

THE POETRY OF GEORGE JONAS

A Critical Map

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There is no conflict that love or bullets
Could not resolve in time.

George Jonas ("Peace")

INVARIABLY, the greatest literature is one of attack; one has only to begin naming authors from the top of the alphabet (Benn, Brecht, Beckett, Broch, Baudelaire, Breton, Camus, Cortazar, Céline, Dostoyevsky, Dürrenmatt, etc., etc.) to realize that harmony and equality in literature are at best stylistic elements, at worst the worm of paralysis gnawing at the base of irreconcilable issues. The technique of assault is the result of, or partner to, the tremendous amount of energy released in a great work of art, either as a result of the artist's desperation over his suspension between the two extremes or poles of a given argument, or his fury at realizing the equal validity of any two contradictory statements. In short, everything *is* and *is not*; a premise that has driven many an artist to metaphysical (and often physical) suicide.

A Canadian poet whose literature stands as a distinctive example of such energy is Hungarian-born George Jonas, presently a drama producer and script editor for CBC Radio in Toronto, author of *The Absolute Smile* and *The Happy Hungry Man*.

What strikes one first about the poetry of George Jonas is its quiet but almost malignant tyranny, directed simultaneously at himself, his reader and those who populate the spaces around him. As if to clear the stage before the battle, the first poem of *The Absolute Smile*, "For the Record", sets the record straight:

I think that I live in a street
Where the evenings are decidedly darker,
A citizen of what is said to be a country,
In the year nineteen-sixty-four.

All the snow melts around April,
In August there is nothing to wait for,
The Fall is established in November,
January is mostly Winter.

A woman claims to be my wife
On the strength of which she lives in my house.
But I am also dangerous to some animals
And have at times been observed to eat them.

I have little to say about the structure of society,
There may be certain letters to write occasionally,
Certain amounts to pay when they become due,
But it is against the law for some people to hurt me.

In view of this I continue to lead
What I am told is an existence
Weeks ending in Sundays
Unasked questions scrupulously unanswered.

The bleakness, an important part of this poem as well as many others in Jonas' books, here tends to function both as a twilight backdrop against which the "facts" of the poem are paraded, as well as a depressant to reduce the impact of several scarcely-veiled threats which will become open declarations of war later in Jonas' verse:

But I am also dangerous to some animals . . .
But it is against the law for some people to hurt me. . . .

The bleakness will remain a constant, however, changing in shade (though not in identity) only occasionally when Jonas offsets his viciousness with an insolent laughter or sarcastic spoof.

By way of further introduction Jonas (in the second poem of *The Absolute Smile*, entitled "Introduction") sketches a quick rough outline of his own person, just enough to give the reader an indication of his "qualifications" and his point of view:

. . . Easy to hurt by silence and by sound
I, as most men, increasing and alone

Grow horrible, and search in my wound,
From live trees cut a crutch on which to lean.

Springs are incidental to what I have become
And Winters affect me not at all:
I keep alive by breathing and in some
Ways I resemble myself even more.

I murder in the inside darkness, I
Have learned to slice an apple and not touch it;
The universe recedes in disarray
I sit in metal towers and I watch it.

But I'm making a note of things I do not like
And I do not like anything. Today
The notes are multiplying in my scroll of black
You are in it, so is she, so am I.

(TAS: p. 3)

In this poem, along with a reinforcement of the threat, we find the first sign of its opposite, the vulnerable side of the man:

Easy to hurt by silence and by sound . . .

This side will be exposed repeatedly throughout Jonas' verse, though as a rule it is found lying behind heavy barricades or guarded by a well-aimed covering fire of abuse or laughter. Its discovery, however, is an easy task, for Jonas has no intention of hiding his feelings; he is simply unwilling to sell those he has on the open market in pre-packaged clichés which wouldn't fit them in any case. There is a ruthless "honesty" about his poetry that precludes all sympathy, pity or Freud. Jonas makes no excuses and seeks no justification for his actions. I will have more to observe about this point later on.

