

## REVIEW ESSAY

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE IN REVOLUTION-MAKING:  
A CRITICAL REVIEW OF *RIDING THE WHIRLWIND*\*

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... by deciding to become active agents of history we disturbed those ancient ways without offering any better replacements (pp. 140-41).

To many Ethiopians of my generation who were either active participants in, or simply amazed witnesses to, the 1974 Ethiopian revolution that led to the unceremonious deposal of one of the most awe-inspiring monarchs of the twentieth century, to those whose dreams and visions subsequently turned into the most unspeakable of nightmares, to the many who suffered the agony of loss bordering on the total, Bereket's novel *Riding the Whirlwind* has very little to offer either by way of recalling fond memories of unselfish sacrifices and fallen heroes or providing a graphic depiction of torture chambers and killing fields the country was turned into under the Mengistu regime. In this regard, the novel may indeed come as a surprise, even disappointment. To those who enter the grounds of the novel expecting to find hitherto undisclosed "information" concerning the revolution in both its historical and political dimensions, to those also who approach it equipped with a foreknowledge of Bereket, the academe or the political figure, expecting him to provide "us" with some "insider's" view of plots being hatched and strategies being mapped, the novel comes with no pretense of being of value in that regard either. More importantly, however, those who might have it in their minds to approach the book with a "partisan agenda" (and this is not at all unlikely),\*\* from whatever political corner or ideological position they

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\*Bereket Habte Selassie, *Riding the Whirlwind: An Ethiopian Story of Love and Revolution* (Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, 1993). 331pp. Cloth, \$21.95.

\*\*I started the essay by entering a caveat as to what not to expect from the novel. The caveat was partly triggered by a comment appearing on the flap of the book's jacket. It comes from Thomas Keneally. I have no quarrel with Mr. Keneally for thinking highly of the book. But compliments, when they exceed the bounds of the reality occasioning them, turn into mere flattery (at best) or even into their opposite. When someone of Keneally's caliber and reputation (as an award-winning author, according to the indication under his name) "reviews" the novel as "a magnificent

come, they will truly be disappointed. In this novel no party, movement, or front is a privileged subject, in any aspect of its existence and activities over the years. Whatever the novel may incorporate into its narrative structure in this regard is there in the service of a concern that transcends the particularity of the material itself.

The events, places, and people exist in the novel less in their own right than as points of departure, so to speak, for the narrator/protagonist's reflection upon the question(s) constantly invading his psychic space at every important turn he negotiates in his revolutionary experience. The revolution itself figures only as a function of the quest—a moral quest, to be precise—which forms the central preoccupation of the protagonist as well as the central theme of the novel. The novel, alas, is not about the revolution, much less about romance, both of which only figure in it as the author's *materia philosophia*.

The almost naive linearity of the plot and the fast tempo with which it moves, the thrift-like economy of description and the virtual absence of characterization, the deliberate (so it seems) avoidance of colorful imagery, the matter-of-fact and no-nonsense approach to the events themselves, all these seem to make it evident from the outset as to where the novelist's concern lies. This approach presents itself as an invitation to a specific mode of reading, a reading that, instead of demanding our emotional involvement in the events and the fates of the personalities peopling the novel, requires co-operation with the narrator/protagonist in a philosophical venture. As important, even necessary, as the revolution (as a political project) is, there is an equally important question—the narrator/protagonist seems to intimate—that the revolution's political immediacy not only ignores but also seems to be necessarily blind to. The protagonist's personal odyssey (for that is what it is) lies primarily in his (almost) obsessive attempt to find a comfortable place for this "other" question within the scheme of his life as a revolutionary. And it is not at all an enviable task. As gruelling (psychologically) as the protagonist's odyssey may be, his portrayal

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fictional rendering of *the most grievous and best kept secrets of this century - the secret of the savage relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea*" (my emphasis), one should wonder what the point is of saying something about a novel that does not even remotely take up this relationship (savage or otherwise) as its subject matter. Clearly, Mr. Keneally is not so naive as to believe his own words; neither does he expect readers not to see that his claim does not figure anywhere in the novel. This is one kind of "partisan" reading that I am referring to. It is not only misleading, it is outright preposterous, whatever the motive. I must agree, however, that Bereket's novel would be as worth one's while to read as I believe it was worth the labor he went through to deliver it.

does not invite a particularly sympathetic identification with him. Our participation in his effort consequently becomes a matter of intellectual pursuit.

