

WEST BANK REALITY

David Grossman: **The Yellow Wind**, translated from the Hebrew by Haim Watzman. London: Jonathan Cape, 1988)

In the late-twentieth-century world few states show such striking convergences as Israel and South Africa. Both are politics that have been brought into existence by a gradual process of conquest, the imposition of force on the territories' older inhabitants. ('Conquest' is a raw uncomfortable term usually evaded in the sanitized rhetoric of the dominant elites.) Both countries have become a wrestling ground for rival nationalisms – Afrikaner/African or Zionist/Palestinian. The airwaves carry to the point of tedium the surly ideologies of the major combatants, but still for the attentive observer there come from both countries many other voices, the voices of decency and courage as individual men and women face up to a dauntingly oppressive environment. Of course there are profound differences between the two countries – most obvious in their size and location: Israel is a very small country, with little more than one-fiftieth the land area of South Africa: smallness sometimes magnifies tension. At the same time Israel occupies a part of the earth's surface that more than any other has for millenia been a scene of conflict between differing cultures. How sharp here is the contrast with a country set at one of the world's extremities. But for all that the convergences of our own times remain insistent. That is why it is impossible for any one familiar with South Africa to read about contemporary Israel and not find him or herself struck by the parallels. That is why it seems particularly worth while drawing the attention of a South African readership to a very remarkable book that has just come out of Israel.

David Grossman is a young Israeli writer, the author of two novels and three children's books. In 1986 – some months before the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising – an Israeli weekly journal suggested to him that he spend a couple of months travelling round the occupied territories of the West Bank, talking not to politicians and officials – their statements are always predictable – but to ordinary people. A whole issue of the journal, **Koteret Rashit**, was devoted to Grossman's account of his experiences. It was intended to serve as a contribution to the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Six Days' War. Grossman's long article became a sensation: republished in book form, it became 'the fastest-selling book in the country's history'. **The New Yorker** took it up and gave it extensive coverage. Now it has been published in England – regrettably only in hard covers. I would urge an enterprising South African publisher to find ways of bringing out locally a paperback edition at an affordable price.

CLASSIC

For David Grossman has written what I am certain will come to be regarded as one of the classics of our time. He

has done something simple, difficult and important: simple to define, difficult to execute, important in its consequences. In essence what he has done is look reality straight in the face – and the reality of the West Bank is painful, frightening and therefore disturbing. Humankind – some words of T.S. Eliot float, possibly garbled, to the surface of my mind – can't take very much reality. And yet when reality is presented with a proper sensitivity it becomes assimilable and invigorating. Grossman's book has a resonance that gives to his local theme a universal relevance.

Grossman starts his exploration in the Palestinian refugee camp of Deheisha south of Jerusalem 'where twelve thousand Palestinian refugees live in one of the highest population densities in the world'. He spends some time in Ofna, one of the settlements built up by the members of Gush Emunim, one of the most extreme of the Zionist groups. He visits the campus of an Arab university and sits in on the proceedings of an Israeli military court. He seeks out West Bankers who are working 'illegally' and therefore living clandestinely in Israel proper. He goes to the Allenby Bridge over the Jordan and sees the way that Arabs entering or leaving the West Bank are treated. He goes to one Arab village whose inhabitants after being thrown out by the Israelis, have been allowed after many years to return, and to another village which has been cut in two by the Green Line, the 1967 frontier, so that the two halves have grown painfully different and apart. He meets an Arab whose son has been shot dead as a terrorist, whose house has been totally demolished and who has thus been reduced to absolute beggary. He goes to the funeral of a Jewish woman killed by terrorists and learns how the men of the settlement have wreaked their revenge on a neighbouring Arab town.

MORE THAN A JOURNALIST

All this, you may say, any journalist could have done. True enough – but Grossman is something more than a journalist. He is an Israeli and a novelist. As a liberal minded Israeli he has long been deeply troubled by the occupation. 'I could not understand how an entire nation like mine, an enlightened nation by all accounts, is able to train itself to live as a conqueror without making its own life wretched'. He found himself beginning to think of 'that kidney-shaped expanse of land the West Bank, as an organ transplanted into my body against my wishes and about which I would have to come to some sort of conclusion and decision'. In other words he is constantly possessed by a deep moral concern. Translated into human terms this develops into deeply humane egalitarianism. In the course of his travels he meets a remarkable Israeli lawyer who defends Arabs in the military court.