I have said that Jonas' poetry is a poetry of attack; as such it makes frequent use of the element of surprise. Often a poem leads off in low-key fashion, progressing from the playful to the insolent to the cynical to the blatantly nefarious. One reads along the lines of what appears to be a relatively peaceful poem, actually entitled "Peace", and suddenly finds one has strayed unwittingly into a dense patch of vicious observations:

I wish to make a positive statement
Of happy hunters returning from the woods.
Wardens of dwindling flocks, serious concern
Dwells in their moist and beautiful eyes.

There is no conflict that love or bullets
Could not resolve in time.
Gardens are carefully planned. Long rows of roses sit
In all directions around any house.

There is always a period of peace
Between two blows, when a smiling landscape
Surrounds with blue light the resting warrior.
The raised arm hardly shows among the ferns.

At such times rabbits jump out of their trenches
And stand listening at the entrance of the field.
Worms pop out of the ground in open amazement,
Sharp-beaked birds freeze unfalling in their dive.

The moment is guarded by dustbins along the streets
Of low and crippled suburbs where later
Children come out of hiding and women pause for breath.
Hate, suspended, sways gently back and forth.

Rats are pacing the floor, thinking,
A loaf of bread cuts itself into warm slices,
A glass of milk travels to India,
Warships lean on their guns and close their eyes.

The beauty of such moments is hardly useful
Except for the purpose of missing a heartbeat,
As old men sit at tables, ready to talk.
For there is nothing to talk about.

(TAS: p. 5)

The “period of peace between two blows” might well describe the time between Jonas’ first and second book publications; the second blow, entitled *The Happy Hungry Man*, is a progression of offhandedly laconic, often faintly desperate thoughts and “irrelevant” stage directions punctuated by sudden, coolly sarcastic, indifferently snide and ruthless comments:

Outraged
 executives caught in air raids
Whimper in the most gratifying way
Conquering crews in capsized tanks
Burn for some time and grow very peaceful
Nor is it necessary to look for the spectacular
Small tumours mollify malignant old women . . .

(HHM: p. 37)

We will have many more opportunities to see this side of Jonas' thoughts; what may now be important is to determine just what sparks this disillusion, this isolation:

Moses and I

Must have climbed different mountains
Or must have been advised by a different god
For look at the writings on the rocks in my hand:

It seems I may not respect my parents
Or my neighbour's right to the things he believes he owns,
Or the lives of those I consider to be my enemies.

Before you begin to envy me
Remember only this:
My god's bidding is as remote from my nature
As your god's is from yours
And I find his commandments
As difficult to keep.

(HHM: p. 34)

The poet is forced by the dictates of his own nature to live in the very teeth of all accepted (normal, usual) moralities, all understood corollaries of conduct and belief:

Being alive you will be disappointed
By disappointing your nature
Or being disappointed by it;
Whether you're finally awarded or avoided
Whether you're looking for caresses or for kicks.

Being a woman you'll often be confronted
By confronting your sex
Or being confronted by it;
Whether you're called, challenged or comforted
Whether you're looking for caresses or for kicks.

But being alone, you'll nevertheless be tempted
By tempting your own self
Or being tempted by it;
Whether your emotions are accomplished or attempted
Whether you regard yourself as owned or rented
Whether you're looking for caresses or for kicks.

Yeah, well
 who will know if we ever meant it
Whether we played the game or threw a fix
Whether my lines were loving or pointed
Whether we were looking for caresses or for kicks . . . ¹

With Jonas it is virtually impossible to tell whether he “played the game or threw in a fix.” He is too self-conscious an artist to be hog-tied by simple, quick-drying solutions, and too conscious of being conscious to trust himself even when he thinks he is being honest. He realizes that a man defines himself as much by his imagination as he does by his instinctual impulses:

Coming from the tribe
In which angels abide
I always told the truth
When I thought I lied . . .

