The Lost Language of Belief: A Conversation with Jonathan Lethem

Ed. Silvia Albertazzi

There is a touch of shyness in Jonathan Lethem's gaze, a gentleness in his manner, that puts his interlocutor immediately at ease. The impression you get reading his works is confirmed when he first addresses you: he is one of us, an individual who, as he wrote in the last essay of his collection *The Disappointment Artist*, believes that works of art can be "better than life, that they [can] redeem life".

In his universe of rock music, jazz, old films, cartoons, omnivorous reading and all kinds of fiction – from Dickens to P.K. Dick, from Kafka to the postmodern – you can always find something that speaks to and for you. Lethem's writings are the kind of works that make you feel "you wish the author that wrote [them] was a great friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it", in Salinger's Holden Caufield's words.

I had the opportunity to meet him in June 2014 when he was teaching creative writing at the Florence campus of New York University. The Italian version of his new novel *Dissident Gardens* had just gone on sale. To the surprise of his fans, the author of such cult novels as *Motherless Brooklyn*, *The Fortress of Solitude* and *Chronic City*, all of them pivoting around characters who experience the difficulty – or the impossibility – of growing up and negotiating the metropolis alone, had published an apparently realistic saga.

The book tells the story of three generations of American communists, from the Great Depression to the present day. A conundrum for American readers and their chronic historical amnesia, the book shows, in the author's words, "what is beautiful and

ridiculous in the American dream", by telling the lives of two women, Rose, a communist virago thrown out of the Party because of her affair with a black policeman, and her daughter Miriam, a rebellious hippie. Around them, a series of men: Cicero, Rose's lover's son; Lenny, Rose's cousin, proud to be "the Last Communist"; Tommy, Miriam's folk-singer husband; and, lastly, Sergius, their frail son.

This is a realistic novel only if we accept Lethem's idea that absurdity is the greatest form of realism. *Dissident Gardens* tries to explain why Utopia is "the show which always closed on opening night", as we read in *The Fortress of Solitude*. Yet, in Italy *Dissident Gardens* has been launched mainly as a political novel, being often introduced to the Italian public by politicians striving to establish an unlikely comparison between the end of U.S. communism and the present Italian situation.

I could not help starting my conversation with Jonathan Lethem by referring to this rather peculiar political reading of his novel.

S.A. Mister Lethem, how do you feel about this "political appropriation" of your work?

J.L. The first thing to say is that because I'm not understanding the Italian that is spoken around me, I can't read my own press release in the language and the situation is out of my control. After many years, I'm entering into a mood of bogus acceptance: you know, the books are how I wanted them to be and the rest of the world is out of my control. And what I would say is that I don't know these people who introduce me and their political ideas: probably if I could hear them through your ears I would be very uncomfortable.

S.A. But does the same happen all around Europe?

J.L. It is different in different countries, but of course the question whether it is a political book or whether it isn't comes up again and again and it did in the States as well. But everywhere, even with the awkwardness with language and the extreme emphasis placed on the political context, I always say that the book is about human suffering, human desire, and the paradoxes of our position in the world, so

isolated and so dependent on other people. And these issues to me transcend politics, but they also describe politics, the politics of everyday existence. And, you know, they are extremely difficult to define and to talk about, and people will always prefer to talk about anything that is more clarified, more tangible, more black and white. That is true anytime I offer a novel. If there is something that people can talk about instead of the ambiguities of fiction, they'll make that preference.

When I wrote *Girl in Landscape*, for better or worse I let it be known how involved my inspiration was with these images of the West you find in John Ford's two or three films, especially *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. I was thinking about John Wayne as a figure of paradox and danger and American possibilities. Well, my reward for mentioning these things was that everywhere I went instead of discussing my novel we talked about John Wayne. This is human nature: at a certain level, the novel represents a kind of an abyss. People are terrified of falling inside; they are terrified, but they want to touch it, they want to be close to it, but they are afraid it will expose them, or test them, or humiliate them, or just confuse them. So we give them a ladder to climb down the abyss and talk about something else. So I spent a lot of my time talking about gentrification or John Wayne or subculture, comic books. Now communism, and Obama and the Occupy movement: all these things seem to be a way out of the conversation about the heart.

