

Tony Duvert, *Diary of an Innocent*, trans. by Bruce Benderson (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2010 [1976]).

Intro by Bruce Benderson, pp. 5-13.

Innocence on Trial: The Politics of Tony Duvert

Literally, the “innocent” to whom the title of this novel refers only makes an appearance at the very end of the book. He’s a sweet, dim-witted street boy who is fascinated by the narrator’s typewriter and spends long periods of time typing every letter of the keyboard in order, over and over. Jokingly, the narrator considers handing in the boy’s work, rather than his own, as the manuscript for the book but realizes that few would read it. Nevertheless, he asks himself, “Is there a law that is so different in the series of words that I put down?” Such comparisons and contrasts between the illiterate and the literate, the amoral and the moral, the impoverished and the well-to-do, and the individual and the family are the mechanisms that drive this narrative. But the real “innocent” to whom the title of this novel refers is the narrator himself, an unnamed lover of boys living temporarily in an unnamed southern city that suggests North Africa of the 1970s. This shouldn’t, however, lead to the conclusion that the word “innocent” is being used ironically. Or, rather, if it is, that irony is at our expense, rather than that of the protagonist’s or author’s.

Those familiar with the other writings of Tony Duvert (1945-2008) or his public reputation are bound to conflate the fictional experiences recounted in *Diary of an Innocent* with his own. However, during the years in which he enjoyed notoriety as a literary figure (1969-1989), he never publicly clarified his

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own sexuality, despite the fact that he made his politics surrounding the issue of sexuality absolutely clear. His critique of French bourgeois life seen through the lens of sexuality was as acerbic as it was tireless, and much of it targeted initial repressions and exploitations of sexual energy during the period of childhood. As he illustrated at length in his nonfiction book, *Good Sex Illustrated*, those cultural institutions we sanctify the most – the rearing of children, education, the family, our legal and medical systems, the clergy, marriage – are

actually accomplishing the very opposite of what they claim. The raising of children, as he sees it, is a ruthless commandeering of their impulses and the capitalization of their bodies by an enslaving process of marketability. In this system, mothers are no more than low-level meat factory managers, who serve as the overseers of the sacrifice of childhood to the capitalist packaging conglomerate we call decency; fathers are trained to take out their frustrations through oedipal vectors in order to geld their children before they become fully aware of their own capacity for pleasure; teachers are hypocritical lackeys whose sole occupation is to rein in children's polymorphous creativity and to provide convincing rationalizations for its reshaping into obligation; doctors, psychiatrists and priests are there to stamp such processes with legitimacy. And finally, the sole purpose of marriage is to repeat this inescapable cycle by creating more upholders and defenders of it. The narrator of *Diary of an Innocent* serves quite obviously as a mouthpiece for these politics. For Duvert, the promiscuous boy lover has become the most convenient device for taking pot shots at our social order.

So much for the narrator, but what about the succession of street boys in the novel who serve as his love objects? Almost all

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of them are wayward prepubescent panhandlers or child laborers from the petit bourgeoisie and working classes. Most tend to enjoy a high degree of autonomy in the streets outside the family circle. All have relationships with parents or elder siblings that are characterized by neglect or violence. Certainly, we expect the author to be calling attention to their plight.

However, Duvert demonstrates quite convincingly that – even given such conditions – these boys are in a position that any French middle-class child should consider enviable. This is because the street boys enjoy full ownership of their bodies and their time whereas the average protected French child is taught to be a robotic tool of parents, teachers and priests.

This is not to claim that, when the novel enters the homes of some of the street boys, their parents and older siblings aren't portrayed as frankly tyrannical. But Duvert goes out of his way to attach such behaviour to the reality of poverty and the rigid, simplistic, traditional codes of the culture he is describing. What mitigates the bad behaviour of these particular caregivers is their directedness, the fact that their actions lack the hypocrisy and hidden motives of the same kind of treatment when it occurs in a bourgeois context. In taking these positions, Duvert's radical project essentially involves turning our moral code upside down, so

that the alienation and sexual tastes of the narrator resemble innocence and sincerity whenever they are compared to those of the normal bourgeois literary audience who will become his readers and whom he is attacking.

