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Writing as a Reader: The Deserted Village of Jay Parini

Fred L. Gardaphé
CUNY Queens College

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“Writing as a Reader: The Deserted Village of Jay Parini.”

Jay Parini’s new novel, *The Apprentice Lover*, comes to us soon after a biography of Robert Frost, a book of poetry, another of essays, and an historical novel based on the life of Walter Benjamin--rather prolific for a guy who teaches and participates in panels and workshops throughout the year around the country. And that doesn’t include the number of books he’s edited during the same period. Parini’s concern with how much writers produce surfaces in an essay exploring the pros and cons of being prolific. He tells us that while over-productivity might hurt, it also can heal. The greater danger he warns is “The critics won’t keep up with them. Their books will be reviewed in isolation from their previous works, and their careers will resist categorization” (“On Being Prolific” 56-57).

Categories work primarily for shelving and selling books, and while you can find Parini in many sections of your local library and bookstore, the only category that fits him as an author is that of the contemporary old fashioned man of American letters. Like any number of his predecessors, Parini creates in his new novel a protagonist who finds American culture not sufficiently inspirational for a literary wannabe. Henry James’s flight east to England and Italy might not have been the model for Alex Massolini, the protagonist of *The Apprentice Lover*, but it certainly is an important precedent for considering much of Parini’s writing, especially this new novel. This comparison takes on greater significance when we realize that Parini served his own literary apprenticeship in Europe.

The success of old fashioned master writers is deeply connected to their work as

master readers. Writers like Parini and James are not afraid to read, and know that in order to write, one must read, and in order to improve one's reading, one must write. Any author who tells you they don't read, is either lying or not worth reading. It's as simple as that. Parini's reading creates his writing and his writing creates his reading. His expression finds its way through novels, biographies, critical studies, short fiction and poetry, fiction, nothing but commercial crap is out-of-bounds for him. Like Henry James, Parini is a public intellectual of the highest calling. He contributes regularly to literary and political discussions alike. He leads and participates in workshops designed to pass along his skills to new generations. And he's not afraid to spend time reviewing books. I say all this by way of introducing my discussion of his new novel because in many respects, this novel, contains much of what Parini has been working on his entire career.

The protagonist of *The Apprentice Lover*, Alex Massolini, is an avid reader, but it seems most everything he's been reading lately "is about love or war, the two subjects that sat like deadweights on my chest" (3). He is a beginning writer, he's written a few poems, but is not sure of how he can go from being a serious reader to a serious writers. When his brother dies, he loses his sense of career direction and drops out of his Ivy League school just before graduation. This upsets his family and starts Alex to thinking about what he's going to do with his life. A student of the classics and a budding young writer, Alex sends some of his poetry to Rupert Grant, a famous Scottish writer who lives on Capri. Grant offers Alex a chance to work as his secretary, and thus begins Alex's soul searching journey to the land of his ancestors.

Set in the U.S. and Italy during the Viet Nam war, *The Apprentice Lover* tells the story of Alex's trip to "a fresh landscape and" his attempt to cash "the blank check of time unmeasured by parental or institutional expectations". He is looking for, "a canvas where I could paint myself into the picture, adding or subtracting traits at will, a place where I had no former history which I had to be absolved" (12). Thinking he can "cut loose from the overfilled barge of [his] youth" (3), Alex abandons his family only to stumble into a deeper sense of the past. "It seemed ungrateful of me to reverse the journey my grandparents had made with such difficulty...They had abandoned their families—poor, illiterate, well-meaning people—and made their way across a vast, threatening sea" (11). Alex might not face the physical dangers of his ancestors, but the psychological risks are no less. The poetry of Parini's writing here is not just in the sound of much of the novel's prose but also in the precision by which his words create the imagery. "My parents Vito and Magarita, who had loomed so large through my past two decades, dwindled as the strip of rubbery water between myself and them lengthened, stretched to a point of unbearable tension, then snapped" (10).