(TAS: p. 61)

This thoroughgoing suspicion of himself is one which every conscious man eventually faces as a major issue, and in Jones’ work this distrust is paramount, being the source of both his laughter and his refusal to take himself overly seriously. Hence the attitude, tone and point of view in his work. But what snaps such a comment back into balance is the ruthlessness of which such a man becomes capable, once freed of this cumbersome sense of self-importance. Suddenly anyone, anything can (must) take on whatever degree of importance he chooses to attribute to it; everything becomes the helpless plaything of the man who is no longer a slave to faith or belief (conviction). Such a man chooses (or is forced, by his very suspicions, to choose) his religions and morals with all the carelessness and passing interest of a bored tyrant, who may, at any given time, decree that such and such a thing or idea be henceforth sacred, killing those who refuse to bow or attempt to disagree.

Such an insolence, inevitably, breeds both raw violence and jagged despair, but since the public arena of Art demands formality, these must be chiseled and shaped into a more manageable construction. An indication of this is found in *The Happy Hungry Man*:

I know it is easy to exaggerate
The importance of any event in childhood
I mentioned the whole thing in ()
And instead of dwelling on it I will
Continue with some light

Subversive verse
Trying to make despair respectable . . .

(HHM: p. 50)

“Trying to make despair respectable” is thus part of the objective of Jonas’ verse, but the word “respectable” in this context does not imply making it acceptable to the world at large. It means attacking this despair even while acknowledging its power and presence, even while admitting one’s own vulnerability to it. It means all-out war, not only with the reasons for despair, but with the reader who has the audacity to watch the fight. But this act of war is not to be confused with an act of hope. Jonas has no hope, in fact, refuses to accept such a crutch even if it were logically possible. It is the hopeless condition of a Sisyphus that makes his condition “respectable”, that demands of us that we “imagine Sisyphus Heureux”.

Therefore, Jonas has no use for peace. The concept is treated in his poetry at various times as either impossible or to no point :

Peace herself will come
Peace herself will come
Peace herself will come tonight

She will take off her clothes
She will take off her clothes
Naked she will lie with me in bed

And nothing I do will change me
And nothing I do will change her
And by morning the night will be over

(“An Intercourse With Peace,” TAS: p.34)

The same thing goes for love. Damned by his nature to live a life which upends all the commonly accepted forms of feelings, he finds himself incapable of more than the mechanics of them :

Through some chance mutation
Poor G.J. has no organ to love with
The way he sees with his eyes
Tastes with his tongue
Thinks with his mind
Screws with his penis
Scratches and bites with his nails and teeth

But having the urge to love

He tries loving with his eyes
His teeth and nails
His mind tongue penis
And it still surprises him
That he's not quite satisfied . . .

(HHM: p. 28)

The result is that both the poet's actions and his person appear to have become inhuman. He has come to the point where even God cannot help him, for his minimum requirements for a satisfactory life have become so large that even God cannot afford to give them any longer :

Of course, there will be a few even (God) cannot help.
A few who are unable to find a place in this soap opera of a world
Misfits, who are not at home, no matter what,
In this fat, happy, cause-and-effect, give-and-take universe
A few vicious saints who want all or nothing.

(TAS: p. 7)

This is the essence of an uncompromising view which gives Jonas' poetry its "monstrous" effect, its insolent yet unflinching demands which, finally, are those of a man who plays his stakes dizzyingly high, plays the game to win, hands down. Total destruction, the other alternative, has nothing to do with losing. A man who has the nerve to risk so much so ruthlessly no longer fits into the category which includes losers. And so Jonas draws his conclusions:

I try but I cannot confirm or deny it
I can do nothing to prove or justify it
I could apologize but after all
I am not even certain that it is my fault.

I do not know what to make of inhumanity
Beyond sharing and understanding it,
Inflicting it and having it inflicted upon me
Every day usually before noon.

And I have slowly come to the conclusion
That I am not a very personal thing,
My food has also known the pleasure of eating,
And some say my own soul could go on living without me.

(TAS: p. 56)

His realization is reflected in his description of the people around him. A woman becomes little more than an enumeration of parts, functions:

On occasion, a pair of thick ankles
And tidy breasts sit with me in the car
And the mind runs sharply through its ducts
And tall trees whistle by . . .