'In her relations with Arabs there is something you don't come across very often – straightforwardness and equality, without a trace of sanctimony; she places herself neither above or below her clients, and there is no soft and self-effacing paternalism, Very rare.'

It is this rare quality that Grossman also possesses. It makes him a sympathetic listener, a stimulating conversationalist. He can relate to people of widely differing backgrounds.

It is no less important that he is by training a novelist. For the novelist has to develop a special sensitivity to place and person, the eye reflective and observant, quick to note the subtler details of scene or gesture, the ear trained to record the idiosyncratic inflexions of speech. (Here a word of praise and gratitude to Grossman's translator from the Hebrew for rendering so readably the texture of Grossman's prose.) Taken all together then, the qualities which Grossman deploys provide the reader with the opportunity of acquiring an exceptionally penetrating insight into a cruel and difficult situation.

HATRED

Hatred is a political emotion of which many people, especially those sheltered by a reasonably affluent lifestyle, have no personal experience. Yet in his conversations with Palestinian Arabs Grossman is constantly presented with the reality and the intensity of their hatred. Take, for example, the words of a 30-year old Palestinian who spent ten years in jail for being a member of a nationalist organization:

'Of course I hate you. Maybe at the beginning I didn't hate and only feared. Afterwards, I began to hate. Before I went to jail, I didn't even know I was a Palestinian. There they taught me who I am. Now I have opinions . . . Understand: the average Palestinian is not the fascist and hating type, but you and the life under your occupation push him into hatred. Look at me, for example. You took ten years of my life from me; You exiled my father in '68. He hadn't done anything. He wasn't even a PLO supporter. Maybe even the opposite. But you wanted to kick out anyone who had an opinion about anything. So that we would be here completely without leaders . . . You took everything. National identity, and the identity of every one of us who fears you and depends on you for his livelihood, you took everything. You made us into living dead. And me, what remains for me? Only the hatred of you and thoughts of politics. That's another evil you brought upon us, that you made every man here, even the most ordinary fellah, into a politician.'

Hatred – poisonous and invigorating – affects almost everyone, even the smallest children. In one refugee camp Grossman visits a kindergarten. Some of the children are the fourth generation to live in the camp. 'The children here know everything', one of the teachers tells him. 'On any night the army may enter their house, right into the house, conduct a search, shout, turn over the blankets and slash at them with their bayonets!' A little boy makes a gesture with a stick as if to shoot him. 'Who do you want to shoot?' the teachers ask the child. And he answers, 'Jews –because the Jews came and stole my uncle.' 'Is this the answer' – Grossman turns to the two young women teachers – 'to bring up another generation

and another in hatred? Couldn't you try, maybe, another way?' The two teachers, 'each in her own way, in a whisper or with self-assurance', give the same reply, 'There is no other way'.

INCOMPREHENSION

The obverse to Palestinian hatred would seem on the Jewish side to be incomprehension. Grossman brings this out very clearly in his account of his visit to the Gush Emunim settlement at Ofna. He was warned that the settlers were 'crazy, fanatic, blind', but knowing that 'reality never surrenders to a stereotypic view' he 'went in order to learn'. He wanted to find out how the settlers viewed their Arab neighbours, whether they were capable of developing any powers of empathy. To try and get them to understand what he was getting at, he talked to them of his own concept of time, of the great importance he attached to it, of his unwillingness to 'tolerate the thought that even one moment of my life might pass empty of meaning, of interest, or enjoyment', 'Were I living under foreign rule, what would torture me', he tells then, 'would be – beside the tangible things that are taken as given – the fact that I do not control my time - the curfews, the roadblocks, the interrogations.' The settlers of Ofna dismiss this sensitive point with a raucous gibe, and there is a hum of agreement when one of them says that 'he does not want to think even for a minute about the situation of the Arabs around him, because he is caught up in a struggle with them': he is at war and any attempt to pity them would serve only to endanger his own position.

