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On Optimism and Despair

Zadie Smith
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A talk given in Berlin on November 10 on receiving the 2016 Welt Literature Prize.

First I would like to acknowledge the absurdity of my position. Accepting a literary prize is perhaps always a little absurd, but in times like these not only the recipient but also the giver feels some sheepishness about the enterprise. But here we are. President Trump rises in the west, a united Europe drops below the horizon on the other side of the ocean—but here we still are, giving a literary prize, receiving one. So many more important things were rendered absurd by the events of November 8 that I hesitate to include my own writing in the list, and only mention it now because the most frequent question I’m asked about my work these days seems to me to have some bearing on the situation at hand.

The question is: “In your earlier novels you sounded so optimistic, but now your books are tinged with despair. Is this fair to say?” It is a question usually posed in a tone of sly eagerness—you will recognize this tone if you’ve ever heard a child ask permission to do something she has in fact already done.

Sometimes it is put far more explicitly, like so: “You were such a champion of ‘multiculturalism.’ Can you admit now that it has failed?” When I hear these questions I am reminded that to have grown up in a homogeneous culture in a corner of rural England, say, or France, or Poland, during the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, is to think of oneself as having been simply alive in the world, untroubled by history, whereas to have been raised in London during the same period, with, say, Pakistani Muslims in the house next door,



Pete Souza/White House

*President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel
at the G7 Summit, Krün, Germany, June 2015*

Indian Hindus downstairs, and Latvian Jews across the street, is thought of, by others, as evidence of a specific historical social experiment, now discredited.

Of course, as a child I did not realize that the life I was living was considered in any way provisional or experimental by others: I thought it was just life. And when I wrote a novel about the London I grew up in, I further did not realize that by describing an environment in which people from different places lived relatively peaceably side by side, I was “championing” a situation that was in fact on trial and whose conditions could suddenly be revoked. This is all to say I was very innocent, aged twenty-one. I thought the historical forces that had taken the black side of my family from the west coast of Africa, through slavery to the Caribbean, through colonialism and postcolonialism to Britain were as solid and real as the historical forces that, say, purged a small Italian village of its Jews and, by virtue of its physical distance from Milan, kept that village largely white and Catholic in the same years my little corner of England turned racially pluralistic and multifaith. I thought my life was as contingent as the lives lived out in a rural Italian village and that in both cases historical time was moving in the only direction it can: forward. I did not understand that I was “championing” multiculturalism by simply depicting it, or by describing it as anything other than incipient tragedy.

At the same time I don’t think I ever was quite naive enough to believe, even at twenty-one, that racially homogeneous societies were necessarily happier or more peaceful than ours simply by virtue of their homogeneity. After all, even a kid half my age knew what the ancient Greeks did to each other, and the Romans, and the seventeenth-century British, and the nineteenth-century Americans. My best friend during my youth—now my husband—is himself from Northern Ireland, an area where people who look absolutely identical to each other, eat the same food, pray to the same God, read the same holy book, wear the same clothes, and celebrate the same holidays have yet spent four hundred years at war over a relatively minor doctrinal difference they later allowed to morph into an all-encompassing argument over land, government, and national identity. Racial homogeneity is no guarantor of peace, any more than racial heterogeneity is fated to fail.

I find these days that a wistful form of time travel has become a persistent political theme, both on the right and on the left. On November 10 *The New York Times* reported that nearly seven in ten Republicans prefer America as it was in the 1950s, a nostalgia of course entirely unavailable to a person like me, for in that period I could not vote, marry my husband, have my children, work in the university I work in, or live in my neighborhood. Time travel is a discretionary art: a pleasure trip for some and a horror story for others. Meanwhile some on the left have time travel fancies of their own, imagining that the same rigid ideological principles once applied to the matters of workers’ rights, welfare, and trade can be applied unchanged to a globalized world of fluid capital.

But still the question of a failed project—as it applies to the tiny unreal world of my fiction—is not entirely wrongheaded. It's true enough that my novels were once sunnier places and now the clouds have rolled in. Part of this I chalk up simply to the experience of middle age: I wrote *White Teeth* as a child, and have grown up alongside it. The art of midlife is surely always cloudier than the art of youth, as life itself gets cloudier. But it would be disingenuous to pretend it is only that. I am a citizen as well as an individual soul and one of the things citizenship teaches us, over the long stretch, is that there is no perfectibility in human affairs. This fact, still obscure to a twenty-one-year-old, is a little clearer to the woman of forty-one.

As my dear, soon-departing president well understood, in this world there is only incremental progress. Only the willfully blind can ignore that the history of human existence is simultaneously the history of pain: of brutality, murder, mass extinction, every form of venality and cyclical horror. No land is free of it; no people are without their bloodstain; no tribe entirely innocent. But there is still this redeeming matter of incremental progress. It might look small to those with apocalyptic perspectives, but to she who not so long ago could not vote, or drink from the same water fountain as her fellow citizens, or marry the person she chose, or live in a certain neighborhood, such incremental change feels enormous.

