



Johann Heinrich Füssli – *The Nightmare*

Alfredo Jimeno

Suppose you're a middle-aged, law-abiding woman living in New York. You earn an income that allows you to live in a small, but decent apartment; you have health-care and a job you enjoy. You are independent. Men treat you with respect. And so do the authorities as our republic is structured in such a way that any majority is constrained by the Constitution to protect your rights as a woman.

You don't endorse the regimes who abuse women, but you benefit from the products these regimes generate: oil from Arab countries fueling the flights for work and vacations, cheap clothing from sweatshops in Indonesia, indirectly contributing to maintaining awful conditions for those less fortunate than you.

You are not without guilt.

Our readings, especially the Islamic Cluster ones, offered insight to ill-treated women, responsibility, guilt and duty. In reading these this, I may be enraged by the treatment of the women depicted in those novels. Am I correct in blaming government agencies - "Washington" – for engaging in commercial and diplomatic relations with governments upholding such ill treatments? Should I assign responsibility on unjust interpretations of faith, on the mullahs and regimes upholding their views?

In Boualem Sansal's *The German Mujahid*, Rachel and Malrich, upon learning of their father's Nazi past, take stock of their moral responsibility of their father's past. They do so however, in different ways. Rachel, the measured, integrated immigrant, a citizen, a hard working married man, takes his own life. He does so after considering his father's deeds within his prism, his "inclinations" (as Kant identifies them in *The Doctrine of Virtue*) and his sense of poetic justice. Kant believed that such an act stemmed from a sense of duty. Whatever our "inclinations," we must comply with what duty demands and therefore be driven by reason.

Malrich however, the free radical promised to a life evading the police with his equally lost friends, finds ground in his father's past and grows as an individual. Why such drastically different actions? Do I decide or force my inclinations to meet my duties? Or do they organically become one as I slowly mature in agreement with myself?

It is because we are moral beings that our lives hold value. As such we can provoke happiness or sadness in others. Our "inclinations" will determine our choices. If we do good deeds, say, by not giving in to the cheap products

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assembled in the sweatshops, and we slowly come to prefer the more expensive but more just products, then slowly our inclinations and sense of duty will merge.

As an example, the unnamed woman of Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* performs the duties expected of a good wife and beyond. "I can even inform you that while I've been away you have breathed thirty-three times", says she to her husband. She is devoted to his well-being, an attitude rooted in faith and convention, hence duty. Her duties are far from her inclinations (emotions) as Kant describe duty and inclinations as "two opposing sources for the human will."

How are the two reconciled then? Enter Kant's "Categorical Imperative," an idea introduced earlier in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. I may identify a number of actions in the course of my life; I define a code of conduct that will guide my actions: if I decide to follow this "Maxim" as Kant identifies it, I must let others follow it too. Hence should I kill, I must conceive and accept being killed.

This principle proves true in Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*. Similar to the incubus about to take advantage of the sleeping maiden in Fuseli's "Nightmare," shown in the first paper of this page, the Mayor will abuse Zeinab, leading her to believe it is the way Allah intends for her mother to better her health. In turn he will face his death in silence, as if destined to it:

"The Mayor saw her come towards him. (...) When he came close he saw her arm rise high up in the air holding the hoe. He did not feel the hoe land on his head and crush it at one blow. For a moment before, he had looked into her eyes, just once. And from that moment he was destined to never see, or feel, or know anything anymore."

Interestingly, the abuse however relieves Zeinab from the responsibility of her mother's well being as she is accomplishing Allah's will. She forfeits in this case her responsibilities as a moral agent towards her mother while upholding her principles of faith. This reaction is akin to the influential Mullah Khaliq Dad in Kabul who, when asked why the accidental burning of copies of the Koran provoked nationwide violence but not the killing of families by the lone Marine, replied "how can you compare the dishonoring of the Holy Koran with the martyrdom of innocent civilians?" said the member of the council of religious leaders who investigated the Koran burnings. "The whole goal of our life is religion."