The story (that is, the protagonist's story) is told to draw attention to, and possibly elaborate on, what I would like to call the moral (as opposed to the political) imperative of the revolution, or what in the novel boils down to the same thing: the human equation. Every time the question arises in the protagonist's mind, the private and the public, or the personal and the political, are posed in oppositional, even irreconcilable, terms. Though the protagonist is clear (intellectually speaking) that when it comes to making "choices" between his personal attachments and public responsibilities, between political commitment to the revolution and moral obligation to individuals in his private life, his *has to be* in favor of the former, his mind is never at rest with regard to the latter. To the same degree he recognizes the necessity of the revolution and accepts the fact of his instrumentality in the accomplishment of its tasks, the ambivalent nature of his role materializes in the form of a moral dilemma persisting so tenaciously that his political "profession" seems, by comparison, to recede into a mere background. This preoccupation tests him constantly, threatening to undermine his confidence in himself and, consequently, in the revolution itself, this latter concern of his being the most disconcerting one.

There are two particularly significant moments in the novel which help bring out the protagonist's moral dilemma. The question posed is not whether the protagonist has a problem in making the ultimate choice (that choice has been made for him by the set of circumstances that we may, for convenience, call "history") but whether, first of all, a sensible balance can be kept between the public and the private, or what is the same thing, between the political and the moral; second, whether, when the demands of the political prevail as an all-consuming passion, the price paid for and the toll taken by these demands are not, after all, too much. Is it possible to unconditionally submit to the demands of the former and still maintain one's "humanity," in any sense of the term? The novel candidly poses these and other related questions, suggesting in the very manner of their posing the virtual impossibility of arriving at a resolution—in fact, they do defy resolution. In this impasse, the only choice left for the protagonist (and many like him) seems to be not much more than accepting his "revolutionary fate," and then hope that his sanity is preserved in the process.

The first moment in the service of the protagonist's "reflection" upon the ambivalent nature of his role and the moral dilemma confronting him as a result involves individuals with whom he has

relationships varying in kind as well as degree. The first, of course, involves his family, particularly his wife, Hanna. One day, after lunch at Desta's (the protagonist's) house, the conversation turns to politics during which Melaku (Desta's friend and comrade) tries to convince Hanna of the importance of the task at hand and of her husband's indispensability in its fulfillment. Already, the terms in which Desta's role is described leave no room for doubt as to the space that personal relations occupy in relation to politics. As far as Melaku (and the rhetoric of revolution) is concerned, Desta is but "a gift to the nation" (p. 39). In other words, Desta has no individuality apart from the assigned role he plays. The choice has been made by the circumstance of the revolution, and Desta recognizes this. In this scheme, Hanna herself will have a place only to the extent that she accepts the situation for what it is. What is rather disconcerting (even frightening) is the fact that her relationship with her husband, as his wife, as family, is at best secondary and, if push comes to shove (and we see a pattern in that direction at work), inconsequential. Though Hanna appears to be placated by Melaku's patriotic appeal, the complex nature of the situation and the problems it poses are not lost on Desta's moral sensibility:

Hanna seemed to be mollified. But I was not. Although I did not want to admit it, the double life I was leading was taking its toll on me. I felt guilty keeping secrets from Hanna, who was always honest and straightforward with me, as with everyone she knew. But on the other hand, if I disclosed the secrets of my underground life, I would not only be breaking a vow of silence, I would be jeopardizing her and our daughter. Also, she would always be worried, and she might even object politically. So I maintained my silence. I knew she suspected something, but she had no idea of the depth of my involvement in the underground movement (p. 39).

This is a very legitimate concern and, on the superficial level, it is as it should be. However, what is foregrounded here is not so much the protagonist's concern for the welfare and safety of his wife (his family) as it is his own worry about the "double life" he leads. That he opts to "maintain the vow of silence," that he recognizes the revolution has its prices, does not at all help minimize the weight of moral burden he carries with him, even as the unflinching revolutionary ("unrepentant" is the term he uses) that he describes himself to be (p. 14). In fact, the larger the revolution looms in its urgency and importance, the more the intensity with which the moral imperative demands his attention. What is perhaps disconcerting to Desta (the revolutionary) is the fact that the choice presents itself in apparently incompatible terms. Yet there is

