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Idan Yaron, *The Toilet in the Symbolic Sphere*. Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005, 215 pp., US\$21.00 (in Hebrew).

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As the opening sally in the series 'Fetish: An Israeli Series for Cultural Studies', *The Toilet in the Symbolic Sphere* is an intriguing book in its own right. But it is also a reminder that in the morass of conflict and suffering that is the Middle East, there is also space for pondering the everyday and fathoming its inner meanings. Yet the everyday includes many different kinds of elements, and why, of them all, Yaron chose to mull over the toilet is a question that the author undertakes to answer. On page 13, paraphrasing Lord Acton, he says, 'I will claim that the clearest test for assessing whether a society is functioning well is to examine the treatment given the toilet', no less. By this, it turns out that the author is referring to the blatant openness of the toilet, and its limitless penetrability that can be seen as a metonymic reference to the fate of the female. And a society is, according to Yaron, tested by its positioning of women. Because the discussion is in the realm of social symbolism, Yaron insists that it is not enough to centre on the history of the toilet as a mere matter of technological evolution. In every case, as the varied linguistic representations (chamber pot, water closet, lavatory, 'house of use') show, the toilet reflects many aspects of the meanings that infuse the social structure. It should be seen as a representation in space of central relationships; and it is the effects of this representation that Yaron undertakes to spell out.

The book is divided into two parts, with Part 1 ('The Physical Space of the Toilet') presenting a historical overview of the evolution of the toilet in ancient times, in the Middle Ages, and in, as the Hebrew has it, 'the New Time'. Here he explains how different conceptualizations of cleanliness and hygiene were embodied in the technological adjustments produced in different eras. Part 2

discusses the symbolic space of the toilet about which, adopting terms from Lefebvre, he says, 'It lives; it speaks'. It is a space that is coded and can be interpreted as a reflection of a way of life. Indeed, Yaron finds support for his thesis in a long quote from Erica Jong in which she points out how arrangements of the toilet and the toilet paper disclose the inner nature of the British, the Germans, the Italians, the French and the Japanese.

In exploring the symbolism of the toilet, Yaron approaches it in Goffman's terms as a 'situational territory' (p. 63), a space where events are framed as a setting for appropriate kinds of social relationships. Thus, it is possible to show the differences between the 'friendliness' of the toilet in Greco-Roman history and the secrecy attached to the toilet with its implications of sexuality in Jewish traditions. In the Talmud, the 'house of usage' is dark and closed, not presentable and therefore hidden, polluted and mysterious (p. 73). Yaron finds this construction analogous to that of the woman in Hebrew law, whose 'glory is within', i.e. who should not be seen outside the home. But there is also an analogy with the dead body, which defiles the environment. Thus, the toilet is associated with the weakness of the female and with the desecration of death.

To point up the connections between the toilet and different aspects of life, Yaron does not stay within the confines of Jewish tradition. He picks and chooses from the literary canon, from that of the plastic arts, and from sociological theory. In the early 20th century, Marcel Duchamp's choice of the toilet as an *objet d'art* not only astonished the bourgeoisie, as the Dadaists planned, but also set the standard for a series of artistic interpretations and reinterpretations of the toilet bowl and its surroundings. Those surroundings are no less than the web of daily life framed in amenities introduced by expanding industry. Through its reinterpretation as a status symbol, the toilet also became a measuring rod of stratification. The *nouveau riche* taste for gold faucets and inlaid toilet bowls puts to shame the starkly minimalistic hygienic appurtenances of the Le Corbusier flats designed for use by the working classes. But as backstage (Goffman, 1959) in every household, even the fixed presence of the toilet with golden trappings is always an unknown, a bizarre entity that is like a stranger, in that it is forever indefinite and mysterious. By contrast with the front stage of the living room, and, in the home (by contrast with Goffman's restaurant), even of the kitchen, the realm of the toilet is unfamiliar and different. It is the hidden area of biological needs, where behaviours are informal, outside the social game, liberated from the need to make an impression, and from the obligations and prohibitions that are at the heart of the definition of class and caste.

Unlike Ritzer (2004), who used McDonald's as the emblem of the proletarianization of workers and the alienation of their humanity, Yaron finds inspiration in McDonald's for understanding the revolutionary divisions of meaning that the toilet has undergone. Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, insisted on spotlessly clean toilets. As his instructions to the staff disclose, the toilet is central to the standard of cleanliness instituted by McDonald's in popular restaurants and workers have to accept the responsibility for keeping the toilets clean. These standards were carried over to the McDonald's drive-ins, which had to overcome the reputation of sloppiness and moral laxity that had until then been attached to drive-in restaurants. In contrast to the self-evident association of the toilet with pollution

and disorder, traits associated with the dirt of prostitution, McDonald's toilet has an image of a space of compensation, 'the neat and "clean" Puritan settlement, identified above all with the male' (p. 134, my translation).

Yaron completes his tour of the different meanings that have been and can be assigned to the toilet by placing the toilet experience in the context of a social drama. Using Goffman's restaurant as a metaphor for 'anyplace', Yaron describes the time spent there as a social drama, the realization of a rite of passage in the compass of a single event. Like the rites of passage described by Van Gennep (1965) and elaborated by Turner (1982), the actor who takes part in the rite passes from the restaurant to the toilet and back to the restaurant. With Turner, he defines the entrance into the toilet as segregation, loss (with the implication of death of the old role). The time spent in the toilet is a period of liminality, a paradoxical ambivalent experience of fluctuation. It is the sphere of 'turning over' and of reaching a new awareness. Leaving the toilet is accompanied by a ritual of hand washing that mimics the rejection of the meeting with 'death' at the limen. The return to the restaurant is an act of reaggregation analogous to rebirth in the new role. In the penultimate chapter of the book, Yaron analyses toilet scenes in two books (*Ulysses*, *The Da Vinci Code*) and three film genres (gangster films, war films and the film *Pulp Fiction*) to show the aptness of the parallels between a rite of passage and the ritual of the toilet in the restaurant.

In summing up his argument, Yaron specifies the lesson he thinks can be drawn from the intense examination of the wealth of ambivalent meanings to be found in the varied features of the toilet. The centuries-long rejection of the female side of humanity and its derogation to no more than brute nature, an environment that can easily be ignored, is robbing society of significant sources of strength. Taking the time to examine the symbolism and the experience of the toilet is, to his mind, a means for renewing the flow of energy that stems from the female elements in all of us. The goal of the long tour of the toilet has been to awaken readers to the need to find ways to combine the potencies of both male and female in order to cure the social ills to which human beings are prey.

Written in a style that is engaging without descending to cheap popularization, this book is an example of the not always evident strengths of culture studies. Yaron's exploration of meanings both observable and obscure is buttressed by evidence from works in different disciplinary domains that are woven together in a way that overcomes the danger of apparent arbitrariness to make a critical point.

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