S.A. Well, these are not the issues I'd like to talk about. In my opinion, one of the most important themes of Dissident Gardens *is family. In your presentation in Florence you called the nuclear family "a tiny utopian disaster" and you explained that all your characters strive to fill the void left by the destruction of the family. Do you think that all families are horrible? Can you think of other possibilities apart from the middle-class family stereotype?*

J.L. I never believed exclusively in their horror or in the menace families represent for the individual. I have two children; I myself reproduced the image of the bourgeois family exactly. So, do I believe

in alternatives? Wow, this is a very mysterious thing to consider, because it requires picking our way out of the present, out of the reality that immerses us. Images of family are one of the most powerful containers for our culture and I am subject to this as much as anyone. One thing that I would say is that I am more and more trying to look at the family historically, in any kind of capable way, and I observe that the family, as I know it and as you probably know it, the bourgeois family in such extreme isolation from other kinds of social order, is a very new creation. Until quite recently, the bourgeois family existed, perhaps, but it was also part of a larger community.

S.A. But the bourgeois family is so strong that in your novel even people like Miriam, who lives in a hippie commune, tend to reproduce it.

J.L. Well, she does, but she has a genuine appetite for testing its limits. She was forced, in a way: at home she had no father, and with Rose, her mother, she had no great storytelling, she had only the starkness of a mother and a daughter facing each other across the abyss. So, she had to invent a new image or die. And so she put her bet on many tables: friends, folk singers, the Village, the commune … She is one of the people I lived my life with and I recognized around me – my mother was one of them – who are genuine "bon vivants", I mean people whose energy flows out into other people and then makes them larger. Miriam has this talent.

S.A. Talking about families, it's impossible not to refer to mothers. In my reading, the key to your novel is to be found in Cicero's intimation to his students: "Let's talk about your mothers, fuckers!". I found the way you put women and mothers at the centre of this story extremely interesting, also because, apart from young Pella in Girl in Landscape*, your protagonists have always been men. What really amazes me is how real your "mothers" are: Rose and Miriam are women of flesh and blood. For this reason, I should almost say that yours is not a book of ideas, but a book of bodies, if you know what I mean*.

J.L. Thank you. If there's one thing I wanted to say is that the book is about the body and the predicament of the human body moving

through social and political space, but always subject to its hungers, and its cravings in a very animal sense. It's not a political book, it's a book about the lives of people who believe themselves to be political, it's about their sufferings and their desires. I didn't invent Rose and Miriam: I opened the door to them with my grandmother and my mother.

S.A. And how about Diane, Cicero's mother? She is a minor character, but she is very important. Cicero is shaped by her absence.

J.L. She is important, but this is what I have done many times: in a way Diane is a reversion to my old paradigm of the disappearing woman. Even *As She Climbed Across the Table* is a book about a woman who disappears: it's quite a light book, one of my first books. The tone is quite frivolous, but it is an important book for me, artistically, because it highlighted that very fundamental image which I was to use again and again. You can find it even in *Chronic City*, used with political implications. Ironically, if I ever wrote a political book, in a sense it is *Chronic City*. It focuses on what is wrong with reality. It's quite angry , and it's quite specifically angry about capitalism. You can take this book as a giant critique of the war and the culture of 2004, a moment when I was horrified by New York City, and our administration. But people don't respond to it that way because the characters don't seem to be political, they are rather living in a frivolous way.

S.A. Is this why you decided to put some leftists at the centre of Dissident Gardens*?*

J.L. No, I didn't want to have the critics taking my book seriously by having my characters behave seriously. But in a way the two books are strangely two halves of a whole because one is a book about amnesiac characters, who float free of history, but in the background you see this immense disaster. *Chronic City* is like a Hieronymus Bosch painting, but in the background is Bosch and in the foreground, *Seinfeld*, a sit-com, and the two things don't seem to connect until the

characters, the comedians inside, begin to notice the painting, and realize that they've been living in hell.

Dissident Gardens is about something I had to understand in terms of the body – that's why I nodded so gratefully when you said that – it's about the forms that idealism takes when you actually try to live it, and move it into your world, into your intellectual, family life, into your professional life, into your neighbourhood, into your house, into your relationships, and all the different ways it becomes deformed and distressed, and absurd and tragic. But I was also using something I had available to me and was suddenly able to write about very directly which was a lot of information about the lives of the leftists, because I grew up among them, and identified with them, and still feel passionately for them. So this gave me access to emotional information because I knew what kind of lives American leftists had led and the cost they had to pay.

S.A. There is a sentence I truly appreciate in your work, but I am rather afraid to quote it, because it is very personal and I don't know if you would like the idea of tackling it with a complete stranger.

J.L. Go ahead.

