

“Private Turbulent Seas”: “painting The Moon” In *Cutting Lisa*, By Percival Everett¹

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Cutting Lisa is an apparently simple novel in which the tensions that run on the surface are hardly ever voiced. John Livesey, a retired obstetrician, who has always felt estranged from his son Elgin, travels from Staunton, Virginia to Yachats, “a small town about halfway between Florence and Newport” (17), to spend the summer with his son's family. The unfolding of this summer vacation is the only plot in the book, even if a few events, major and minor, pepper the story: the meeting and the subsequent affair of the main protagonist with Ruth, a young woman, a brawl in a bar, a fishing trip, an accident on the beach. So things do happen but more than weaving into a story where all is said and done, they rather form a patchwork of not so disconnected moments, akin perhaps to “the green patchwork landscape” (11) John observes from the plane on his way to Oregon. The slight paradox here is the coming together of a picture through apparently random bits and pieces assembled together, forming a sort of impressionistic painting which needs to be seen from afar.

But it is also as though the whole picture kept escaping from the main protagonist, as if he were incapable of viewing things clearly. His vision is not so much blurred as nonexistent, incapable as he is to adjust his eyes and perceptions to the right distance. In spite of his repeated efforts to puzzle out images or pictures, his vision is hindered either by distance or by closeness. On the way to meet his son's family, he “[tries] to picture the faces that would be greeting him” (11). But instead of an attempt at describing those faces, the reader is merely offered the reasons why there can be no such pictures: physical and emotional distance from his son, geographical and temporal distance from Katy, his granddaughter whom he has not seen in four years. As for Lisa, his daughter-in-law, she is not mentioned at this point in the story, but she will be the object of his close, too close scrutiny, pregnant as she is with a baby he soon suspects is not his son's.

What stems from this tension between closeness and distance is a feeling that the character is lost in a world he does not recognize in spite of the frames he tries to enclose it into. Hence a pervading feeling of estrangement that leads to a constant questioning of reality. In other words, the self is confronted with an alien reality which it cannot master. Loss of control is at the heart of the novel, which conveys the sense that disquieting forces are at work, rendered all the more unidentifiable since they are unworded and ungraspable, escaping both the character and the reader's understanding. More than the resolution of the tensions palpable in the novel, skirting along the limit between life and death, the novel seems to be built around the very movement of the tensions, as if what was really at stake was this “private, turbulent sea” mentioned by the narrator and best mirrored, perhaps, by the changing weather of Oregon and the movement of the ocean. The turbulence of the sea suggests its shapelessness and its restlessness. Its privacy evokes the idea of intimacy, submitted to the tyranny of the indomitable sea. What results is that the tensions at work

¹ Percival Everett, *Cutting Lisa*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1986

create an ever-moving, unstable landscape, providing the reader and the characters with a series of paintings whose beauty is all the more powerful since it is ephemeral, caught in the gesture of painting more than allowing representation to come to life. But this "private, turbulent sea" is not just the suggestion of a tortured psychological makeup. More than that, it gradually, somewhat surreptitiously at first, raises the question of the limits of the human, which has to come to grips with, or to surrender to the inhuman and the sublime.

Although written in the third person, *Cutting Lisa* embraces the sole point of view of its main character, John Livesey. It is through his gaze that the reality constructed in the book is perceived, the narrative focusing on the feeling of tension at work for the character. What stems from this inner focalization is a paradoxical sense of dislocation, which leads to an ever-growing feeling of disorientation.

John Livesey is a man of physical and moral habits, who "[approves] of [a] kind of regularity", as the reader is told as soon as the first page, when the narrative voice refers to the routine of the pastor of the Baptist church near the character's home: "the young minister was there every Tuesday at the same time to place the title of his next sermon in the bulletin case" (1). What matters here is not so much what the sermon is about as the minister's presence every week at the same time. Indeed, "John had only waved and never had he chatted with the man" (1-2), as if the mere presence of the priest were enough to create a sense of stability, to frame a reality feeding more on the regular yet theoretical structure of time than on the substance of an encounter. It seems in fact that framing time through regularity and routine is a way to give it consistence and to shape a reality otherwise hostile. Indeed, "since his wife's death, he had made a decision that strict routine would be the easiest way for him to take care of himself. He had the same meals every day" (7). His wife's death, mentioned almost casually several times in the course of the narrative, is what triggers the need to map out time, to frame it through a paradoxical act of decorporation. It seems as though her death were the first acknowledged moment of loss and by resorting to a strict routine, the character wards off the unexpected and perhaps what the narrative voice in *The Body Artist* by Don DeLillo² calls "the terror of another ordinary day".

