PERCEPTIONS AND REFLECTIONS OF AND ON WORLD WAR II IN PENELOPE LIVELY'S "MOON TIGER"

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Abstract: *The paper explores the way in which World War II is perceived and reflected by some characters in Penelope Lively's novel* "Moon Tiger". *Thus, we analyse the perceptions of Claudia Hampton, a historian and war correspondent, and of Tom Southern, a tank officer, and the reflections of the same characters and of Jasper, a TV mogul at the time of the reflection. We shall point out the fact that similar positions engender similar perceptions and reflections.*

Keywords: *perception, reflection, war.*

A historian turned into a novel writer, Penelope Lively deals in her works with human relations, but also with

> the way the past affects both places and people in the present. By juxtaposing collective and individual memory – for instance by looking at history from different points of view – she shows the reader that history is not static but offers various possibilities of interpretation. (Colton-Sonnenberg, 2007: 8).

Awarded the Booker Prize in 1987, Moon Tiger is a historiographic metafiction, characterized as Penelope Lively's own "history of the world in a novel of 202 pages, not closely printed." (Oatley, 1992: 367) One of the historical events that is seen and interpreted in various ways in the novel is World War II, which "haunts her work as the decisive event in the lives of many of her characters and of their culture". (Davies, Davies, 2011) Thus, we get to know the way in which the war is perceived by the main character and at times narrator, Claudia Hampton, a historian turned into a war correspondent, and by her great love Tom Southern, a tank officer, therefore a direct participant in it. The perceptions are reflected by the same characters, but also by Jasper, Claudia's occasional partner and the father of her daughter, a TV mogul at the time of the reflection. Moreover, we shall also examine Claudia's reflections on war.

Claudia's perceptions of the war are those of a woman in her early thirties. She experiences the war as a member of the Press Corps in Egypt, in Cairo and its whereabouts between 1941 and 1944. She is stringer for a Sunday newspaper and correspondent for one of the weeklies. It is not an easy job for a woman, as it is predominantly a male occupation and Claudia has to face problems both with editors in London and with her male colleagues in the Press Corps. She is one of the few representatives of her sex employed to do it. But she is also the best looking and is willing to get her charms into play in order to get what she wants. She is determined to do a good job and is not afraid of going close to the battlefield, to obtain information that she can publish.

In wartime Egypt, life seems to unfold on two levels: on the one hand, there is the war; on the other hand, there is "normal" life. The war is fought somewhere far, in the desert. To those in the town, and for some time for Claudia

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herself, it is something distant and exterior, represented only with the help of a map on the wall of the Press Room and various objects placed on it standing for the people and things involved. The representation connotes the idea that the war is colourful, orderly and simple, quite the opposite of what it actually is.

> The map on the wall of the Press Room is decked out with little flags: red, green, yellow, blue, brown, white. Brigades and divisions make gay patterns upon the contours. The Press Officer's pointer moves among them, reducing everything to orderliness and elegance. Noise, smoke, heat, dust, flesh, blood and metal are gone; it is really all quite simple, a child could grasp it, a question of dispositions and manoeuvres, flanks and pincer movements, lines and boxes. (Lively, 1988: 129)

"Normal" life as experienced by Claudia during World War II is lived in Cairo. It is a kind of life in which entertainment seems to counteract the danger and death lurking nearby. Claudia's perception of it is marked by the image of flowers, by scents and perfume, by swims taken in the swimming pool at Gezira Sporting Club and drinks savoured near the water. It is a frenzy that is provoked precisely by the awareness of the fact that life can end at any moment. Claudia sees herself laughing immoderately, dancing, drinking and meeting lots of people: members of the Press Corps, soldiers on leave, attachés at the Embassy, important army officials, and the inhabitants of Cairo, professional businessmen, bankers or English teachers.

Occasionally, the two kinds of lives intersect, as the military men come on leaves, or as Claudia herself goes close to the front. She sees soldiers flitting "like medieval barons between the battlefield and the sybaritic excesses of the city." (Lively, 1988: 91) and makes an analogy between them and the Crusaders, perceiving this war as an echo of the other.