S.A. It's the close of The Disappointment Artist, *when you write: "I find myself speaking about my mother's death everywhere I go in this world". What impresses me in this sentence, apart from its poignant personal significance, is that, even talking about such a tragic occurrence, your accent is on space and movement. You don't write: "In everything I write" or "In any question I answer". It seems as if your loss, and the telling of this loss, were the space on which you build your house of words, as if each road, each motion brought you to this everywhere (or nowhere) which is, in any case, in this world. Recently I read your analysis of Talking Heads' record* Fear of Music *and I found this same sense of void and loss in your description of David Byrne's "fear of nowhere theme", together with the idea that this "fear of nowhere" can "evolve toward reconciliation". Indeed, you write that you can abide with nowhere, "you can dwell there, even gratefully, so long as you don't require it to be a heaven". This might be the meaning also of the image of*

your work I always carry with me: the ending of The Fortress of Solitude, *where during a snow storm father and son find themselves together "in a sort of middle space, in a cone of white".*

J.L. I understand and I can add to that account, because I recognize it as the very definite account, the centre of my work. And I've never heard it put in terms of space so specifically, but I'm very compelled by that. Now let me tell you a story or a kind of a description of how I have modelled my own emotional relationship to my work and its images. There is one thing I came to understand and this is extremely relevant to *Dissident Gardens* and *Fear of Music*: that my mother's death became, obviously by now I understand, the organizing image of the world for me. There was a loss, a central loss, that must be endured and you constructed your sufferance around this loss afterwards. Simply speaking of me as a persona made up of cultural possessions – the friends I made at the age of fourteen, fifteen; the books I read at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen (P. K. Dick, Graham Greene, Patricia Highsmith) – the music – *Fear of Music* – the films – Kubrick and Godard -, I arranged myself around this loss, and I'm still that person. And yet it's not enough for me to see this as something that magically and suddenly occurs just because my mother died. For I think its origin as a deep image, a metaphor for me, actually comes before my mother's death and even before her illness. The city I was living in, and the family I was living in, and the counterculture I was living in, were all crumbling utopias before my mother died. New York City in the Seventies was defined by the sense of its failure, it was a dystopian city, it was irreparable, and yet we lived in it. The Sixties' dream that my parents embodied by 1973, '74 was crumbling around us in so many ways, all so well documented: and the coming repressive response to it in the form of the Reagan-Thatcher era was due to come. The price was to be paid. My own family, which was a beautiful, fascinating delicate construction – my parents had a beautiful world full of friends, of neighbours – was in disrepair. Their marriage was in disrepair. I felt the extraordinary, multiple image of loss: the world is marvellous but it is on the verge of destruction and collapse. My grandmother's relationship to the idea of the Holocaust

and of the destruction of the European utopia was so powerful to me. I was a child, it was very irrational, it didn't make sense, but I was influenced by her feeling that you might think that the world is great, but the Nazis are coming, they're gonna take it. So all these things were telling me in different ways: "Get ready; the bomb is gonna fall". And then my mother died, and it became the confirmation. It wasn't a sudden random event that reoriented me. Instead, my mother's death, strange as it may seem for a fourteen year old boy, was a confirmation of a world view that had somehow already arrived.

S.A. And do you still have that world view?

J.L. Sure. After I had any other … But you know, this loss describes why I see temporary utopias as being infinitely worthwhile. This is what I try to do when I connect the image of the communists in *Dissident Gardens* not with political history but with the idea of the temporary utopia, the moment in *You don't Love me yet*, when the rock band has a *Gestalt* for one day, or images that are scattered all through *Fortress of Solitude* – the boys playing on a street who for one brief period don't know they are black and white and play together, so they have a temporary utopia, which is doomed, the world is gonna take it away, but that luck, those days have happened, and even elsewhere in the book, there is a convention, absurd as it may be, those people are coming to that hotel, to share a little dream, and for one weekend the world is there, until they have to go back to their terrible jobs.

S.A. Thinking of the rock band who have a temporary utopia just for one night and one brief song, I can't help wondering: If the show went on, would it be like the one that goes on and on in Heaven in a Talking Heads' song, that is to say, always the same song, always the same gestures? In other words, when it is not temporary, is Utopia "a nice place, a good and desirable place, yet deadly boring" (to quote from Fear of Music*)?*

J.L. Yes, there is also no sustainability if you invest in this image. The temporary nature of utopia is one of its fundamental properties. It's an experience, not a place, it's not a product, you can't put it in a can, it's a passage.

S.A. I believe that sometimes places tell the stories better than people do. This is what happens in your novels: for instance, Motherless Brooklyn *and* The Fortress of Solitude *are told by Brooklyn in a way, that is to say, they could not be set anywhere else. What amazes me in all your works is your characters' relation to places in general and to cities, in particular. In your essay on* Fear of Music*, I found a sentence which seems to explain the attitude to the cities of people like Dylan Ebdus, the protagonist of the* Fortress, *or Miriam in* Dissident Gardens *or her husband Tommy: "Cities have a lot of people in them, more than families do, but we go to them, often, to be unknown. And then our cities become our families, and we might find we have to venture forth from those as well".*

J.L. This is what happens in my life. There was a time I had to leave New York even though it nourished me because I felt too visible, the city was looking at me too much. I couldn't hide any more.