The Apprentice Lover is a story about the relationship of history and story, of classic and contemporary and how they continue to influence each other. History is stasis, it doesn't change as quickly as we do; stories can change everytime they are told and can also alter our sense of history. In this sense, storytelling becomes an anti-static force. This novel moves along by juxtaposing varying notions of story and history, a pattern not new to Parini's work. In his historical novel of the last years of Walter Benjamin's life he wrestled with the

very same ideas.

Benjamin believed that the equivalent of a Copernican revolution in thinking must occur. Fiction would replace history, or become history. The past, 'what has been,' had previously been accepted as the starting point; history stumbled toward the dimly lit present through the corridors of time. Now the process must be reversed; 'the true method,' said Benjamin, 'was to imagine the characters of the past in our space, not us in theirs. We do not transpose ourselves into them: They step into our life.' One does not proceed by seeking empathy with the past: Einfühlung. This was historicism of the old mentality. Instead, he argued for what he called Vergebenwartigung: 'making things present'. (*Benjamin's Crossing* 73).

In another historical novel on the last year of Leo Tolstoy's life, Parini has Tolstoy say: "Fiction is for people who have not yet begun their search for God" (*The Last Station* 13). This juxtaposition of fiction and theology, of fact and story, that create a dynamic tension throughout most of Parini's work, comes to the surface in this new novel.

Divided into a prologue, six parts and an epilogue, *The Apprentice Lover* covers a little less than a year in Alex's life, but it's a time that changes the entire trajectory of his being. In the "Prologue" we learn that Alex's brother Nick is killed in the Viet Nam war. Nick appears throughout the novel in interestingly formed letters from Viet Nam that Alex periodically recalls or rereads. "brothers, as the

old Neapolitan saying goes, are versions of each other” (127). The letters reveal an intensity, a sense of personal history, of immediacy, of reality that Alex has yet to encounter. When Nick writes, he says things he probably could not have said to his brother’s face, for the both come from a family in which “it was considered a failure, a mistake, for a man to show emotion, to lose his temper and lash out. Men controlled themselves. They managed to stifle emotions before they could root and grow into visible feelings” (8). In one letter, Nick tells him: “everybody (except Dad) thinks I’m a piece of shit and only you got brains. Only you are ‘college material.’ Only you are ‘college material’. I’m just there, a kind of accident, an unfortunate case. Hardly even Italian” (238). But it is Nick’s experience that makes him a powerful writer, and it is through these letters that Alex learns how to be a writer by learning how to reveal those emotions on the page. In many respects, it’s his more interactions with his brother’s ghost than with any living mentor that teach him how to write. Like one of his earliest novels, *The Patch Boys*, *The Apprentice Lover* is about a young man’s attempt to find a place for himself in the worlds of and outside his Italian American family. His father, Vito, is a veteran of World War II who left his fighting spirit back with the ghosts on Salerno beach. He submits to his wife’s wishes and lashes out at Alex when he doesn’t do the same. Margarita is an overweight control freak given to creating public spectacles over her inability to pull all the strings all the time. His namesake grandfather, Alessandro, urges him forward to Italy with the warning that the United States is the future, Italy is not much more than an interesting place from his past. And then there’s his only sibling Nicky, whose death

challenges Alex to find a way to get to the other side of death. At the funeral, Alex, in a fit of family loyalty and responsibility tells his parents he will do what was expected of his brother had he survived the war. He will come into the family construction business. But Alex's college education has left him totally unfit for such a future and his family knows it. So he takes off for Italy.

The title of Part One, "Sic transit," begins the first of many classical allusions. Translated as "So it goes." This first phrase of the famous saying: "Thus goes the glory of the world" launches Alex on his journey to the auspicious Villa Clio, home of the Scottish poet, his wife and their entourage. Named after the muse of history, often portrayed sitting with a scroll and books, the Villa becomes a place made of words and haunted by history. Clio is also said to have teased Aphrodite's love of Adonis, and this unstated allusion adds a dimension that imbues static history with a vibrant sensuality.