nothing inherently incompatible between one's moral obligation to family and friends and commitment to politics, in this case to the revolution. The incompatibility is a matter of circumstance, of expediency, not of some ontological principle. The revolution, as the call of the nation, subordinates everything else to itself. In Desta's words, the revolutionary vision "defined our attitudes toward practically everything, including our relations with people around us at home and in the work place. It dominated our thoughts. It permeated our consciousness" (p. 14). All personal relations stand only in a functional relation to this totalizing scheme. In this sense, the revolution is literally impersonal. There is very little room, if any, for personal considerations, and the protagonist seems to cherish, and even relish, the idea that even that little space may be there for him to "meditate" upon the possibility of striking a sensible balance between the two terms thus opposed. Whether such a balance is possible or not, it still remains of paramount importance to the novel's theme that the particular dilemma the protagonist is confronted with is an ever-present problematic of the revolutionary process. The choice, as choice, does not make sense. Consequently, the protagonist's attempt to understand, explain (mostly to himself), and/or justify his predicament is what is important in the passage just cited.

Then there is his relationship, involving romance, with Mimi, the lover he meets in the process of conducting his underground activities. In the episode(s) describing his involvement with her, naturally the romantic aspect is highlighted. However, the same moral dilemma enters the scene, but from a different angle. Here the opposition is between what I may call "revolutionary ethics" (or propriety) and natural impulses. The question, simply posed, reads: is it proper for Desta to indulge in sexual escapades, particularly when this indulgence is carried out even before his murdered comrade's (Melaku's) "corpse has begun to get cold?" This is the first aspect of his dilemma, the strictly personal side. The second aspect of his ethical dilemma is something to be inferred, something implicitly given in the context of the ideal of being a revolutionary. Implicit in this second aspect of the dilemma is the assumption that as a revolutionary, the protagonist should resist all such temptations. In the scheme of the revolution which makes of the revolutionary a more-than-ordinary being (as the "midwife of history," p. 13), not only personal relations but natural urges, it is assumed (wrongly or rightly is of no account), are to be suppressed. Or, as we know of these things from contemporary American politics, public figures have to be discreet about such indulgences. The problem for our protagonist, however, does not seem to be the morally "sinful" act of adultery or his unfaithfulness to his wife. Well, such things happen all the time, as long as they are recognized as the human foibles that they are! For him, the realization

that he could, under the present circumstances and given his commitment as a revolutionary, submit to these "ordinarily human" weaknesses is where the moral/ethical burden seems to lie. Mimi does not seem to figure in this aspect of his dilemma (not yet anyway), for, after all, she is only the proverbial seductress, "the fallen woman," whose interest in him may not go beyond the immediate satisfaction of the desires of the flesh. She may even be there to lead him astray of his "noble bidding." He expresses his predicament in one of the better-executed passages of the novel in the following manner:

It was all absurd. And I was attacked once again by that mordant guilt that was eating away at my entrails; the scotch only numbed it. Then I found myself getting excited by this mysterious, beautiful woman. *It was as if my mind had become the battleground between two demons: the demon of free will, saying: "to hell with all scruples!" emboldened by the seductive presence of Mimi; and the demon of over-caution and self-censorship.* I even thought: what if this is a trap? What if she is an imperial agent? But by the time she returned with the food, I had already decided to let the demon of free will win the battle (p. 79, my emphasis).

Once again, the pain of having to "choose between things" presents itself with as much force as the first time, except that now the numbing effect of the alcohol, coupled with the exciting beauty of the "mysterious" woman (not much mystery there!), works inevitable wonders, coming, as it were, to the rescue of our "revolutionary saint." Ironically (even with a trace of self-mockery, it seems), the otherwise principled revolutionary is freed from his "ethical bondage" by a demon—one conveniently termed the "demon of free will." The bondage itself is presented as a demon—"of over-caution and self-censorship." The depiction of the narrator/protagonist as "a battleground between two demons" has far-reaching implications, much more than the episodic nature of the encounter and the accompanying guilt he feels seem to suggest. "To hell with all scruples!" Including revolutionary scruples? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. That the protagonist finds himself, even if momentarily, to be nothing more than a function of "two seductive forces" speaks for more than his ambivalent stance and ethical dilemma in a particular situation. Commitment to the revolution, in the context of which this "eros" simply reigns supreme, is juxtaposed with the seductive force of the "mysterious woman," making of the former nothing more than an object of sheer passion. In the mind of the protagonist, the bothersome nature of the dilemma lies in this realization. Our protagonist is tempted, "Christ-like," by a demon, ironically of "free will," and he succumbs! Unlike the Christ, however,

he is a mere mortal, a mere human being. Precisely the point! Very conveniently then, within the scheme of the narrative itself, Desta finally "resolves" the debate within himself by means of a justification that seems all too familiar:

As I dressed, I was surprised to find that I felt neither guilt nor shame. These are facts of life, *I told myself*. Joy. Sorrow. Love. Death. Life is too short for regrets or crippling pangs of guilt. *Take life as it comes*, I thought to myself. *Why question* a magnificent gift of life such as Mimi! *Besides, this gift did not diminish my commitment to the cause* or my resolve to avenge my friend's death (p. 89, my emphasis).

"I told myself," "Why question," "Besides." This "discourse" on "the facts of life" is not as self-evident as the protagonist makes it to be. The phrases emphasized in the passage belie the protagonist's sense of himself as having come to terms with the ambivalent nature of his predicament—being torn between the political and the personal (or the moral) imperatives which seem to place, at least up to this point, equal demands on his life. In short, by justifying (and nothing more) his passionate involvement with Mimi, as against the background of what is otherwise expected of him as a public figure of the revolution, he only accepts, recognizes, his dilemma for what it is. Not only "why regret," but also "why question!" "Take life as it comes" is hardly a line of reasoning, much less that of a conscious revolutionary with a free will not only to choose but even to change things!

Desta's attempt to reconcile the moral and the political in his life, to come to terms with his dilemma, takes us yet to another encounter with Mimi. At this point the protagonist's relation with her takes a turn for the worse, worse in the sense of involving the intricacies of intimacy, or love, if you will. Yet, the relationship also seems to figure positively (at least to him), for it is at this point that Mimi is taken into his confidence and becomes, quite literally, the guardian of his secrets—he invests in her the trust and responsibility of hiding his secret documents. For inexplicable reasons, he finds out that she is the only one he trusts:

The thrill and sheer abandon with which I embraced this romance in the midst of a political crisis is hard to express. Maybe there was a connection. The odd thing was that, although I did not discuss politics with her, I felt as if she understood and supported the things for which I was working (p. 119).

They make passionate love and, inexplicably, a sense of "camarderie" is begat. The trust he invests her with is spelled in political terms, not in moral or personal terms. The trust even then is a perceived one ("I felt as if. . ."). Its significance in terms of his ethical dilemma lies in the service it offers as grounds for the justification of his "moral profligacy" and "ethical laxity." In somehow reconciling the personal and the political in this manner, nothing is achieved other than putting his troubled mind at rest. In other words, the tension is never really resolved, precisely because in the scheme of things as they stand, it is not resolvable. It is enough to "feel" that he still has his political commitment, and the resolve to follow it through, and that Mimi has the moral courage to be on his side, even while fully aware of the risks involved. Whether at this point one chooses to formulate the equation as "politics being moralized" or "morality being politicized" hardly matters, for symbolized in the totality of their relationship is the perceived dialectical interaction inherent in the oppositional relation between the two terms. Given, however, the narrative scheme of the novel as well as the protagonist's "central" concern with the moral/ethical aspect of his involvement (the political having never been questioned), it would not be too farfetched to suggest that the attempt has throughout been one of "moralizing" politics, investing it, that is, with the human dimension that it seems, by definition, to lack. At any rate, our protagonist finally seems to have reached that moment in his moral crisis where he could own up to his personal, human weaknesses and be at peace with himself. Herein is inscribed, for him, the odd sense of spiritual fulfillment that he seems to feel.

The second moment in his "moral odyssey" is occasioned by a visit to his ailing mother in Gonder. The occasion provides him with an opportunity for yet another reflection. But this time around the reflection takes him outside of himself, where the moral conflict he feels within grows in scope to embrace a wider set of relationships, specifically that between the revolutionary and the community in whose name he/she rose up in arms. He uses the moment not so much to question the revolution, of which he was a part, as to ask questions of practical import regarding the self-perception of the revolutionary and, by implication, "our" perception of revolution-making.

