's first-person narrative functions as the negation of a more paradigmatic notion of confession, in which the act of revealing one's transgressive thoughts and actions is painful rather than rewarding. The fact that Josef describes neither guilt nor shame as reactions to the crimes he commits shows his distance from any ethical framework that would be irreducible to his self-serving goals. In Josef's moral universe, where there is no longer any external authority to evaluate his words and intentions, confession becomes an exercise of power over the reader; indeed, it is Josef's last attempt to create a semblance of power in a situation where he is rapidly losing control over his life. It is important to note that Josef does not live in a wholly amoral universe, in which words such as guilt, responsibility, and truth have lost their meaning; rather, those values function as distant echoes of a world in which morality is not shaped for political ends. That Josef retains the meaning of those values is clear from the "horror and revulsion" (209) he feels with regard to people that he has hurt. It can be argued that those intensely dysphoric emotions are a projection of his self-loathing, which ultimately leads him to suicide. Read allegorically, Jacobson's novel can be seen as a representation of how authoritarian political systems foster and thrive on a stance of moral degradation. Insofar as it describes the decline and death of its main protagonist, the ultimate political opportunist, it also allegorically represents the ultimate failure of those systems in their endeavor to create individuals whose moral universe is wholly subservient to the needs of the turbulent, unpredictable system they try to serve. It is this failure that Sarmeda's authorities try to erase when they claim that no such person as Josef Baisz ever existed.

5. Conclusion: Jacobson's pessimistic message

In an interview conducted in 1985, eight years after the first publication of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, Jacobson observed that his voluntary exile from South Africa was a necessary condition for him to become a writer. As he tells Stephen Gray, "I find it very difficult to imagine myself having become a writer had I stayed in South Africa" (Gray 78). In his novel, Jacobson reproduces this condition of exile by writing from the metropolitan centre about his native country and the native countries of his parents. By conflating the socio-political realities of South Africa and Eastern Europe, he creates a hybrid, dystopian

country called by C.J. Driver "South Africa-sur-Volga" (qtd. in Kusek 22), which becomes the political and moral other to London; the half-illuminated world of obscure motivations, whose laws and principles stand in strong contrast to his stance of liberal humanism. It should be emphasised that Baisz's deluded attempts to distort Nietzschean philosophy to achieve his political and personal goals are not an expression of Jacobson's rejection of liberal humanism, but rather a convincing and powerful exploration of Baisz's corrupt conscience.

When considering the moral and allegorical dimensions of Jacobson's novel, it is important to keep in mind that at no point in his novel does Jacobson suggest that the ultimate bankruptcy of Baisz's self-destructive tendencies is representative of the socio-political system within which he functions. Indeed, as we learn from the Translator's Preface, the Republic of Sarmeda continues its existence in its unchanged stance of defensiveness with respect to the Western world. It seems that, unlike the individual, the corruption of the system does not lead to its decline – no such positive turn of events is anticipated in Jacobson's novel. This dystopian message is the darkest and most powerful expression of Jacobson's political pessimism regarding South Africa and Eastern Europe in the late 1970s.

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| Abstract

MAREK PAWLICKI

Dan Jacobson's The Confessions of Josef Baisz: A Transnational Allegory

This article offers an analysis of Dan Jacobson's novel *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* (1977) as a transnational allegory of political repression and moral corruption. It argues that Jacobson can be viewed as a transnational writer, whose works cross the national and cultural boundaries of his country of origin, South Africa, and his adopted country, England. In the mentioned novel, Jacobson's transnationalism enables him to create a fictive world that can be seen as an amalgamation of South African nationalism and Eastern European communism. Writing in the mode of allegory, Jacobson formulated an incisive political and moral critique of the ways in which authoritarian political regimes foster moral corruption among their citizens, specifically among the functionaries responsible for legitimizing and defending them. Divided into three parts, this article begins by defining transnational allegory, then examines political references in Jacobson's novel, and finally analyzes its first-person, confessional discourse as a study in moral corruption.

Keywords: Dan Jacobson; *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*; transnational allegory; apartheid; communism; South African literature

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