This way of taking care of himself equates somehow to negating any form of intrusion or rupture, however innocuous or terrifying it might be, or at least to keep it at bay. His early walks on the streets of Staunton, for example, allow him to "[catch] the dawn stillness, before it [is] broken by the sounds of children awaiting school buses and of car engines being started in driveways." (1). Whereas the "dawn stillness" takes on a generic value, characterized by absence of movement, the sounds evoked in the second part of the sentence, along with the use of the plural and of -ing forms introduce not only movement, but also a feeling of disorder interrupting – breaking – the stillness he so relishes. Besides, the impression of profusion and almost of cacophony provoked by the plural serves to better highlight the contrast between a world teeming with children, buses and cars and the solitude of John Livesey. It seems as though he rejected any form of interaction – he barely waves to the minister–, as suggested by the use of the passive mood : engines are started in driveways but no one starting those engines is seen, as if human bodies were kept outside

² Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, New York, Scribner, 2001, p. 15.

the character's view and thoughts. The fact that he has the same meals every day also contributes to this de-corporation : not that the character erases his body as such, not even that he withdraws it from the world but the repetition of the same gestures, eating always the same food precludes any idea of change. In a way, giving his life a mechanical turn, made of gestures always the same, he tries to avoid feeling the pain of loss – the loss of his wife and the inexorable loss of his life – because, as he tells his son, lying in a hospital bed, “if you can't feel [the pain], it doesn't hurt. [...] It's the nature of pain” (89).

Yet, of course, this does not mean that the origin of the pain has vanished. Framing the real in order to keep it at a distance fails, because it always resurfaces in the form of the unexpected. For all his efforts, John Livesey cannot contain the real which breaks apart the frames he has carefully built. Interruptions and ruptures come from outside the frame, in the form, for example in the prologue, of a phone call. This phone call not only disrupts the routine of his life, it also shatters to pieces his well-built certainties, thereby creating in the novel the first instance of an oscillation between order and disorder. The discovery that a Mr Thompson did a section on his pregnant wife is a form of scandal, not only because it amounts to a mutilation, but also and perhaps more importantly because it triggers unexplained and unexpected feelings in the character who realizes that “[h]e was not so much bothered by the fact that he had seen a woman so badly mutilated, nor was he terribly disturbed by the fact that a man could have done such a thing. What bothered him was that he was finding Thompson's action somehow beautiful”. (7) John Livesey is “bothered”, “disturbed”, his certainties shaken in the process. In other words, he is losing his mastery over the world around him, but, more importantly, over his feelings. The beauty of Thompson's gesture cannot be elucidated, it does not fit into the moral and intellectual or cognitive categories with which he puts his world into order. It is just there and emerges independently from the character. His acknowledgment of what bothers him is the first instance in the novel of his surrendering to a reality beyond the grasp of his heretofore controlled world. The event described in the prologue seems to open a breach in what appears as a well-ordered stasis, thereby rendering the character's relation to the world more complex, as suggested by the mixed feelings of anger, empathy and admiration Thompson provokes in him, as opposed to the somewhat binary and detached perception Livesey had so far.