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/asia/disconnect-clear-in-us-bafflement-over-2-afghan-responses.html?pagewanted=all>).

Yet, independently of my knowing the Mayor's calculation, why can't I understand or accept Zeinab's decision? In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls introduces the concept of justice as fairness: if I am to consider myself as a free moral agent, equal to others, I must then actively adhere to and engage in principles of social and political fairness. This concept stems from the premise that I do not choose the society I am borne into. I may benefit from an unjust society just as easily as I may be its victim.

Because government agencies are not moral agents, but the result of rules, they cannot be subjects for blame. I do however have the responsibility to change these rules if I can, or at least to take stock of the injustices these rules continue to sustain. Should I fail to do one or the other, I become the ghoulish horse peering through the curtain in Fuseli's "Nightmare" painting as the incubus preys on the sleeping maiden.

Malrich and Rachel may have been tempted to blame Germany's National Socialism, hence personifying an ideology, as responsible for their father's choices. Instead, they undertook the difficult process of rethinking themselves in light of their father's dramatic past, and drew the conclusions we know; unlike the rabbi in Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, who relies on his faith to condemn Jesus:

“ ‘I passed sentence’ the rabbi said in a tranquil voice ‘and so did you Centurion. But there remains one. The most important of all who must also pass sentence.’  
‘The Emperor?’  
‘No... God’ ”

Rethinking oneself implies a deconstruction process which, to paraphrase French philosopher Jacques Derrida, Malrich and Rachel needed to rethink their persona in terms of values, observing themselves as they incorporate their father's past into their present. Gao Xingjian offers a formidable example of the deconstructed persona in his *Soul Mountain*: “you know that I am just talking to myself to alleviate my loneliness” he writes in Chapter 52.

Contrary to government institutions who exist but don't know it, human conscience determines and confirms a person's existence. In his *Anthropology from the Pragmatic point of View*, Immanuel Kant states that “the fact that Man can

have the idea “I” raises him infinitely above all the other beings living on earth. By this he is a *person* and by virtue of this unity of consciousness through all the changes he may undergo, he is one and the same person – that is, a being altogether different in rank and dignity from *things*, such as irrational animals, which we can dispose of as we please. This holds even if he cannot say ‘I’; for he still has it in mind. So any language must *think* ‘I’ when it speaks in the first person, even if it has no special word to express it.”

Importantly, he adds: “it is noteworthy that a child who can already speak fairly fluently does not begin to talk in terms of ‘I’ until rather late (perhaps a year later); until then he speaks of himself in the third person (Charles wants to eat, to go for a walk etc...).”

It is important because, although Kant identifies a human as an “I”, being a single individual, this individual is constantly changing such as the child who doesn’t talk at first, and then does. My experiences, opinions, thoughts and physical being are not the same today as they were yesterday nor as they will be tomorrow. How can I continuously refer to myself as “I” under those conditions? Xingjian’s answer in alternatively being the actor and the observer reconciles his rebuilding of self: “I can only talk with myself as the partner of my conversation.”

Kant agrees. To confer a harmony, in the sense of a unity, to a being that empirically is never the same, the individual must be conscious, as conscience is not only the perception of the present, but also a memory of the past. Hence, Xingjian is able to synthesize in one single empirical experience (though with multiple pronouns) both his life experience before being cancer-free, and his present experience.

“It is impossible to disentangle imagination from experience” writes Xingjian. Indeed, it is because they both stem from our senses. This sentence and the structure of his novel are a poignant critic to innatism, the doctrine that states that we are born with ideas and hold knowledge that will carve future experience. However, the 17th century English Philosopher John Locke wrote in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) that nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in the senses. One of the founders of empiricism - the counterclaim to innatism – Locke, states that knowledge comes from sensory experience.