Living at the Villa Clio is Rupert's wife, Vera, 20 years younger than her husband and an author of cookbooks who promises Alex that she will "tell [him] the truth, if and when it matters" (39). She lives up to her name only when she can hurt the few who are weaker than she. There's Grant's English assistant, Holly Hampton, beautiful and seriously aloof, at least to Alex. Grant also employs an Italian researcher, Marisa Lauro. Both girls service the man more than his letters, and become objects of desire for Alex. Other minor characters include, Patrice, a gay acquaintance from France whom Alex meets on the ferry over from Naples. Alexi, as Patrice calls him, saves Patrice from drowning during a swim in the famous Blue Grotto, and the two gain a spiritual connection

that surpasses their different sexual orientations. There's Luigi Aurelio, a local priest who is a literary translator and a convenient confessor for Alex from time to time as he works his way back to a Catholic sense of the spiritual.

Besides a few local servants who tend to the mundane needs of life at the Villa, there are of course the many house and dinner guests including some of the world's top writers W. H. Auden, Graham Greene, and Gore Vidal. Each of these writers come to us in charming vignettes, but none are drawn with the detail of one Dominick Bonano. A Puzo-like writer of "multigenerational sagas about Mafia families" with titles like *The Last Limo on Staten Island* that become potboiler bestsellers, Bonano is a grand, obnoxious American who thinks enough of Alex to introduce him to his daughter. Whether intentionally or not, this author's name reveals much about Parini's attitude toward the type of fiction that "nobody takes seriously" (45). The usual spelling of the name, as in the late gangster Joe Bonanno, uses 2 "n"s. Ano, Italian for anus, and Bon, good. Bonano will not do as a model for Alex who has come with the hopes of finding a mentor. "In retrospect, I suppose this yearning for mentors had something to do with my own father's remoteness, although this sort of speculation didn't interest me at the time. All I know was that Rupert Grant immediately inspired in me the feelings of longing. He represented a world I desperately wanted to possess myself" (46).

This is not the first time Parini has written about mentors. In fact, what he has to say in the novel about mentors had been rehearsed in an essay collected in *Some Necessary Angels: Essays on Writing and Politics*. From the Scottish

poet Alastair Reid, in many ways the major source from which Parini drew to create Rupert Grant, he learned to edit, and to see cooking as an analogue to writing. From Robert Penn Warren, he learned to “Cultivate leisure. That’s the best thing a writer can do for himself. Good work never comes from effort. It comes easily. If it doesn’t, it isn’t ready” (“Mentors” 11). And from Gore Vidal, he learned responsibility to society. When Rupert tells Alex that the only way a particular story might work is if the characters are sitting atop a bomb, Parini is taking this from advice that Vidal had once actually given to him. Alex finds the writer in himself by first learning to see it in others, and what he sees is not always easy to emulate.

In Part Two, entitled “Gradus ad parnassum,” we see the young man taking his steps toward becoming an artist. The “Steps to Parnassus” refers not only to the sacred mountain of the muses, but also that classic work on Latin verse containing rules and examples for good writing. As he begins his internship in the writing business he find out that “Lo pazzo d’isola, [the island madness] as the locals called it, permeated everything, but it was worse at the Villa Clio” (83). Capri has always figured strongly in Parini’s work. His friend Gore Vidal has a villa there; Parini and his wife, Devon, have spent time there, and that is where Walter Benjamin met his wife Dora and his lover Asja Lacis. In Crossing Benjamin, Parini uses Asja’s perspective to comment on the island: “What I liked about Capri was its feeling of survival; many conquerors had come and gone, but the island itself remained—a glittering rock of freedom in the bright green sea. It was timeless and equal to anything history could give it”

(Benjamin's Crossing 161). But as history ages, it has a tendency to lapse into myth. And through the myth of Capri, the island becomes a theater where the "sexual outlaws, revolutionaries, artists, wealthy pleasure seekers" (213) come to see and be seen. Alex later begins to tire of the beauty and says, "Capri, a corrupt and jaded island full of snobs and dissipated intellectuals. This was definitely 'not' the Italy my grandparents recalled and sentimentalized"(207).