By upsetting the plenitude John had created through regularity, it also seems to bring him back into the world as someone aware of time and therefore aware of pain. When he picks up the phone to answer the obstetrician delivering the news of an unusual event at the hospital, the character says, speaking of himself: “ Why do you wake up this old man?” (2). The words he utters, banal as they may be nonetheless stress two important features of John Livesey. First, the call indeed wakes him up from a sort of symbolic sleep. His routine is a way of extracting himself from reality, of maintaining his body functions without having to come to grips with the real or, rather, as a way to cope with it. John Livesey sleeps a lot in the novel: his nights are short and he is an early-riser, but he takes naps all the time, as if it was a way of excluding himself from the world that surrounds him. His sleeping is even akin to a form of death when he pretends, for the benefit of his granddaughter and her friend Connie, that he is not breathing anymore. This mimicking of death is a way to control death,

to choose not to be caught unawares by it.

The second trait of the character mentioned in his answer to the phone call is his age: he talks about himself as "this old man". Old age, and its proximity with death appears as a leitmotiv throughout the book and his trip to Oregon stresses a sense of urgency that contrasts with the statement, on the first page of the novel, that "he felt he had all the time in the world", again a feeling of eternity evocative of eternal sleep perhaps, but also of stasis: having all the time in the world is in a way an annihilation of time. Going west, he accepts, albeit reluctantly, to loosen his grip on reality because he is perhaps "submerged by a paradoxical, exacerbated and overwhelming emotion provoked by the threat that nothing will happen again", as Catherine Bernard would say³. Negating death through repetition is a way to pretend that things will go on happening. Yet, it is also a refusal of time, therefore of the events that constitute it. On the contrary, acknowledging the possibility of death means acknowledging that nothing might happen again. The approach of death not only heightens his perceptions, it also introduces the need to be part of the world while realizing that, as a subject, he is unfit to the world, hence creating a polarity between presence and withdrawal.

The result is a growing feeling of disorientation and disorder. First, by moving away from Staunton, he becomes a stranger in a strange land: the ocean is repeatedly said to be "on the wrong side" and all form of familiarity disappears. More than once in the novel, the character is said to feel "disoriented" (119), geographically and metaphorically, when thinking about his relation with Ruth, his lover for example, or while driving on a now perfectly familiar yet extremely unfamiliar road, feeling "like a vagrant, tooling to no great distance up and down the highway. The ocean he had come to recognize was still beautiful, but only because it would not go away. It just posed there as a reminder that this place was foreign" (119). This disorientation is upsetting because it is illogical, uncanny because of the intricate mixture of familiarity – he recognizes the ocean – and defamiliarization – he says the road is "in no sense his".

In fact, the more things seem to escape John's grasp, the more he tries to impose his control over the world around him. Despite his claim that he does not want to upset his son, he consciously creates a tension all the more powerful as it is surreptitious and based on silence, thereby pointing more effectively to his intrusive presence over the privacy of his son.

It is within the very intimacy of conflicting feelings and emotions, in their interaction that, in order to maintain, half-consciously perhaps, his power over the other characters John Livesey imposes a form of tyranny on the house, not only by trying to figure the tensions he feels, but also by creating tension himself. Hence for example, after a night drinking with his friend Oliver and nearly fighting in a bar, he is the prey to contradictory feelings once again:

He felt sour and as he looked at the sunlight spilling over the bed he felt indulgent. This would be an easy day he decided. He'd play with the girls, paint a little, be pleasant at every turn, and so cause overall tension about the house. He was amused by this thinking (72).

³ Catherine Bernard, "Sublime et postmodernité: captation d'héritage ou filiation retrouvée ?", *Postérité du sublime*, Dir. Max Duperray, Paris, Mallard, 2000, p. 33.

By acting as a grandfather and a father is supposed to act, he in fact imposes a form of threat all the more terrifying for being unseen, akin perhaps to the treacherous stillness of the sea likely to become turbulent at any time.