As such, Xingjian is correct in binding imagination and experience as they both touch on the sensory. But he adds: “I travel to my inner mind with you who are

my reflection.” Akin to the XXth century French philosopher Alain’s sleeper theory, Xingjian seems to travel his inner mind conscious of his “I” and “You.” Paraphrasing Alain in his 1928 *Manuscripts Inédits* he writes: I think, and then I think that I think, therefore identifying Subject and Object, I and the world, I and my sensation, I and my feeling, I and my idea.

This leads Xingjian to confuse present and dream. “I can’t distinguish how much is experience and how much is dream” he admits. Here again Alain’s theory of the sleeper is relevant. In consciousness, there is clear separation of the “I” and objects. In dreams, consciousness is not immediate; the separation between the “I” and objects is unclear. Can we conclude that Xingjian is dreaming?

We know from the book’s introduction that Xingjian actually undertook a long journey. Perhaps then his lack of perception is fomented not by a dream but as a result of the Cultural Revolution, which took place from 1966 to 1976, fading the “I” in favor of an artificial “We”, a national identity.

Adding dramatic new elements to my prism, I’ve proposed, implies a process of deconstruction, and merging my sense of duty with my inclinations. To appreciate this process in the novels I’ve read this semester, I analyze this process from the perspective of the *Hero’s Journey*, also known as monomyth, a term coined by Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It refers to a journey from the known to the unknown, and a return to the known with a fresh perspective. Half way through the unknown, the “hero” will face the abyss, the absolute lowest point of their life - which in turn will be the instrument for transformation - and return. The hero becomes more knowledgeable, a greater person.

Ariq Tahiri offers through one of his characters: “...you need misfortune and sacrifice in order to arrive at a happy ending.” *The German Mujahid* certainly qualifies if we take a “happy ending” to be interpreted as Rachel and Malrich being in agreement within themselves.

As they reach the abyss, the hero first seeks relief from their condition, itself altered by the dramatic new element. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Jesus suffers at the hands of his people, the Romans and God himself by haunting his thoughts and dreams since age twelve. Jesus seeks relief in horrible ways, sparking the beginning of rational thought (as irrational as his actions may seem to us). All seems better than the “curse” he is faced with: “He unbelted the nail-studded leather strap (...) and without speaking, began pitilessly to scourge

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his thighs, back and face. The blood spurted out and splashed him. He felt it and was relieved.”

Similarly, the wife in *The Patience Stone* seeks relief from her prayers but she feels abandoned by God: “What has gotten into me now?” her head bangs against the wall. “I really am possessed... Yes, I see the dead... people who aren’t there.”

She prays and asks Allah for concrete (real) actions to relieve her suffering: “help me regain my faith”, “Release me! Rescue me from the illusion of these devilish ghosts and shams!” But God doesn’t answer her prayers.

The wife insists:

“Allah, you’re the only one who can banish this demon”

“I’m going mad. Allah cut off my tongue!”

“Allah protect me, guide me, I’m losing my way, show me the path!”

No reply.

No guide.

“I leave my daughters in Allah’s hands!”

“Allah... what are you doing to me?”

Perhaps their suffering is the work of evil? As men and women of faith, our protagonists beg the question: if the universe is finalized, made by an intelligent and all-mighty God, how can their suffering be explained? El Saadawi's *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*, suggests Satan has little or no power. The latter states: “ (...) in all three Books, you have depicted me as the enemy of all people, as being responsible for all the evil in the world. How can I be responsible when you are the one who possesses all the power, the arms, the knowledge, the media, the heavens and the earth, everything?” El Sadaawi’s suggestion has been previously made by David Hume, the eighteenth century philosopher, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: “is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence, then is evil?”

Could it be that the Holy Books have been tempered with? In *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*: “...the three Holy Books have been the object of distortions because they were transmitted by human beings, who narrated them and this led inevitably to changes in the words and the meaning.” (This idea, and his depiction of Mohammed in *The Satanic Verses* landed a *fatwā* on Salman Rusdie’s head.)