S.A. And you won't go back?

J.L. No, well, I've left it several times now, and I seem to go back and round. I feel very proud of those books about Brooklyn, especially *Fortress*, for the intensity of their relationship to the place. I almost hesitate to say "about Brooklyn", because Brooklyn is too big. You know, when I was writing *Fortress* I told myself: forget doing the great American novel, forget doing the New York novel: I can just do Dean Street. I can just get what I feel: the complexity, and the sensations and the tribulation of my experience of the street.

S.A. Are the Sunnyside Gardens of your latest novel an equivalent of Gowanus of The Fortress of Solitude *in terms of a temporary urban utopia?*

J.L. Yes, *Dissident Gardens* is almost like my mother's *Fortress of Solitude*. Her departure from the outer borough to Manhattan reproduces that pattern of yearning and regret between the outer boroughs and Manhattan, in many ways.

S.A. Do you have a plan of setting a novel in each borough of New York? What will come next, after Brooklyn, Manhattan and now Queens?

J.L. No, no, I don't think I have anything to say about the other boroughs.

S.A. Anyway: in your work Brooklyn represents a sense of past and continuity; Manhattan stands for historical amnesia. And Queens? What about Queens?

J.L. Well, Queens differs from Brooklyn in a very specific way, because Brooklyn is a failed rival to Manhattan. They were two great cities, then one destroyed the other; one absorbed the other. But Brooklyn retains that injured vanity, because it remembers that it was once a great city, too. Queens is the original suburb, it's the bedroom community. It was never its own place, it was always the suburb, it was always servicing Manhattan.

S.A. Yet in Dissident Gardens *the people from Queens have what you call a "boroughphobia" for Brooklyn …*

J.L. Well, you know, you can still detect traces of boroughphobia. When I grew up in the 1970s, people who were courageous, worldly, brilliant and curious would sooner go to Italy than cross the Brooklyn bridge. It was unspeakable, in some ways, it was the unconscious.

S.A. De Certeau wrote that places are stories waiting to be told. I wonder if Dissident Gardens *is that secret song of New York Tommy Gogan wants to sing in your novel?*

J.L. That's good, I agree completely. I have an immense affection for Tommy Gogan: if he had more courage he could have been a kind of great artist, he would never have been a Dylan, which is what with his talent he must become, he would never become that kind of artist, he is so disruptive, but this other impulse he had, to be a documentary songwriter, was a little more ready to possess his own gifts. It's funny, because he is very ashamed, he works from sort of non-fiction sources, and maybe I identify with him, because to do this book I had to become also a researcher, and the voices in the book are not mine, the voices come partly from historical documents. I hope the book doesn't scream of research. I was absorbed: often I would do research and then

ignored it. You know, it had to go with me, it had not to go into the book. I thought I was bursting with understanding of these people, these times, these places, but I didn't want to put all of this on the page: I just wanted to know it myself.

S.A. Your novel appeared more or less at the same time as Inside Llewyn Davies, *the film by the Coen brothers set in the Sixties in Greenwich Village. Was there any relation between them?*

J.L. Yes, there is and it was very funny. To build the Tommy Gogan chapter I depended on three sources: my ancestors' memory, because my mother was part of that world, and I was so fascinated that I took the lore, I listened to the lore and made it my own. Then there were two very revealing and generous autobiographies: one by Suze Rotolo, who is the girl walking arm in arm with Dylan on the cover of *Freewheeling Bob Dylan*: she was from Queens, and her father was an Italian communist, she ran away from Queens, so she was kind of a wonderful, accidental parallel to Miriam; and then the other book was Dave Van Ronk's autobiography. Van Ronk is a great storyteller and his book - a beautiful, funny, charming book - was very useful to create the atmosphere of Gogan's chapter, so much so that I even put Van Ronk into the book: he deserved to appear! And that's the book the Coens used: so we were working in parallel, but I didn't know what they were doing. When *Dissident Gardens* was in preparation, when I was editing it, a trailer of *Llewyn Davies* came out and I saw it and I just laughed because even in three minutes it was so unmistakable that we worked from the same book, and I thought, It will be funny when they come out together.

S.A. Did you like the film?