Rupert renames Alex to Lorenzo, as though baptizing him into literary life. But the new life Alex realizes is not what he has expected. When Rupert tells him "Writers are all murderers in disguise," Alex is shocked. "My idea of a writer was far different from this. To me, a writer was a healer, a builder, a creator. Not a destroyer. When I suggested as much to Grant, he shook his head sadly and clucked his tongue. 'If you're really a writer, Lorenzo,' he said, 'you'll slay your next of kin first, and proceed from there. It's a bloody business. A bloody goddamn business'" (92). Yeah, it's not always great to know the man inside the writer, and sometimes it's just better to stick to the writing and leave the writer alone. But you can't do that when you're the apprentice, so Alex must learn how to process his master's personality.

Unlike his brother Nick, who let outside forces dictate what experience he would gain, Alex has been able to, if not totally control, then at least point to the direction in which his experience would come. Alex comes to believe that he must constantly search for experience that will ultimately give some meaning to his life. In the meantime he encounters those whose lives begin to represent different ways of seeing and being in the world. Through Rupert's relationship

with Holly and Marisa, we can see two very different portrayals of decadence. Alex, acting as the good apprentice is quite attracted to his mentor's women and even considers the possibility of sleeping with Rupert's wife, something offered to him by Rupert as well as Vera. Alex soon finds himself imitating his mentor in the worst way in order to find a place for himself in this strange, new world.

In the novel's shortest section, Part Three, entitled "Amo, amas, amat," after the singular conjugation of the Latin verb "to love," things begin to heat up. As Alex pines for Holly, Marisa comes to his room one night and helps persuade him to "love the one you're with." Alex, whose sexual experience prior to this trip has been nothing but a few forays into the shallow end of the pool, is after more than the sex, but it seems that all of his friendship with females (Bonano's daughter Toni, and later with Holly) turns sexual. But as Alex expands his sexual experience he finds the social world of Capri constricting.

Parts Four "Ars longa" and Five "Vita Brevis" break up the famous quote of Hippocrates, "Art lasts, life is brief," and in these sections Alex's prose gets sharper under Grant's guidance, but his moral vision is getting blurry. Alex returns to fighting childhood mother/son, father/son battles with Rupert and Vera as surrogate parents. When his father calls to say mother's sick, Alex contemplates returning, but in the end decides that he's not going to fall under his mother's spell this time. And soon the drama heightens as life is short refers to a suicide that could be read a suffocation of the spirit of youth by Rupert's egocentric behavior. The possessive and demanding love displayed in many of these characters is reminiscent of the obsessive love that Parini portrayed in his

very first novel, *Love Run*. And it's connections like these that suggest the possibility that every work of art contains all of the artists previous works.

War and the place of the intellectual are ideas Parini has played with in previous writings, most dramatically in historical novels like *Benjamin's Crossing*. Character Lisa Fittko writes: "In time of war, people become obsessed with their own past, with the story of their lives; they begin to live everything all over again, sifting for evidence of a kind that cannot be found" (*Benjamin's Crossing* 113). This is what Alex's brother Nick does in his letters and it forces Alex to do the same. Parini, as a public intellectual, creates a place for such a figure in novels such as *Benjamin's Crossing*. Again, this comes to us through Lisa Fittko: "For me, Benjamin was the European Mind writ large. Indeed, as I later realized, Old Benjamin was everything the Nazi monsters wanted most to obliterate: that aura of tolerance and perspective that comes from having seen many things from many angles. Even that rueful laugh of his was part of the aura. Here before us was the last laughing man, I thought. The last man to laugh the laugh of ages. From now on, history would be tears, and the work of intellectuals would be the work of grieving" (187)