According to Campbell, this stage of doubt is essential to reach the moment of lucidity, the “revelation,” at which stage the hero will commence their return. The wife in *The Patience Stone*, conflicted by her wanting her husband dead “yes, rid myself of you”, and shame: “I was sure I was a monster,” reaches her revelations: “these words burst from her mouth: ‘sand-e-saboor!’ She jumps: ‘that’s the name of the stone, sang-e-saboor, the patience stone! The magic stone!’ She crouches down next to the man. ‘Yes, you, you are my sang-e-saboor!’ She strokes his face gently, as if actually touching a precious stone. ‘I’m going to tell you everything, my sang-e-saboor. Everything. Until I set myself free from my pain, and my suffering, and until you, you...’

In dramatic contrast from her previous self, the wife takes control of her actions. She realizes she isn’t tied to a preconceived role, hence negating the idea of an essence of her. She becomes a moral being. Jean-Paul Sartre confirms in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that for Men to be free (emancipated) there cannot be an *essence* of Man. Existence precedes the essence, therefore negating a hitherto human nature.

The protagonist in *The Patience Stone* will soon reap the benefits of her free will: "And then I realized that since you've been ill, since I've been talking to you, getting angry with you, insulting you, telling you everything that I've kept hidden in my heart, and you not being able to reply, or do anything at all (...) all of this has been soothing and comforting to me." She realizes she can experience pleasure. First studied by the Greek hedonists, pleasure, it is thought, derives from desire. It is in her desire to share her secrets that she feels pleasure. And by pursuing this pleasure, she eventually emancipates, merging her inclinations with her duties.

This will lead the wife in *The Patience Stone* to rebel against the representatives of convention and faith to which she no longer bows. As the soldier enters her quarters, she stands up to him. The soldier asks:

“And what do you do for work?”

(...)

“I sell my body, as you sell your blood”

(...)

“I sell my body for the pleasure of men!”

Filled with rage, the man spits, “Allah, Al-Rahman! Al Mu’min! Protect me!

“Against who?” she replies. Despite his incredulity, and then his threats, she stands firm and ultimately prevails.



There is no turning back. The assimilation of the dramatic truth, as in the case of Malrich and Rachel, akin to a revolution has begun. And a revolution can only be achieved in blood. The philosopher Hannah Arendt confirms this in her introduction of *On Revolution*. Arendt associates “revolution with notions of beginning and foundation of freedom.” She also affirms “revolution is brought up by violence and is even inconceivable outside the domain of violence.” As such stresses the need to expel “violence from the political space because of its incompatibility with speech.”

It is this very tempering, the very human interference – such as that of the mullahs in the interpretation of the Koran, priests in that of the New Testament, or Rabbis of the Bible – in the hope to uphold convention, that plants the seed for revolution. When Ahmed’s father in Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *The Sand Child* fathers a boy against God’s will, deceiving all along the way to prevent his estate from falling in the hands of his brothers, he also fathers

Finally, should I, not unlike the protagonists of the books discussed in the paper, decide to engage in this journey, I would face a paradox. Because the protagonists and I, live lives of conventions dictated by habit, law, ideas and/or faith – or the interpretation thereof by strong patriarchal characters. These conventions are deeply rooted in our persona. The integration of the dramatic new truth will destabilize it. This last step of the paradox is essential for the protagonists and ultimately the readers to be convinced of the sincerity of the former; and perhaps to understand that any choice is not possible.

The essential need for the paradox is argued by Søren Kierkegaard who writes, in his *Philosophical Fragments*, “one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.”

We have argued, in the case of Malrich and Rachel, that reason introduced a sense of guilt, which appealed to inclinations which in turn triggered a new sense of duty. But how does reason creep through the foundations of faith? To answer this, we need to explore the concepts of essence and existence and their relation.