Meanwhile the dream of time travel—for new presidents, literary journalists, and writers alike—is just that: a dream. And one that only makes sense if the rights and privileges you are accorded currently were accorded to you back then, too. If some white men are more sentimental about history than anyone else right now it's no big surprise: their rights and privileges stretch a long way back. For a black woman the expanse of livable history is so much shorter. What would I have been and what would I have done—or more to the point, *what would have been done to me*—in 1360, in 1760, in 1860, in 1960? I do not say this to claim some pedestal of perfect victimhood or historical innocence. I know very well how my West African ancestors sold and enslaved their tribal cousins and neighbors. I don't believe in any political or personal identity of pure innocence and absolute rectitude.

But neither do I believe in time travel. I believe in human limitation, not out of any sense of fatalism but out of a learned caution, gleaned from both recent and distant history. We will never be perfect: that is our limitation. But we can have, and have had, moments in which we can take genuine pride. I took pride in my neighborhood, in my childhood, back in 1999. It was not perfect but it was filled with possibility. If the clouds have rolled in over my fiction it is not because what was perfect has been proved empty but because what was becoming possible—and is still experienced as possible by millions—is now denied as if it never did and never could exist.

I realize as I write this that I have strayed some way from the happiness that should rightly attend accepting a literary prize. I am very happy to accept this great honor—please don't mistake me. I am more than happy—I am amazed. When I started to write I never imagined that anyone outside of my neighborhood would read these books, never mind outside of England, never mind “on the continent,” as my father liked to call it. I remember how stunned I was to embark on my very first European book tour, to Germany, with my father, who had last been here in 1945, as a young soldier in the reconstruction. It was a trip filled, for him, with nostalgia: he had loved a German girl, back in 1945, and one of his great regrets, he admitted to me on that trip, was not marrying her and instead coming home, to England, and marrying first one woman and then another, my mother.

We made a funny pair on that tour, I'm sure: a young black girl and her elderly white father, clutching our guidebooks and seeking those spots in Berlin that my father had visited almost fifty years earlier. It is from him that I have inherited both my optimism and my despair, for he had been among the liberators at Belsen and therefore seen the worst this world has to offer, but had, from there, gone forward, with a sufficiently open heart and mind, striding into one failed marriage and then another, marrying both times across various lines of class, color, and temperament, and yet still found in life reasons to be cheerful, reasons even for joy.

He was, I realize now, one of the least ideological people I ever met: everything that happened to him he took as a particular case, unable or unwilling to generalize from it. He lost his livelihood but did not lose faith in his country. The education system failed him but he still revered it and placed all his hopes for his children in it. His relations with women were mostly disastrous but he did not hate women. In his mind he did not marry a black girl, he married “Yvonne,” and he did not have an experimental set of mixed-race children, he had me and my brother Ben and my brother Luke.

How rare such people are! I am not so naive even now as to believe we have enough of them at any one time in history to form a decent and tolerant society. But neither will I ever deny their existence or the possibility of lives like his. He was a member of the white working class, a man often afflicted by despair who still managed to retain a core optimism. Perhaps in a different time under different cultural influences living in a different society he would have become one of the rabid old angry white men of whom the present left is so afeared. As it was, born in 1925 and dying in 2006, he saw his children benefit from the civilized postwar protections of free education and free health care, and felt he had many reasons to be grateful.

This is the world I knew. Things have changed, but history is not erased by change, and the examples of the past still hold out new possibilities for all of us, opportunities to remake, for a new generation, the conditions from which we ourselves have benefited. Neither my readers nor I am in the relatively sunlit uplands depicted in *White Teeth* anymore. But the

lesson I take from this is not that the lives in that novel were illusory but rather that progress is never permanent, will always be threatened, must be redoubled, restated, and *reimagined* if it is to survive. I don't claim that it's easy. I do not have the answers. I am by nature not a political person and these are the darkest political times I have ever known. My business, such as it is, concerns the intimate lives of people. The people who ask me about the "failure of multiculturalism" mean to suggest that not only has a political ideology failed but that human beings themselves have changed and are now fundamentally incapable of living peacefully together despite their many differences.


In this argument it is the writer who is meant to be the naive child, but I maintain that people who believe in fundamental and irreversible changes in human nature are themselves ahistorical and naive. If novelists know anything it's that individual citizens are internally plural: they have within them the full range of behavioral possibilities. They are like complex musical scores from which certain melodies can be teased out and others ignored or suppressed, depending, at least in part, on who is doing the conducting. At this moment, all over the world—and most recently in America—the conductors standing in front of this human orchestra have only the meanest and most banal melodies in mind. Here in Germany you will remember these martial songs; they are not a very distant memory. But there is no place on earth where they have not been played at one time or another. Those of us who remember, too, a finer music must try now to play it, and encourage others, if we can, to sing along.

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