The closest Claudia gets to the war and to the reality it actually represents is when she spends three days in the desert in order to get material for her articles. It is there and then that she gets acquainted not only to the ugly side of things, but also to Tom Southern, a man through which she will come to get a more profound view of the war. He is the one who will become the love of her life and, as he is a combatant, he will cause her to see the war no longer as an external fact, but as something that affects her directly. Up until then, the Front had appeared to Claudia as an "elusive shifting goal: a concept rather than a place." (Lively, 1988: 92) Afterwards,

> The war, she realizes, has become something quite different. It is no longer prowling on the perimeter, like some large, unpredictable animal that she is safely watching from afar, whose doings are of scientific interest. It has come right up close and is howling at her bedroom door; the shiver it provokes is the atavistic shiver of childhood. She is afraid, not for herself but with that indistinct cosmic fear of long ago. (Lively, 1988: 117)

Accompanied by Tom, Claudia sees the war as a real thing, not merely a representation on a wall. And the real thing is not at all colourful, nice and orderly. The grimmest image of the war seen through Claudia's eyes, perceived by her directly does involve colour, but it is the colour of death. It is the image of the wreckage of a car that had hit a mine and of two wounded men. They are young. There is blood all over the place and insects everywhere.

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> The man is lying face down. His hair is fair. His tin hat lies beside him, part of his head is in black bloody shreds, the sand too is blackened, one leg has no foot. Flies crawl in glittery masses. As she looks at all this she hears from the other side of the smashed car a noise. She steps round to see and there is another shattered body, but this body moves. […] One of his eyes is a purple pulpy mess, the sand under him is dark black, his trousers have been ripped half from him and in the flesh of one thigh is a red hole into which you could put your fist. From it there crawls a line of ants. (Lively, 1988: 98-99)

Though people fight over the desert, the desert remains immune to their struggles.

> This is the area of last week's enemy advance and subsequent retreat. This thousand square miles of emptiness has been wrestled over for five days and nights; it has exacted the lives of several hundred men. And it is untouched, thinks Claudia. Already the sand is starting to digest the broken vehicles, the petrol cans, the tangles of wire; a few more storms and they will sink beneath it. In a few years' time they will have vanished. She watches Tom Southern pore over his maps; these scribblings too are arbitrary – the sand has no boundaries, no frontiers, no perimeters. (Lively, 1988: 96)

Equally immune to the war going on at their doorstep are the Egyptians. "Those of them with sufficient information, leisure and interest watched the progress of the desert war with detachment; when Rommel seemed unstoppable notices appeared in shop windows saying 'German officers welcome here'." (Lively, 1988: 116) Years later, Claudia reflects that "When Egyptians speak of the war they mean the Israeli war, not ours – which wasn't after all anything to do with them anyway." (*ibidem*) Egypt was at the time under British control, though independent, and it was invaded by the Italians in 1940 as a consequence of the attack of the English based in Egypt on the Italian positions in Libya. The Germans invaded it in 1941.

The desert appears as a "tract of sand that is both empty and populous" (Lively, 1988: 96). There are "scores of vehicles" (*ibidem*): motor-cycles, trucks, cars, lorries, tanks, ambulances, jeeps; shacks, shelters, holes in the ground in which men live; the place is full of flies. The images are visual (at night, Claudia sees the light of the stars, but also of searchlights and flames), but also auditory (in the Press Tent near the front line she hears the noise made by the typewriter). At one point she even gets to see the "enemy" – "a lot of down-and-out Italian waiters, average age about twenty-one." (*ibidem*) A Company Headquarters appears as the "centre of civilization" (Lively, 1988: 98).

At one point, they stop in what had been once a tiny seaside settlement. The houses, the café are ruined, but everywhere there are flowers that had sprung amid the tents and the air is fragrant. Nature has its own way, covering the disaster made by people.