Parini's writing reminds us that it is the world that makes us writers, and that nothing can be better than living the writer's life. As he writes about Tolstoy in his novel, *The Last Station*, "He has always been happiest within his work, dreaming his grand, sweet dreams" (*The Last Station* 3). In the novel, Tolstoy's daughter mentions that her father believed: "It is the duty of an author to present himself to the public. To say, *this will do, and this will not do*" (53). There is a

number of similarities between Tolstoy's amanuensis, Valentin Fedorovich, and Alex. Valentin writes in his diary: "I am not among the great ones, but I understand what must be done—or not done—to become like them. I have to give up desire and loathing. I have to delight in what happens, whatever is given. I should not struggle or exert my own petty will" (*The Last Station* 107). This is the place of the apprentice, the one who stands near, but never in the place of, the master. In a similar vein, Alex's writing, while perceptive, reveals the young man's tendency to elevate and explain his master's behavior: "Grant's world was so purely aesthetic, a maze constructed to hide some mythical beast that frightened him. He had created a dazzling thing, employing his talents to the fullest, and yet those around him scarcely understood what he'd done, or what their part in his fantasy might be" (257). The apprentice must learn to subjugate his self to the needs of the master, but then there must come a time when the apprentice attends to his own needs, at the cost of separating himself from the master.

In a trip he takes with Holly to the mainland, Alex comes upon a scene that Parini uses to give his protagonist an unearned epiphany. When Alex goes to the beach at Salerno he feels a connection to his father's experience of landing there during the Allied invasion of World War II. "My knees weakened, and I knelt in the sand as the day brightened, with a red sun tinting the water. I believed I had seen something there, in Salerno. Heard and smelled it, even tasted it. And it would never leave me. It would become part of who I was, making it far more possible for me to connect to my father when I went home"

(256). Somehow he believes he has connected to his father simply by imagining the scene. This is one of the few possibilities never fully realized by Parini in this work.

As he begins to connect to his father's past he begins to disconnect himself from Grant. This separation begins earnestly in Part Six, "Gloria mundi." after Alex is able to verbalize his own earlier delusions: "I refused to criticize it [Villa Clio], taking for granted its small guilts and large assumptions. I bought greedily into Grant's view of things, and did my best to make him believe I shared his opinions. Yet now I found our conversations painful" (277). In the end he realizes that knowing the artist's humanity is what keeps him from becoming a god and keeps Alex from living the rest of his life as a faithful devotee. This realization alone enables Alex to assert his own identity as an artist, as by the novel's Epilogue, Alex has become a master writer whose work as a poet and novelist has brought him some degree of fame and comfort. He publishes a piece on Rupert that later gains him an invitation back to the Villa Clio from Vera. When Alex returns he finds the island overcome by commercial success and Rupert overcome by senility. In their final encounter Alex realizes he will never know if he ever did get through Rupert the way Rupert had gotten through to him.

In the end, *The Apprentice Lover*, is not really the coming-of-age novel, as other critics have suggested. It is a coming to one's senses novel, a piercing through the illusions the ego builds as obstacles to achieving one's goals. Every apprentice writer fears the power of the great ones whose works have taunted them to give it a try. When Alex realizes that he cannot write like Shakespeare, he

fears he is destined to write crap, that if he does not live like Rupert, he will never be able to dedicate himself totally to the art. But the more Alex learns about Rupert, the more confused he becomes. He wonders if one needs to become an asshole to be great. And he learns the great lesson that if it wasn't for assholes, we'd all be full of shit. If it wasn't for artists, we'd all be a little less human.

Every work of art is a home the artist lives in for a while and then abandons for others to inhabit. The problem is, if we go searching for the artist in one of his deserted homes, we will never find him, for he's gone off to live somewhere else. So while there is much of Jay Parini to be found in *The Apprentice*, and much of his previous work that echoes throughout the rooms of this work, we'd be hard pressed to make a case that Parini is somewhere hiding in this novel, as most likely he's off somewhere down the road reading himself a way to write himself a new home for us to read, inevitably creating, through a lifetime of writing, a deserted village for us to wander through and wonder about. Published in: *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. 103:1 (Winter 2004): 159-168.

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