When interrogating his son and Lisa on the reasons why nobody seems thrilled by the prospect of a new baby, John challenges the balance of the household, introducing disquieting elements that verge on violence. He is repeatedly said to be a silent character, with whom conversation "is not easy" because he claims "that the world [is] clearly composed of half-truths" (14). But when confronted to the silence of Lisa and Elgin about the baby, he refuses to let go and, as he says to his son, to "face things, take them for what they are, and go from there" (91). He cannot take things for what they are and tries rather to inflect reality by replacing the event of the adulterous baby in an ethical perspective. What he reproaches Greg Yount, the real father of the baby with is "the betrayal, not the lies nor hurt nor the ignorance [...]. The stench of rancid souls". (119). In fact, the outrage for him comes from a form of dissensus, what Catherine Bernard calls "a disjunction inherent to the tension between the absolute of good and the relativity of practical experience"⁴. He passes a moral judgment on Greg Yount and Lisa, and the "rancid souls" he mentions suggest an order of values devalued by what he experiences. Again, his binary sets of values, what his son calls, "the side of right and good and the American way" (91) is put to the test by reality. In short, it is the confrontation of theory with reality, the breaking of his moral frames by an event, the non coincidence between ethics and the world that confronts him with alterity.

This disjunction between his vision of the world as absolute and a reality far more complex and uncategorizable is also what provokes the different and contradictory attempts to define the human in the novel. The word "human" is used in the prologue in two distinct manners. First, when Livesey reacts to what Thompson did to his wife. He says: "We're talking about a human being, not a goddamned motor" (6). This reaction feeds on a humanist, anthropological and transcendental definition of the human "always as if at least man were a certain value which has no need to be interrogated", as Lyotard writes in *The Inhuman*⁵. Claiming the woman is a human being imposes certain limits to what can be done to the human, for example transforming it into an inanimate object devoid of subjectivity, lying on a table, nearly dead after being cut open and sloppily sewn. It inscribes the human in a certain set of values, drawing lines which must not be transgressed. As Lyotard explains, not transgressing those limits is the condition for full humanity in humanist terms. One of the definitions of the human is, he says, that

"endowed with the means of knowing and making known, of doing and getting done, having interiorized the interests and values of civilization, the adult can pretend to full humanity in his or her turn, and to the effective realization of mind as consciousness, knowledge and will. That it always remains for the adult to free himself or herself from the obscure savageness of childhood by bringing about its promise – that is precisely the condition of humankind" (4).

From that perspective, humankind equates with the age of reason, when the child, no

⁴ Catherine Bernard, op.cit., p. 35

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trad. Geoffrey Bennington et Rachel Bowlby, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, p. 1.

longer an infant, has access to language and can inscribe itself in a transcendent perspective and organize the world beyond its "obscure savageness". As for the woman, nothing is known of her "effective realization of mind as consciousness, knowledge and will". For all her humanity, she merely seems to be an instrument of measure, the standard by which Livesey defines his and Thompson's humanity. The consequence is that the woman is de-subjectified, which shatters to pieces the idea that the subject must be considered as a central epistemological category in this specific instance.

Yet another hint at the human appears, as ungraspable as the beauty John finds in Thompson's gesture. Whereas Thompson's "response to the situation is emotionless" (6), he triggers an emotional response in the main protagonist, a response that escapes the categories described above. The shift in Livesey's attitude toward Thompson is revealing, moving from irrepressible anger to a form of admiration and relief whose cause is somewhat puzzling for the reader. What brings about this shift is the man's answer to Livesey's simple question: "Do you have a boy or a girl?" "I didn't notice" (6). The conclusion of this exchange is: "This answer relieved John. Thompson was, after all, human; no doubt a disturbed man, but human" (6). The logical link between Thompson's answer and John's reaction is to say the least unclear, but this is probably the reason why the doctor perceives the husband as human. Not knowing whether he has a boy or a girl inscribes him in a somewhat irrational perspective, unable as he is to pay attention to the binary structure that is the logical outcome of giving birth. What happens here is a paradoxical lack of focus: whereas Thompson states that all along he "was thinking very clearly" (6), he does not notice what should have been the object of his perception. The fact that this makes him human in the eyes of John is perhaps the indication of a form of indetermination akin to another definition of the human, fraught with dehumanizing forces. The result is unsettling for John, but more interestingly it suggests a much more complex perception of the human, opening the subject to irrational forces and denying it being a central pivot for the organization of knowledge.