After this experience and her meeting Tom, Claudia's life will again unfold on two levels: the days when he is on leave and comes to stay with her and the days that she spends alone, waiting to hear from him. The days she spends without him unfold in rumours, talks of pushes and retreats, arrivals of generals and diplomats. She hangs around in corridors waiting to get the chance to talk to various people or sits "with ears pricked" (Lively, 1988: 105) in various places in the hope of getting some useful information. They seem to be periods when she desperately looks for something to do, something to fill her time with until his return. At one point she tries to get herself another trip to the desert "not because I

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would be anywhere near him but because I wanted to experience what it was he saw and heard and felt." (Lively, 1988: 118) She does not manage, being told that the desert is no place for women. The days spent with Tom abound in colours and perfumes. They spend them at the Club, sitting beside the swimming pool savouring their drinks and the smell of Nivea sun cream, then swimming. In the evening they have dinner, then walk beside the Nile, or visit the Great Pyramid and the centre of commerce near it. They see the streets of old Cairo, full of the smell of animals, humans, kerosene, coffee, roast sweetcorn and frying oil. When she is with Tom, Egypt appears to her as a country of bright colours: gold, pink, turquoise (At night, the bridges on the Nile "wear necklaces of coloured lights" and the house-boats are "festooned with gold". - Lively, 1988: 111); of pleasant sounds: ice clinking in glasses, the slap of the suffragis' slippers on the stone of the hotel terrace; of heat and dust and smells. She experiences it both as herself and through his eyes, the eyes of a man who might see it for the last time. Her perceptions demonstrate Westphal's concept of "polysensoriality", the idea that space is not perceived only by vision, but by all senses. (apud Ager, 2014)

Tom's perceptions of the war are those of a tank officer, a direct participant in it. His life unfolds on two levels as well: the war and the time spent with Claudia in Cairo. Obviously, he experiences the war in a different manner than Claudia. When she asks him what it is like out there he answers by offering a mixture of impressions, like when brainstorming, that suggest the idea that he has not given much thought to it. His actual perceptions will be given to her later, after the war is over and he is no longer alive, under the form of a diary kept by him and sent to his sister, and will be read by Claudia even much later, while she is on her own deathbed.

Tom's perceptions seem to be a reflection of Claudia's. Tom also perceives the war visually (the desert lifts around as a mine explodes), and auditorily (the squadron roars away; headphones whistle and crackle; there is the noise of the battle preparations, followed by the silence of getting no news and no orders; the noise of the repairs and of the enemy ammunition; the "battle noise that reverberates in the head long after it has ceased" - Lively, 1988: 197); the voices transmitting orders in a coded language, like a "ghost chorus" - *ibidem*).

The feeling he experiences most acutely is fear, more acute before the battle, not during it. The fear of being paralyzed with fear and of not being able to act properly, the "atavistic, primitive" (Lively, 1988: 201), impossible to control fear felt when the enemy gets nearer, the sick feeling experienced when the enemy thought dead comes to life and starts firing. On the other hand and at the other extreme, fear is counteracted by the equally irrational exhilaration felt when they have to pursue retreating enemies.

Sleep is also given attention in his diary: sleep in the middle of all the noise or after being in action, coming either as "a black pit of extinction" or as a slipping "just below the level of consciousness" (Lively, 1988: 197) with wild surrealistic dreams that exorcise the hell they went through.

In a manner similar to Claudia's, Tom also notices the indifference of nature to their struggles, the neutrality of the desert that lives a life of its own nearby and the icy glitter of the stars on the night sky above.

Tom's thinking also unfolds on two levels: the present, "with the tank, the men, the equipment, the CO, with what this man has said and that one has done, with the way a brother officer eats with his mouth open (and how in the middle of

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all this one can be irritated by someone's table manners God only knows)" and the future, "all the things I intend to do still" (Lively, 1988: 204) together with the one he refers to in the diary as "C.".

On the other hand, to Tom, Cairo is like "some sort of mad fairyland". (Lively, 1988: 107) While on the battlefield he had almost fought with a boy for a last can of water, now, at the Zoo, he sees gardeners watering the flowers and feels the smell of damp earth. Still, we do not have much of his perceptions of Cairo. We see him only very eager to spend his days there, with Claudia.

The reflections of and on the war appear when everything is over, when those involved in it, whether directly or indirectly, take their time to both reflect on what had happened and reflect it, i.e. show it to others. Though this would be the normal chronology – first the perceptions, then the reflections – , things are not recorded like this in the novel. The reflections do not follow the perceptions, as it would be logical in a chronological narration, but are mixed up with them. Actually, they are also difficult to separate. Still, we have been able to distinguish and will comment on several instances of such reflections.