(TAS: p. 24)

or, in "Eight Lines for a Script Girl":

I almost know you now. You are your name,
The substance of your skin, the movement of your eyes,
The line of your lips, the texture of your hair,
Your phone number, the colour of your voice.

You are your breast's shape, the full length of your limbs,
You are your smile, your nailpolish, your dress.
Later I'll know you more. Still later
I'll know you even less.

(TAS: p. 30)

A striking resemblance between Jonas' condition and the one described by Camus in his "The Myth of Sisyphus" may be relevant here. In the section "Absurdity and Suicide" Camus discovers:

Men too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of their lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them.

The leap from this position to the Absurd in Jonas' books is extremely short. Several sections of "The Happy Hungry Man", written in a child-like lilting rhythm, seem to spin off into an absurd joke; the flippant, almost cursory quality of many of Jonas' poems carry this frame of mind to a number of quasi-hilarious, quasi-deadly-serious conclusions, all of them characteristic of the "bored tyrant":

The happy hungry man believes in food
The happy homeless man believes in a home
The happy unloved man believes in love
I wouldn't mind believing in something myself.

(HHM: p. 9)

or:

At present I still have
A choice of deaths,
I could, for example, die of a difficult disease
For medical science and I could
Die for a stranger who has never learned to swim.
I could also die for the Queen.
These are quite honourable deaths
But they don't appeal to me.
I think I'll die for Barbara.

(TAS: p. 25)

This concerted suppression of all undue sentimentality accounts directly or indirectly for much of the power of Jonas' work. As such it appears to be very much a part of Jonas' nature, and it is certainly part of the reason why he never actually *complains* in any of his poems. Jeers, yes, or provokes, but never complains. In a recent letter to J. Michael Yates (Aug. 13/69) he refers half-jokingly to an entertaining little "level system" which he uses to describe various types of people and their attitudes about living; his own attitude becomes clearer here:

. . . It is not a value system; the four levels of which it consists do not form an ascending scale, but could be described, using Shakespeare's works as an example, as follows. Level one is people who like Shakespeare as a matter of course, because his greatness is taken for granted the same way as winter's snow or summer sunshine; level two is the people who *dislike* Shakespeare for the same reason: that is, because they quarrel with all the obvious facts in life and challenge in the most serious and humourless manner everything that seems to be part of the human condition. Level three is the people who find Shakespeare delightfully funny, because he is really a scream, just too much, camp if you will, but who are nevertheless enjoying him fully in this fashion. Finally, level four are the people who really know that Shakespeare is indeed a great writer having come to this conclusion after independent study and experience.

Jonas goes on to say that he is himself a "level three" person, which is certainly in keeping with the mood of his poems, give or take a few grimaces. The comic element in his verse helps save it from coming to idealistic conclusions he cannot seriously accept in any case. There are, in fact, no solutions anywhere — only re-locations of the constantly inevitable nonsense:

It makes no sense, yes.
There's no good reason for it, no.
So don't believe me, don't.
Say it's a passing mood.

Go on, ship wheat to Asia,
Clear slums,
Redistribute wealth,
Rehabilitate prisoners,
Liberate the oppressed,
Educate the ignorant,
Construct a condition of justice.

But Asia won't be full until Europe goes hungry,
Slums will relocate themselves,
Wealth will find its own level: a slope
Which it seeks with the physical force of water
And just as relentlessly
(But don't believe me)
Don't believe when I say
 The prisoners will become jailkeepers
 And the jailkeepers prisoners,
Don't believe me when I say
 Your teachers will spread ignorance
 And your scientists destruction.

“What would you have us do then?”

I would have you do exactly what you're doing:
Clear slums,
Educate the ignorant.
Liberate the oppressed.

Oh, it makes no sense, I admit,
There's no good reason for it, no.

(HHM: p. 51)

Predictably, critics have complained about the no-exit signs in Jonas' poetry. They have found it too difficult to stomach a poet who not only recognizes that his demands on the world around him are unjust, but refuses to apologize or accept the customary guilt for an anti-social stance:

I try but I cannot confirm or deny it
I can do nothing to prove or justify it
I could apologize but after all
I am not even certain that it is my fault.