In his mother's house, he finds himself, on the only evening he stays there, surrounded by his nieces and nephews who "sat at my feet never taking their eyes off me." Then, as if in a reverie, and in a mood that completely belies the equanimity with which he seems to have handled himself so far, with a candor that a radical revolutionary of those days would probably find embarrassing, maybe even "reactionary," the protagonist pours his heart out thus:

To them the evening must have seemed like a miracle. It was to me. You don't get that kind of warmth and community of spirit in the big cities. With all its material backwardness, the life of these simple folks was better at the spiritual level. Will it be there for long? I wondered. Will it be swept aside in the march toward material progress; and if so, can it be replaced by something remotely resembling it? (p. 140)

Here, too, on the surface, this reflection seems to focus on the contrast between the impliedly dehumanizing materiality of the city and the "pastoral bliss" the country enjoys in its spiritual fullness. Yet, that the revolution, at any rate the revolutionary's self-assigned role as "savior," is also implicated becomes clear when he continues: "I did not know then and I still don't know today. But one thing seems certain: by deciding to become active agents of history, we disturbed those ancient ways without offering any better replacements" (pp. 140-41). This realization, among others, seems to me to have provided the impulse for the novel's inception. The revolutionary, earlier on bothered by individual moral dilemma, now sits in his mother's house in sober contemplation of what went wrong overall. This brief moment (perhaps nothing more than a couple of hours) provides the yarn out of which the protagonist's critical attitude we find in the beginning pages of the novel appears to have been woven. There are several passages illustrative of this attitude, but a couple of them seem to encapsulate, in the strongest possible terms, his evaluation of what (at least in part) went wrong:

I never thought things could get worse. I did not know what the future had in store. To ordinary mortals like myself the future seems always bright, especially in youth.

That was how I saw things then, until the revolution exploded in our faces long before we were ready for it; long before the squabbling factions of our movement could heal their mutually inflicted wounds. And the revolution threw up from its womb unexpected forces and individuals that surprised us (p. 11).

Then (the bombshell?):

I belonged to what I proudly considered to be the *creme de la creme*, young people who believed that they were summoned by history to play a special role. . . .

As a fraternity of the enlightened, we thought we could do no wrong. . . . We were utterly convinced that we could bend events to our will; that we could organize important social forces

like labor unions and students and harness their energies to implement our ideas and dreams of a better future. It took time and some painful experiences for us to recognize the arrogance and naiveté implicit in our belief (p. 12).

If the novel could be said to have a thesis, it is this: what the youthful revolutionary, as well-meaning as he was, thought was possible and what reality had in store were simply two different things. The difference is between theory and practice. Does "men make their own history, but not according to their own free will" sound familiar? This is the lesson we seem to forget as fond as we seem to be of quoting these same words. Experience has shown that most of us who, at one time or another, considered ourselves to be revolutionaries were "textbook revolutionists" of the Nega Gobena type in the novel, who indiscriminately imported, like most everything, ideas that had very little to do with the complex reality on the home front.

I do not know how well this "self-criticism" of the protagonist's will be taken by many. For all I know, the protagonist (and through him, the author) may be viewed as a "snivelling romantic" lamenting the loss of innocence. We can go on debating that, but for now I, for one, believe Mr. Bereket has shown both candor and courage (still rare among the elite) to plainly say that we, of the *creme de la creme*, have not done well by "the people," our good intentions notwithstanding. At least that much must be owned. On this score, then, the novel goes beyond being a mere object of aesthetic contemplation, and asserts itself as a political testament as well as a lesson in history. In a country, indeed a whole region, where, to appropriate the protagonist's words, "the scriptures of Twentieth Century Revolution" are still being quoted "by every faction and every national movement in support of its case" (though not with the same rigor as before), in a place where politics seems to operate, for the most part, in a "moral vacuum," the novel should have an important significance as a warning: if the appropriate lesson is not drawn from the past (a past that is very much part of the present), if this past is simply recalled for its own sake, history may repeat itself not even as farce, but in a fashion for which we may never find any terms at all.

Finally, whether the novel is read simply as a tract on the moral ambivalence inherent in a revolution, or as one sounding a call, in practical terms, for us to heed the errors of the past, I think Bereket Habte Selassie has done a commendable job, even with the few weaknesses I believe it suffers from on matters of technique. As dealing with them here would serve no particular purpose, I shall quietly make my exit.