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Eleventh century thinker Anselm of Canterbury wrote that if God existed only in thought and not in reality, then a greater being could actually be thought, namely one that existed in reality. This begs the idea of a real God capable of acting within the realm of reality. For Canterbury, the essence of God begets God absolutely.

In *The Patience Stone*, the wife understands that it is her secrets (essence) that keep her husband alive (existence). A bittersweet relationship ensues: "I don't know whether you can see or not, but one thing I am absolutely sure of is that you can hear me, that you can understand what I'm saying. And that is why you're still alive. Yes, you're alive for my sake, for the sake of my secrets. You'll see. Just as my secrets were able to resuscitate my father's quail, they will bring you back to life!" And "your breath hangs on the telling of my secrets."

This realization is essential in unleashing the passion that will be instrumental in the wife's emancipation. This passion Kant identifies as proof Man's associability. And although the protagonist is now a moral person, she grows with human relations and selfish moments of passion. As these fall in line with her sense of duty, they now produce pleasure.

But not all protagonists manage to emancipate themselves. Eve in *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting* explains that it is in seeking knowledge that she liberated herself from the control of God, only to fall under the control of men: "He appointed man as trustee, as a patron over women, over her morals, her humor, her virginity, her marital fidelity. He accorded her husband the authority to supervise her behavior and her faithfulness to him but deprived her of any authority or rights. He legitimized marital infidelity for men by allowing them to marry more than one woman or have slaves or concubines. And all this happened because I am Eve, the sinful, yet who committed no sin and is the main reason why humanity exists."

The unnamed wife in *The Patience Stone* will end up worshipping her husband, as her sense of duty demands. So is her telling her secrets emancipation as such? It can be argued that she worships what the husband has come to represent, and no longer the physical being – in line with Islam's inaconism.

The emancipation of the women in our readings is their *Carpe Diem*, some of the comments in our forums stated. It made sense then, but now that I have shared and analyzed their journey, the context of Horace's sentence (*quam minimum credula postero* – putting as little trust as possible in the future) doesn't

apply to these women. It is precisely because they trust in a better future that these women act upon their reflections. Even if that future is death.

What of the men? In *The German Mujahid*, Rachel travels to Aïn Deb. He is moved by the villagers' welcome. His sense of duty motivates him to do good. Equally, it is because the villagers have inclinations that Rachel knowingly blubbers "Salam." Had he been received in a village of purely rational beings, with no inclinations, they would not have been able to receive joy or sadness, and he would not have achieved his role as a moral agent.

Without morality there is no measure to life: Rachel's traveling to Aïn Deb was done at great risk for his life and at great monetary cost. This was motivated by his sense of duty. His good deed comes with a reward; hence his inclinations and sense of duty come together in what Kant calls a "Maxim." This is an important concept of Kant's categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law."

Rachel has adopted a particular conduct and allowed himself a number of actions to be in agreement with himself and with others. This is something Malrich will experience as he turns down the teachings of the imam, and slowly immerses himself in his brother's journal. His inclinations and actions (out sense of duty) slowly merge, and the resulting maxim leads Rachel in his decision-making throughout his journey. It is this same process that led the women of the Islamic Cluster through theirs.

Rachel's experience however is vastly different from that of the women in our readings. As I, Rachel was brought up in a society that offered him choices. His moral convictions and beliefs are founded on the choices his family made for him yes, but also on the opportunities that were made available to him, these being dramatically different (if any were offered!) from those of the women in the Islamic Cluster.

Rachel's moral judgment and his sense of duty, are motivated by the well-being of those around him (he obtains French citizenship for his brother) and his fundamental views of right and wrong.