J.L. I had my reservations. I mean: the texture was fascinating and their sensibility always interests me, that peculiar morbid tone. But I think sometimes these qualities become habits, mannerisms; and this was the case here. Did you see *A Serious Man*? I think it's one of their strongest films and I was really hoping this would be in that register. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

S.A. In your books there is always a sort of anxiety about the possibilities of language. Very often your characters feel a sense of loss in the face of reality: I'm thinking of Lionel's loss of language in front of the sea at the end of Motherless Brooklyn *and of Chase Insteadman's confession in* Chronic City: *"When I look at reality, language dies". So, which language can – or cannot – tell the reality of* Dissident Gardens*? For instance, in* Motherless Brooklyn *tourette was a kind of metaphor of urban chaos and the need for physical contact of metropolitan people, but it was also a metaphor of the many ways of telling the city. So, which language for the dissidents?*

J.L. Let me add to your examples by recalling how in *Fortress of Solitude* Dylan looks at the graffiti on the walls as telling the particular history of the city: the world is made of scribbles.

S.A. Yes, and at the end of the novel, Dylan and his father alone in the snow are described as "two gnarls of human scribble".

J.L. Well, to return to *Dissident Gardens,* you can think of Lenny as an almost tourettic personality. He is making a world by inserting language, ideology and argumentation into every space. When you meet him at the chess shop, he assaults you with his personality and language: he grabs Cicero and overwhelms him, not physically, but with words, because he is like a language drunk. Argumentation becomes a way of putting a bridge across the void. Here the unexpected authority of bodies living in the world is the equivalent of the ocean in *Motherless Brooklyn* or the reality that Chase sees when language dies. For the communists, the ideologues and the personalities of *Dissident Gardens*, the only way to gulf the bridge between utopia and reality, the fact that revolution is not coming tomorrow, is to cover it with language, to fill up this space with language. In fact, my view of the past is made of language, of argumentation. That's what the Thirties were like: an obsession with dispute and language. Even Cicero makes a language world that is very impressive, very bullying and very aggressive, but the way his body moves through space tells another story.

S.A. There is a question I cannot help asking the author of The Ecstasy of Influence*: which authors influenced you most? Am I right to detect the presence of Dickens in almost all your books?*

J.L. Yes, he's very central for me. I think he's the ultimate novelist, but because of the popular image of him as quaint or sentimentalist he's so very underestimated. Yet he presents every different talent, everything a novelist can ever imagine doing.

S.A. So, when you write that Rose is a sort of Mrs Havisham whose life stopped in 1956, could we infer that Cicero is her Pip?

J.L. That's pretty good, I mean, that makes sense. I hadn't really consciously put him there, but *Great Expectations* is for me the one, it's the best of Dickens' novels: so, if I reproduce its pattern it makes complete sense.

S.A. Many critics compared Dissident Gardens *to* The Buddenbrooks …

J.L. This was a red herring, but I am only myself to blame. That book was never a vital source for me, but I wanted to be polite because so many people praised *Dissident Gardens* by saying: "You've done it: it's the leftist American *Buddenbrooks*! I just tried to say, 'Thank you', but this book was never in my mind.

S.A. You've been labelled "the heir of Philip Roth: how about him?

J.L. Well, you can only be amazed and grateful for this kind of praise. Roth is very important for me, I nourished myself on his great books, I think about them a lot, he was part of this one, but only as a part in a sequence of different important touchstones. This book more than any other that I have written is the blind memory elephant: it's all parts; all influences are specific. For instance, I was influenced by Canadian Irish novelist Brian Moore when I was writing Tommy Gogan's chapter. Then, there is the Australian Christina Stead, an unbelievable writer, with her unfinished autobiography *I'm Dying Laughing* and the novels *The Man who Loved Children*, which I've also taught several times, and *Lettie Fox*, the image of a woman before

feminism, making her way sexually in the world, a kind of model for Rose.

S.A. And how about American working class novelists such as Nelson Algren and Upton Sinclair?

J.L. I do not have a strong relationship with them. I identify more with Jewish writers of the 50s: Bellow, the early Malamud: *The Assistant* is very emblematic for me. Some of the most angry reviews I received said: where's the working class? How can you possibly declare this is your subject and they never appear? But in a way I did the opposite: I declared the absence of the working class, the search for them, by people who are constitutionally incapable of making contact with them. Even Rose working in the pickle factory holds herself apart from the men who are right in front of her.

S.A. To conclude, in Chronic City *you wanted to write about the emotion of trying to give a name to unnameable things without having a language to describe them. Now, what do you mean when you define* Dissident Gardens *"an attempt to speak in tongues"?*

J.L. The book is an attempt towards totality, probably it's an attempt to reanimate a kind of lost religious language of communism, of belief.

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