Claudia's occur at the end of her life, as she awaits her death on a hospital bed. She considers then writing a history of the world, but what unfolds in her mind (as she is in no condition of writing) is actually a history of herself in which World War II seems to occupy an important place, as she returns to it constantly. That it actually occupies the most important place is not obvious until close to the end of the novel.

At the end of the war, she returns home and is waited for by her brother Gordon at the railway station. She is glowing. She wears an orange coat, a little feathered hat, expensive perfume. It is as if she were trying to hide her scars (she had lost Tom and their unborn child) behind a glamorous appearance. She manages to do that. Gordon considers her unscarred by the war. She does not contradict him and will never tell anybody what happened.

Looking back at the war, she comments:

> I arrived in Egypt alone in 1940; I was alone when I left in 1944. When I look at those years I look at them alone. What happened there happens now only inside my head – no one else sees the same landscape, hears the same sounds, knows the sequence of events. There is another voice, but it is one that only I hear. Mine – ours – is the only evidence.
>
> The only private evidence, that is. So far as public matters go – history – there is plenty. Most of it is in print now; all those accounts of which general comes out of it best, who had how many tanks, who advanced where at which point and why. I've read them all; they seem to have little to do with anything I remember. From time to time I quarrel with a fact – a name or a date; mostly they just don't seem relevant. […] I was interested enough in relevance at the time – I had to get a story to file. (Lively, 1988: 70)

The first paragraph of the quotation is filled with regret, the regret of her being the only member of the couple who survived the war. The repetition of alone stresses the feeling. Besides, the paragraph advances the idea that, though the war was a public event, in the sense that it affected so many people, it was at the same time personal, in the sense that each person experienced it in his/ her own way. Claudia suggests that she herself had somebody with whom to share the experience, but that person is no longer here. Probably in an attempt to recover the

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past, we may infer, she has read much about the war. But public history differs from personal one. She does not remember all facts – read or otherwise experienced – as she no longer considers them relevant. What she remembers are feelings, sensations, fragments of experiences that were important for them personally. She admits, however, that at the moment of the war she had a different view on things. The same idea appears in the following quotation:

> Wars are fought by children. Conceived by their mad demonic elders and fought by boys. I say that now, caught out in surprise at how young people are, forgetting that it is not they who are young but I who am old. […] The rest of us grow old and tell each other what really happened; they, of course, will never know, just as they never knew at the time. The files of newspaper libraries are stuffed with these baby-faces, grinning cheerfully from the decks of troop-ships, from train windows, from stretchers. In pursuit of truth and facts, in the exercise of my craft, I have looked at them and thought of the slipperiness of whatever fact or truth it is that makes these faces change with the eyes that view them. It was not boys I saw in 1941.
>
> Nor the grey of old newsprint. In the mind's eye is the blazing technicolour of a hot country, so that I seem to see it still squinting against the glare, dazzled by that relentless sun, moving in landscapes that shimmered in the heat haze. (Lively, 1988: 104)

As we can notice, her perception has changed with the passage of time. The soldiers whom she had seen as men appear to her now as mere boys. Moreover, she also sees them now as the pawns of the elders, their tools only. Everything appears as a black and white picture, as were the photographs taken at the time. Still, back in the 1940's, things were not perceived in grey, as the colour of the faded ink, but in blazing colours.

Claudia also reflects on the language of war, on the words that mirror the reality of those days. On the one hand, the numbers representing the cruel facts behind the term "war":

> the million dead of Leningrad, the three million labour slaves from Belorussia and the Ukraine, the two million prisoners of Kiev, the quarter million maimed by frostbite […] the twenty degrees below zero temperatures of the winter of 1941; […] the thirty destroyed cities, the seven million slaughtered horses, the seventeen million cattle, the twenty million pigs (Lively, 1988: 66- 67),

the fate of the animals paralleling that of men. On the other hand, another type of language, "that lunatic language that lays a smokescreen of fantasy" (Lively, 1988: 67), the language of the code names:

> Operations Snowdrop, Hyacinth, Daffodil and Tulip dancing feyly towards Tobruk. […] the laconic chat about Matildas and Honeys, coy disguise for several tons of mobile death-dealing metal, and the amiable euphemism whereby such things when hit did not explode (roasting alive their crew) but 'brewed up'. (Lively, 1988: 67)

The raw reality evident from the numbers is euphemized in these code names. They are suggestive of nice, delicate things (flowers, women), not normally associated with wars. They too seemed normal to Claudia at that time, though now they appear eccentric.