The narrator of *Diary of an Innocent* functions as a test case for someone who attempts to avoid – however abjectly – the oppression of social institutions. His position is one of complete alienation from every element of society that Duvert has defined

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as hypocritical. He lives without family, without concern for his own safety or health, without allegiance to his own country and without the sexual orientation and sobriety we would expect from someone of his level of education and class. He is “innocent” of all those things and thus completely at odds with the social order. Rather than being a member of a political group or movement, he is single-handedly opposed to the capitalist cultural machine that produced him. This does not imply, however, that he is a firebrand, fighting for justice and attempting to convince others that he is in the right. As an “innocent,” he seeks merely to live his life in as unfettered a way as possible.

Despite all of this, one is occasionally – and erroneously – led to believe that Duvert is a kind of activist. One of the most striking devices in this complicated narrative is a section that fantasizes about what it would be like if homosexual pedophiles were considered the norm and heterosexuals were treated the way homosexuals were in the era of pre-Stonewall. So fastidious is Duvert in covering every element of reversed oppression that could occur that this section becomes a hilarious send-up of the child protection schemes and exclusion of homosexuality from daily life that prevailed in Western society in the middle of the twentieth century. As each prohibition and prejudice is piled on, all of them begin to seem more and more absurd, producing delightful satirical effects. But once this reverse dialectic is accomplished, Duvert deflates it immediately by pointing to a central flaw in his argument: no homosexual, he explains, would ever oppress another group to the level of exclusion and isolation that the homosexual himself has been pushed. Thus, the purpose of this upside-down narrative is not to produce change, but merely to sharpen our consciousness of the mechanisms of the social order,

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and such a process of analysis promises to lead most of us into a profound state of uneasiness.

What American readers will find most repulsive about this novel is the fact that it isn't redemptive. In order to understand the importance of the theme of redemption to the American scene, we must first discuss the influence of seventeenth-century Puritan literature on the roots of the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, and the about-to-be-born novel of the century that followed. Especially in its early stages, the novel in Anglo-Saxon cultures was deeply influenced by the spiritual autobiography, which had already become a favorite form of reading. Perhaps the best known of these spiritual autobiographies is John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), in which Bunyan recounts his lapses into sin that lead eventually to his epiphany and conversion. In such a book, the journey from point A to point B – from damnation to grace – created a ready-made linear narrative that always enjoyed the same structure. It is a movement from error towards conversion and the proverbial “happy ending.” And it suggests that no story is worth its salt, or perhaps, no story could be called a story at all, unless the protagonist is brought back into the fold. Although this fold may have originally denoted a relationship only to God, it has taken on more banal and conformist parameters in modern times. One could almost substitute “family” for “fold.”

Today there are thousands of fiction and nonfiction books that are constrained by the patterns established by narratives like *Grace Abounding*. Depictions of transgressions may be limitless, accounts of sensuality and appetite luridly graphic, the altered states of drug abuse described to a T, but we always end up in a recovery meeting, which we then realize is our perspective for looking back, and which wins us, hopefully – if we are authors – a guest spot on Oprah.

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By saying this, I am not claiming that we do not also enjoy narratives that end in tragedy rather than a happy ending. But these tragic narratives are, as well, adapted to the mold of redemption. In every case, the tragedy serves as a kind of punishment, and since the book is being written from a post-punishment perspective, the narrator is finally established as “good,” having gone beyond error (even if it was too late in his or her particular case) and therefore worthy of our attention. As an extreme but relevant example, I must point out that our literary tradition has no narratives about pedophiles who avowedly enjoy behaving in a manner they admit we would see as having bad intentions. They are either confessing an illness to us or trying to prove that their orientation really is well meaning and socially constructive, usually in the sense most accepted by the middle-class mind.

Duvert, on the other hand, who remains very close to his narrator in this novel, doesn't wish to be thought of as contributing to the well-being of society, which he sees as a machine of speciousness. He makes a strong claim of being absolutely irredeemable in our eyes, salting this negation with brazen claims of innocence. And indeed, in a way that may seem perverse to some readers, he locates the moral superiority of his text in its absolute *irredeemableness*. He forsakes the only two possible approaches to this subject that an Anglo-Saxon might choose: "coming to his senses" and realizing the error of his orientation, with the narrative representing the journey to that realization; or settling on a way to convince us that his lifestyle is for the betterment of society. Duvert's character, on the other hand, is "lost" to our notion of what is good or right, and he chooses to stay that way for the very purpose of declaring himself innocent. He may be

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"lost," but if that is the case, it's not because he has chosen the wrong path and is lost to himself, but because he has been abandoned by the social order, something he has little hope of changing.