(TAS: p. 56)

The closest that Jonas ever comes to an apology is in a poem ironically entitled, "Apology":

I cannot be shown
I cannot be shared
No one can learn me.

I am not what I say
I am not what I do
I am not my friends.

I die too fast
I am born too often
No one can talk to me twice

I am not at home in my skin
I do not sit like a spider
At the centre of my nerves

Mirrors do not reflect me
Sound waves do not bounce off me
I am not revealed in my dreams.

No explanations,
No affiliations
Nothing.

Without inlets, from a distance,
I can only be punished
I can only be forgiven.

(TAS: p. 59)

In another letter to J. Michael Yates, Jonas comments on his position in this regard. He refers here to the condescension of critics who attempt to treat him as a moral cripple:

... The condescending part I am used to; it is the normal reaction of a "feeling" person toward an "unfeeling" one. If you make the mistake of seeing the world objectively and in some kind of perspective (and yourself too since you are part of the world) you will be accused of — or at best forgiven for — your "attitudes" since most people, being healthily subjective, cannot conceive of a cast of mind which (to use a simple example) can regard its own desires as unjust but still not feel guilty. Most people either believe that what they want is right, or they have a conflict. They can't imagine a person not equating his own desires with universal justice, unless he feels remorseful and beats his chest. The absence of this beautiful defense mechanism that permits most people to think that they rightfully own what

they would like to have is interpreted, depending on the temperament of the critic, either as pure evil, or nihilism, or as an attitude, something in the nature of a noble fantasy . . .

and comments on the “two contradictory” statements:

. . . If I were to tell someone that I prefer brief relationships to marriage because women are different but wives are the same, they would accuse me of facile cynicism and of treating women as objects. The fact that I could tell them the same thing about men being all different but husbands being all the same wouldn't pacify them; and since it is not my problem anyway I won't tell them. Neither will I tell them that the very opposite of what I said (to stick with the same example) is also true; you can never learn anything about marriage in general, only about marriage with Miss X, Miss Z, or Miss Y. If I told them both, they'd ask me how I reconciled the two statements, to which I would have to say that I haven't the slightest intention of reconciling two contradictory statements both of which are true. They can be true without reconciliation, which is one of the things that makes my life very sad without making me worry about my sadness in the least. I might cut my throat one day but I can't pretend that it's important . . .

If there is any doubt about the mood, the tone and the attitude of Jonas' work, I think this terse comment dispels it. It is both an explanation and a caution not to fall into the critical trap of attempting to neutralize Jonas' poetry by “looking heavenward and pronouncing that the world will be better for this criticism.” Jonas makes no pretense of rebuilding the universe he has destroyed, nor does he show any desire to see anyone else do it for him. In a reaffirmation which is almost manifesto-like, Jonas sums it up in a poem entitled simply “Twenty-Eight Explanatory Lines”:

Whereas I do not deny
 Anything I may have said before
 Let me add: ultimately
 I have less and less love
 And I'm saving it more and more.
 Let me also say that no one ever came near me
 Even of the few who tried
 And if I had a fault, well, it was mine
 And I was wrong by right.
 Not proudly, not asking to be excused
 And not even to set the record straight
 I say this merely to say it.
 For soon I will believe in myself
 And think that the food I eat is mine,

Mine are the women I enter
And the list of my assets will grow longer
As I grow shorter on time.
No complaints, but I want to live
And there is only so much life
And I cannot share it with anyone
Having an obligation to myself
To play it safe.
Soon, I know, my eyes will deepen
My nostrils will open wide
I will be happy, happy — and even now
Nothing could happen to you
That I would not take in my stride.

Notes

- ¹ This poem, contained in the original manuscript of *The Happy Hungry Man*, does not appear in the published version.
- ² All references to THE ABSOLUTE SMILE are referred to in this essay as (TAS: p.); references to THE HAPPY HUNGRY MAN are listed as (HHM: p.).
- ³ Correspondence listed is from the files of J. M. Yates.