The realization that Thompson is "after all, human", added to the fact that he is "no doubt a disturbed man" affects John more than Thompson himself, as if the husband of the mutilated woman were but a catalyst or a mirror-image of the main protagonist himself. By bringing to the surface the unutterable, what cannot be contained by language, Thompson embodies the inner conflicts of John, caught between the two definitions of the human suggested in the prologue. He contributes to decenter John as the center of perception and knowledge while, prompting him, for all his will to control the world he inhabits, to realize that "[he's] been around life and death for forty years or thereabouts and [doesn't] know a damn thing" (125). Acknowledging that he knows nothing means accepting doubt in his world, what Jean-François Lyotard calls "traces of an indetermination, a childhood, persisting up to the age of adulthood"⁶. It is also the acceptance that he cannot read the world, just like he "[can't] see through the cool exterior [of Thompson] and tell whether he [is] troubled at all by what he [has] done" (Everett, 6).

Such a process of complexification, by reintroducing the real – death or events that break the smooth surface he has created – not only underlines the major tension between

⁶Jean-François Lyotard, op. Cit., p. 3

mastering and losing control, it is also perhaps what prompts the protagonist to join his family in the West. Just as the meeting with Thompson leads him to give in to contradictory feelings, his "spending the summer in Oregon [is] in some fashion a surrender. He [is] giving in partly to his fear that as an aging man he would soon be dead and partly to the fact that he [feels] he [is] losing his family and sense of a family." (11) The fear he had so carefully avoided so far takes the upper hand because his approaching death is the one thing he has to cope with. It is as though the initial break in his routine – the c section done by Thompson on his wife – had, by interrupting regularity, introduced a form of syncopation setting time into movement again. John's finding what Thompson did "somehow beautiful" introduces a form of indetermination, the adverb "somehow" underlining the flimsy nature of the beauty perceived by the character. His being bothered suggests once more that he cannot get the whole picture, that something escapes him in what he describes as beautiful, that he is confronted with an emotion that can neither be understood nor represented.

Twice in the novel, the pronoun "it" is used with no specified referent. The second occurrence is particularly interesting, when John is speaking to Elgin asleep in a hospital bed. Although addressed to his son, John's speech is a monologue in which he tries to voice the contradictions inherent to life. He realizes that it is all a matter of "dealing with *it*". (144, emphasis mine) The verbal phrase, "dealing with it", underlines the disappearance of the subject, because he cannot master let alone define the "it" life is all about. Here lies maybe the moment of syncopation, the subtraction from view and understanding of something that nonetheless takes place, as if, to put it in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, "it had *no place*, did not enjoy the unified space of a figure, but were given in the spacing, in the schematic oscillation of the drawing of the figures, and thereby happened only in the syncopated time of the passage from the limit to the limit"⁷.

In spite of his condemnation of what Thompson did, Livesey is paradoxically suspended, not directed anymore by a feeling that overwhelms him, beyond the limits of reason or on the very limit of reason. Words fail him to describe this feeling (note the imprecision of the phrase "somehow beautiful") and he will resort to drawing "the shape of a pear, then a line across the wide part of the figure" (7) in order to picture the event of the day, to give it shape in an oblique yet symbolic way. But this failure of language corresponds also to a new form of thinking on the limits of words, beyond articulation and logical combinations, in a form of suspension. It opens up unfathomable perspectives for the character and for the reader, perhaps what Jean-François Lyotard calls "the suffering of thinking" (*The Inhuman*, 19). He writes:

The pain of thinking isn't a symptom coming from outside to inscribe itself on the mind instead of in its true place. It is thought itself resolving to be irresolute, deciding to be patient, wanting not to want, wanting, precisely, not to produce a meaning in place of what *must* be signified.[...] Maybe it's just the mode according to which what doesn't yet exist, a word, a phrase, a color *will emerge*. So that the suffering of thinking is a suffering of time, of what happens (19).

This emergence, which is welcome (it is "somehow beautiful") combines suspension and presence in the world. In a way, to use the words of Lyotard again, the liminal event of the novel has "[made] the mind [of Livesey] a blank" (Lyotard, 20), because of the

⁷Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trad. Richard A. Rand, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 62

emergence of the unthought which contrasts with the comfort of his so far regular and well-regulated life. The disturbance he feels afterward might therefore be a symptom of the emergence of pain and the need to cope with it other than by erasing it through routine. Jean-François Lyotard states that "the unthought hurts because we're comfortable in what's already thought. And thinking, which is accepting this discomfort, is also, to put it bluntly, an attempt to have done with it" (20).