Duvert belongs, of course, to a well-known tradition of French *poetes maudits*, who aligned themselves with variations of the notion of evil and who include Sade, Baudelaire, Bataille, Huysmans and Genet. The fact that passages of *Diary of an Innocent* were repulsive to me and that I identified that repulsion as much more than a matter of taste is merely efficacy of Duvert's purpose. Several scenes are there mostly to ensure a portrait of the protagonist as someone who is plainly repugnant to the normal reader. In one, he removes a tiny worm from his anus with the tip of a knife as if it were light comedy; in another, he devotes almost an entire page to describing a cat munching on a giant cockroach as he speculates about how it might taste and compares that taste to elements of French cuisine; in a third, he recounts an attempt to have coitus with a dog during a camping trip when he ended up in a French town that felt alien and rejecting to him.

Even in France, discussions about or with Duvert have tended to touch upon the startling amount of aggression and alienation in his texts. In both his writing and the interviews with him, it is almost as if he were jumping the gun and expressing his disgust for those who would express theirs for him – as if he has left any call for inclusion by the wayside long ago and has made himself a sacrificial victim of social rejection. But for what purpose? One could say that he has chosen to lie down with the Devil in order to escape the narrow boundaries of

social experience – and thus achieve an unusual kind of transcendence. As I have tried to show, such a stance probably could probably not be more foreign and more distasteful to the American mind, which tends to function on the assumption of

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conformity and inclusion. (There's room for everybody, if only we can learn to understand!) there may also be one other purpose of Duvert's narrative, though evidence for it is subtle. I would call this *de-idealization*. Idealization of human behaviour is a tactic all of us use to survive. A most obvious example of this is our reluctance in almost any discourse (excluding vulgar satire) to discuss or provide examples of certain activities we engage in regularly, such as defecation. When we see a beauty queen on television gushing over the receipt of a rhinestone crown and a bouquet of long-stemmed roses, it is true that some of us may in our minds subject her to a prurient sexual objectification, but the furthest thing from our thoughts is what she looks like on the toilet or menstruating. Why? Not only does the frequency of both make them an integral part of human life, they also preoccupy all of us to a high degree at moments when we're alone.

As a child, I remember a transgressive game I would play compulsively with myself: I would think of friends of my parents, teachers, politicians, alluring actresses or any individual who encouraged idealization and radiated social power; and then I would try to visualize the same person on the toilet. After questioning friends, I have come to the conclusion that such perverse fantasizing is far from original. To see authority, beauty or social currency suddenly disappear the moment one adds certain universal but private behaviour to the repertoire of the imagination can become a positive exploration for a child who has just begun to confront the world and its intimidating institutions.

Duvert's intention in this text may be analogous. Not only is he forcing the grotesqueness of his own libido on us; he is also calling for a de-idealization of our experience and human experience in general. Hidden behind his rather boastful descriptions of situations

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that threaten to turn our stomachs is the challenging question: *And how pretty would you look with your soul bared to this extent?*

If this aspect of Duvert's texts truly exists, it presents one of the hardest of his lessons for us to take in. Our initial and defensive reaction will obviously be: *Well, I don't sleep with little boys!* But anyone who has the inclination, the mind and the stamina to absorb a larger part of Duvert's oeuvre will eventually be subjected to his careful and detailed inversion of our system of values, obsessively and meticulously worked out according to the most stringent rules of reasoning, with the help of Marxist theory. His worldview is certainly audacious but never lacks rigor. I would go so far as to say that its repercussions are as inescapable as the oppressive systems he is unravelling. They support his claim that our intimate and private lives are just as wicked – indeed, more so, because of their hypocrisy – than the disturbing descriptions in this book. This allows the dialectic of the book to justify the narrator's plea: he is *innocent*. According to Duvert's reasoning, it is an innocence that approaches sainthood (in the sense of Sartre's *Saint Genet*) because the protagonist chooses to suffer (and, in fact, there are even passages in this book in which he chooses to live for several days on bread and water, because he finds this preferable to confronting the social networks of the outside world.) By his "sins," he is critiquing, or even neutralizing, all of ours, which are not only oppressive but entangled in exploitative social functions that have constructed themselves as incontrovertible and reach far beyond us. And though it may be true that the protagonist's life-style is helping no one, we – as cowards and upholders of the very order that oppresses and exploits us – are harming many. Into the libidinal, alternative, alienated world which this narrator so categorically invites us, it inevitably becomes our shit that stinks, not his.

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