Going over the book again, I remember your question: "Do we need to dilute drama to find our true self?" The same memory I had then, springs to mind now: I lived in the Congo in 1996 while working as a consultant for an NGO, after my years with the UN. A series of events led to my assistant saving my life

in an ambush. It wasn't as dramatic as it sounds, but fact of the matter is I probably wouldn't be here if it weren't for him. Six months after returning to Europe from this mission, the Mai-Mai rebel group stormed the region and killed several people I had worked with. A few years ago, I received a letter from a priest I had met then. He'd survived. He wrote that my assistant had survived too and though he was not in touch with him, he is probably in one of the numerous camps in the Great Lakes region.

If I interpret your question correctly, I have tried to dilute the drama of this situation to better accept it. But this thought pops up regularly. It did when reading *The German Mujahid* and it appeared with equal intensity when reading *The Kite Runner*. Am I influenced by a naïve Western sense of romantic adventure when thinking of packing up to look for him? Logic tells me I have a wife and a young son, and putting my life in danger is irresponsible. Shouldn't I accept the UN and NGOs' conclusions that he is nowhere to be found? Is it because I don't have yet a true sense of self that I am yet unable to hold on to a decision with which I could agree?

It takes courage to face our fears as Rachel and Malrich did. Courage is the all-encompassing word that includes genuine interest, the will to be true to oneself and others, and the strength to own one's reality as awful as it may be. Perhaps my deeply-rooted cynicism protects me all too well from lingering with those thoughts. Perhaps. Yet my inclinations, my prism, lead me to be deeply moved by Rachel and Malrich.

Yet not all are capable of integrating, denouncing and reshaping their lives in the name of what is right: in *God Dies by the Nile*, the people of Kafr El Teen worship the Mayor, and not God directly. This is sharply criticized by Sheikh Hamzawi: "they don't have faith in God nor do they worry their heads about what will happen either in this world, or in the next. In their hearts they don't fear God. What they really fear is the Mayor."

But the Sheikh will soon join the ranks, rejecting emancipation: "the Friday sermon (...) cannot solely be concerned with Allah. Part of it must deal with worldly affairs, and the world in which we live in is controlled by the Mayor. We cannot go about our lives if we are in disfavor with him." He chooses to remain in the darkness. Consequently, he keeps Fatheya in the darkness: "the words of Allah and the rituals of prayer were supposed to be learned by heart and not understood."

XVIIth century philosopher Blaise Pascal says in note 273 of his *Pensées*: “If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mysterious and supernatural element. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous.” This suggests an equilibrium that the Sheikh in *God Dies by the Nile* found and remained satisfied with.

You may remember the Imam of the 96<sup>th</sup> street Mosque explaining how lucky we are that Allah put all scientific information about the dead vibrating at different ranges than us, in the Koran with no explanation. “It is too much thought for our brain to process” he said. Allah gave us the information, so “we wouldn’t need to think.” Yet, questioning these intentions allows us to emancipate and grow.

But it is this very darkness that the Imam praises which contributes to the *banality of evil* as the philosopher Hannah Arendt argues in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Religious leaders in the books mentioned above encourage removing the thought process from a life of convention. Indeed, just as Zeinab is comforted in her abuse in believing she is accomplishing Allah’s will, being identified as God’s chosen people further muffles the need to question the Holy Books’ teachings: “We, the Arabs are the best of nations born amongst the people of the earth” sustains Prophet Muhammad in *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*. But being “elected”, explains the 17th Century Dutch philosopher Spinoza in his *Theological-Political Treatise* has “regard to nothing but temporal physical happiness and freedom, in other words, autonomous government, and to the manner and means by which they obtained it.”

In conclusion, It is by introducing a dramatic new element that I am offered the opportunity to question my condition, that of others and my views on these. As a moral agent, I can try to seek relief – and indeed succeed as the above protagonists demonstrate - from the thoughts and troubles this new dramatic element introduces to my life by aligning my sense of duty with my inclinations.

“A man is the sum of his actions” writes Jean-Paul Sartre in his *On Being and Nothingness*. Indeed he is. But I may act out of duty or follow my inclinations, and as long as both aren’t merged, I am not in agreement with myself.

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