Tom reflects the war and on it in the answer given to Claudia:

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> It's so many different things. Boring, uncomfortable, terrifying, exhilarating. In rapid succession. Pretty well impossible to convey. […] It's like the whole of life in a single appalling concentration. It does lunatic things with time. An hour can seem like a day or a day like an hour. When you're flung from one state of mind to another with such speed the physical world takes on an extraordinary clarity. […] An astonishing amount of piety goes on out here, you'd be surprised. The Lord is frequently invoked. He's on our side, by the way, you'll be glad to hear – or at least it's taken for granted that he is. (Lively, 1988: 101-102)

He assumes that they are going to win the war

> Not because of the Lord's intervention or because justice will prevail but because in the last resort we have greater resources. Wars have little to do with justice. Or valour or sacrifice or the other things traditionally associated with them. That's one thing I hadn't quite realized. War has been much misrepresented, believe me. It's had a disgracefully good press. I hope you and your friends are doing something to put that right. (Lively, 1988: 102-103)

But as he imagines her unsatisfied with this description, he starts keeping the diary, which can also be seen as his reflection of the war. As far as his reflections on the war are concerned, he intends to do that later, after the war is over, starting from the diary and with Claudia's help. Thus, he hopes to make sense of it some day. He does not get to do it, however, as the war claims his life. Claudia herself, though she has reflected a lot on the war, cannot make sense of it either. But reading Tom's diary, she understands her need of being connected with other people, instead of being an isolated independent self as she has tried to all her life. Only after this, can she die in peace.

As far as the representation of war is concerned, Tom makes the distinction between chroniclers and reporters. The chroniclers are not in the middle of it, therefore they concentrate on big words only, like justice or valour. And on statistics, a word that includes those who fight in the war, a position in which he sees himself as well. Another distinction that he makes is between reading history and being part of it. While he and Claudia can be included among the reporters and, unfortunately, statistics, Jasper belongs to the other side, being what Tom called a "chronicler".

Jasper "had a brilliant war as the youngest member of Churchill's staff, and emerged from it ambitious, well-connected and opportunist." (Lively, 1988: 10) His view is not that of an (ex-) combatant, but that of a spectator and potential beneficiary. At the time of his reflection, Jasper is a TV mogul and the reflection itself is a lavish series presenting a dramatized history of World War II. "A fictional figure, a young officer, was followed in progress through various theatres of war, from the Balkans to the Far East, against a background of enacted scenes of history – Churchill's War Cabinet, D-Day, Yalta …" (Lively, 1988: 49). The story is both a private and a public one, a mixture of fiction (filmed in colours) and reality (filmed in black and white). The fiction is produced with professional actors, while the reality is represented by clips of film shot during the war. What is paradoxical, however, is that it is the latter that looks unreal. The series is a much praised and discussed enterprise, the first of many projected similar productions, but Claudia dislikes it because it turns history into entertainment. Still, she herself

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had no problem in doing the same, writing a book later turned into a film about people who had no personal connection to her, however, the Spaniards and the Aztecs.

It is a fact that different people have different perceptions of the same event. Still, Claudia's and Tom's perceptions of World War II do not differ much from one another. It is as if the two were a single person, with more or less a single mind. The differences in what concerns the reflections can be explained by the fact that one has come to live longer and to have more time to meditate on it than the other. Jasper, on the other hand, opposes them in his view of the war. Still, his reflection of it mirrors and is mirrored by Claudia's reflection of the war between the Spaniards and the Aztecs. Public history is seen in the same manner by the two "chroniclers". But when what is public history for some is private history for others there appear differences in both perceptions and reflections.

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