Several times in the novel, comfort and discomfort side along, to the point of becoming inseparable, as if the character were no longer able to make sense of what is happening to him. Intensity, or, as Jean-Luc Nancy might say, *intension* seem to replace and oppose intention and understanding. In a way, John gives up the wisdom he had shrouded himself in, giving in to a mixture of fear and safety, to affect. It is particularly the case during one of the micro-events that compose the novel. Although he is afraid of the water, John agrees to go on a fishing trip with Elgin, Katy and her friend Connie. The water is described as being "uncharacteristically flat" (73) yet the trip will end as somewhat of a shipwreck. Indeed, Connie, also known as "the hurricane" starts to rock the boat, "aware of her power" (74). Again, John "feels suddenly disoriented" and "is pitched". The episode takes a certain magnitude for a number of reasons.

The first one is that John is "disturbed by his comfort" when he falls off the boat. His fear connects with a feeling of "being fine" as he says, and although he cannot tell why, the reader suspects that it is for two reasons. To start with, "the water was footing, after the fall, a place he was instead of a place he was going". He is floating, as though suspended in the water, in a stasis altogether different from the one resulting from his routine. He is also incapable of saying what is going on, of making sense of his emotion and the only answer he can provide to Elgin's puzzlement is "I'm not sure". In fact, and this might be the second reason for this paradoxical affect made of fear and comfort, he seems like a spectator of his own fall: "Katy's screaming seemed distant, as in a dream [...] he looked at the faces in the boat and felt himself floating". The distance he experiences renders him unable to communicate what is happening to him, as if his intellect was disconnected from his sensations.

The fact that Connie is nicknamed "the hurricane" gives yet another dimension to his fall into the water. A hurricane cannot be mastered. It embodies Nature in its sublime dimension, whose voice hushes any other. When she is asked to quit rocking the boat, her answer resonates as what cannot be opposed by any form of reasoning or command: "Shut up! [She barks]" And indeed, no language can counter her animal voice. No sense is to be made out of this event which will neither be discussed or analyzed later in the novel.

This dialectical tension between thinking and the impossibility to shape the unthought signals the readiness to accept what *will emerge*. Perhaps then it is no wonder that the landscape plays such an important part in *Cutting Lisa*. Almost every chapter starts with notations on the weather or descriptions of the sea, images combining movement and stillness, sound and silence, as if reconciling contradictions that cannot be accounted for by language. "The sea, for example, offers the loudest kind of silence. Gulls called and waves crashed and rolled constantly, but still all was quiet". (50) The oxymoronic vision everywhere present here induces an incapacity to represent the scenery, to give it shape. All

it calls for is contemplation, a contemplation that both calls forth imagination and goes beyond it. The changing weather, the movements of the sea and the sky preclude any form of capture by the mind. All they require is this speechless contemplation, which reveals the limits of imagination, and foregrounds the ungraspable syncopation of events that take place not in a definite and framed space but, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, within spacing.

And perhaps this is the reason why John won't paint the moon, won't draw limits around the symbol of the limitless. By refusing to represent anything but fruit, he refuses in fact any form of representation, "claiming not to be exercising some highly developed aesthetic peculiarity but only to be painting to get better at it" (7). It is the gesture that matters, the process of painting, the presentation of a world that can be contained neither by words nor shapes. So indeed, there is not much of a plot in *Cutting Lisa*, no full vision, even if its unseen end is announced on the cover of the book. No radical transformation of the character either, but rather perhaps an attempt to seize what it means to be part of the world and accepting the indifference of the elements that compose it, to accept that what is, is and, as one of the narrative voices in Percival Everett's latest novel says, to accept that "there are no realities that are more real than others, only more privileged"⁸.

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⁸ Percival Everett, *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, Minneapolis, Graywolf Press, 2013, p. 31.