'The whole world is against us, they broadcast to you with every word' – these Zionist zealots cherishing their dreams of a Greater Israel. 'Inevitably, they have created their own prison, their spiritual Sparta on the mountain tops, out of which they peek, stiff and prickly, in the face of all other opinions'. Talking to them leaves Grossman with a sense of his own lack of comprehension. He cannot understand their grandiose motivation. 'I fear life among people who have an obligation to an absolute order. Absolute orders require, in the end, absolute deeds, and I, nebbish, am a partial, relative, imperfect man who prefers to make correctible mistakes rather than attain supernatural achievements.'

STRATEGIES

Haters and zealots – these are the polar extremes. And in between there comes, of course, all those who have worked out their own strategies. There are the refugees who become 'addicted to their dreams', living in 'a splendid past or a longed-for future'. There are the so-called 'wastonaire' (derived from a local slang word **wasta** meaning 'mediation'), Arabs who batten on the opportunities offered by the occupation, enriching themselves in the role of middlemen between the military and the local population. There are the many Israelis who 'cling to the desire to remain ignorant and unaware. Faithful to their half-closed consciousness, they immerse themselves in a despairing, miserable moral slumber: "Wake me when it's over".' And there are a few who are prepared to look reality squarely in the face.

One such is an Israeli ecologist, Nisim Krispil, who has spent years wandering through the West Bank, 'speaks Arabic like a native and knows all the smallest customs

and manners.' 'We could have built something with the Palestinians in partnership. In mutual assistance and friendliness. Today the only people who come to them are people with demands . . . No one has taken an interest in what can be improved, to distribute clothes to the needy, to bring toys to the kindergartens', But Krispil himself lives up to his preaching, spending much of his time engaged in small, practical deeds of kindness. He goes everywhere unarmed, knowing that Arabs would be enraged and humiliated if they saw him carrying a gun.

And then there is Raj'a Shehade, a Palestinian lawyer and writer. Shehade is the author of a book, **The Third Way**, in which he expounds his personal philosophy of action. He rejects the two ways most obviously open to him as a Palestinian – the way of collaboration, the way of armed struggle. Instead he opts for the 'third way', which is summed up in the Arabic word **Sumud** meaning 'endurance' or, as Grossman interprets it, 'a sort of passive combativeness, gritting one's teeth to keep from giving in, and to keep from losing one's mind.' It is an austere philosophy designed to provide an antidote against despair – and with so many Palestinians condemned to live in refugee camps not only in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip but also in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, despair is an emotion never far from the surface. Shehade too fears for the future: 'the occupation is steadily destroying us', 'destroying the entire fabric of civil and traditional life'. And yet, he tells Grossman, 'I do not despair. There are so many things to fight for. There are so many things to improve. From looking after mental health institutions to the effort to set up a law school. There are a million things

that a person can devote himself to. You can't give up'.

HUMAN

In the last paragraph of the book Grossman quotes a remark made by Albert Camus that the passage from speech to moral action has a name – "to become human". But Shehade has already said much the same thing: 'one of the things which, for me, gives meaning to my life is that the situation is a challenge: to remain human even under the conditions that prevail'. And so Grossman reflects that 'nothing matches the occupation as a great personal challenge. As a personal crossroads demanding action and thought'. I am not sure that many people who live in the cosiness of the affluent West will grasp what Grossman is getting at, but I am certain that friends in South Africa will appreciate what he means. And agree with him too when he adds, as one who has faced his challenge, 'sometimes you can gain in this way – for a split second – real mountain air.'

Finally, an explanation of the book's title. 'Have you ever heard', an elderly Arab asks Grossman, 'of the yellow wind. It is 'a hot and terrible east wind', coming from 'the gate of Hell' once in a few generations. It is a wind that 'sets the world afire, and people seek shelter from its heat in the caves and caverns, but even there it finds those it seeks, those who have performed cruel and unjust deeds, and there, in the cracks in the boulders, it exterminates them one by one'. And 'the rocks will be white from the heat and the mountains will crumble into a powder which will cover the land like yellow cotton'.

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