

15 A postcolonial aesthetic

Repeating upon the present

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The task of rerouting involves not only a re-mapping but also a re-vision (a re-doing as well as a new way of seeing) of what we take as read in our practice as postcolonial critics. If we assume this to be the case, then a central concept we might want to revise, to look at again, and attempt to make more transparent, is the too-little-examined notion of a postcolonial aesthetic. Driving this contention is, at one level, the awareness that ‘postcolonial aesthetic’ represents nothing less than a contradiction in terms, perhaps even an oxymoron. Insofar as *the postcolonial*, always a contentious term, is used to refer not merely chronologically but politically, and is taken to designate writing in opposition to empire and its oppressions, then there is little sense in which postcolonial writing can be both political *and* implicated in a (purely) aesthetic stance.

A crucial way of rerouting or re-examining the postcolonial therefore would be for those of us designated as critics of postcolonial literature to set aside the ‘issues’ that tend to define the postcolonial, and interrogate what its aesthetic, or its literariness, might in fact consist in. This, then, means asking what makes up the singularity of the postcolonial artifact. Is there something intrinsically postcolonial about certain kinds of writing *qua* form, about their structures of feeling or the modes of attention they invite; about certain inflections of voice or certain tropes and uses of trope? Or is a postcolonial aesthetic – if it exists – always to be understood with reference to some real world out there, separate from the artifact?

John Keats is one of those who in his letters memorably evoked the disinterestedness of the aesthetic by saying that he hated poetry ‘that has a palpable design upon us’. Yet there is a whole host of postcolonial texts, many of which are critically deemed evocative, moving, beautiful, that manifestly have a ‘palpable design upon us’ not so much through their evocativeness as through the message they are trying to transmit whether stylistically or otherwise. In postcolonial writing and criticism, as this implies, a purely aesthetic approach or theory has to date often been considered a western, middle-class indulgence. This, then, is one way through which the postcolonial has repeated upon the present (to refer to my title): in its hostility to matters ‘solely aesthetic’. The second edition of the Routledge *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft *et al.* 2005) typically refers postcolonial representation to ‘issues and debates’: globalization, the environment, resistance, diaspora. There is no overt mention of an aesthetic discernible.

1 And yet, as is manifestly clear from our practice, postcolonial critics do rely
 2 on a generally unacknowledged notion of an aesthetic – what we might call an
 3 aesthetic in so many words – when we speak of postcolonial literature, or of the
 4 singularity or particularity of the writing we're interested in. Most typically, and
 5 here is another repetition upon the present, we invoke the polyglot layerings
 6 and cross-cultural mixings of postcolonial writing as tracking the standard-issue
 7 cross-hemispheric, migrant or postcolonial experience. In such cases, a mimetic
 8 aesthetic, if nothing else, is involved: an aesthetic that is deemed to reflect a
 9 certain postcolonial cultural politics or condition.

10 Given this tacit acknowledgment, would it not give greater clarity and sali-
 11 ence to our work, and a more powerful understanding of postcolonial *writing's*
 12 significance to the task of rerouting the discipline, if we more *boldly* considered,
 13 in theoretical-aesthetic and not only political terms, what a postcolonial aesthetic
 14 might entail? Indeed, it might help to shed light on the politics of the postcolo-
 15 nial text if we looked more closely at its generic and stanzaic forms, as a critic
 16 like David Scott of *Conscripts of Modernity* suggests, as when he discusses the tragic
 17 mode of much postcolonial discourse (Scott 2004). At base, what we are dealing
 18 with here are the connotations of both the programmatic and the reductive that
 19 to date tend to attach to the concept of a postcolonial aesthetic – and this aware-
 20 ness of the concept's limitations then generates a range of important questions.
 21 Is what we name a postcolonial aesthetic no more than a reiteration of tried and
 22 tested humanist assumptions about literature dressed in a late colonial guise –
 23 assumptions concerning its inherent yet universally accessible meaningfulness;
 24 concerning its capacity to elicit a cathartic or ethical response? Alternatively, are
 25 there particular modes, stances, or sets of motifs that could be characterized as
 26 peculiarly or typically postcolonial, yet are not entirely circumscribed by their
 27 real-world reference? Or, again, do we need a specialized critical vocabulary to
 28 speak of specifically postcolonial texts? Thinking strategically, if we were able to
 29 formulate, even just in a preliminary way, the notion of a postcolonial aesthetic,
 30 if we were able to establish postcolonial aesthetic protocols, this would assist in
 31 legitimating the study of postcolonial writing *qua* writing, as not simply reducible
 32 to testimony, tract, or manifesto.

33 I do not have critical or theoretical rabbits up my sleeve, in the sense of full or
 34 satisfactory responses to those questions with which I began. Instead I aim to retrace
 35 the polarities of certain well-known debates about the aesthetic *and* the postcolonial
 36 (or indeed the aesthetic *versus* the postcolonial), in order finally to assess whether,
 37 on balance, that *and* represents a legitimate, even legitimating, connection. Is it,
 38 alternatively, no more than a formal bridge between two concepts in irreconcilable
 39 and universalizing contention? Throughout, I take the term 'aesthetic' broadly
 40 speaking as referring to a concern with the form and structure of a work of art over
 41 its raw content, or with form as a critical part of its content. The phrase 'postcolo-
 42 nial aesthetic' therefore implies the privileging, for example, of the work's generic
 43 aspects and connotative language. Above all, it implies a concern not to read that
 44 work only with orientation to other frames of reference, historical, social, or politi-
 45 cal, but on its own terms, as insisting on its own particular modes of attention.

1 Strictly speaking, that is to say, if we speak in ways tending in the direction of
 2 one of the most influential, rigorous western theorists of the aesthetic, Immanuel
 3 Kant, the aesthetic denotes ‘an analytic of the beautiful’. This of course famously
 4 stands as the title to the opening of his *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1951: 1–12;
 5 Cavell 2002: 73–96). The aesthetic, in other words, involves an understanding of
 6 the perception of harmonious or beautiful form in an artwork, that may or may
 7 not coincide with cultural or authorial intentions, but in any case is perceived to
 8 transcend them. It may further designate what Kant might have called the purpo-
 9 siveness of a work’s form, outside of concepts or sensations inhering to it: that is,
 10 how the work presents itself as beautiful, though without any representation of
 11 goal or end. The Kantian aesthetic also signifies or points to – and this is the area
 12 most problematic for postcolonialism – a universality of the judgement of taste.
 13 In other words, to experience a subjective pleasure in the beautiful implies at the
 14 same time a participation in a universal capacity to experience and then to talk
 15 and adjudge of this feeling in a way that transcends cultural-political co-ordinates
 16 and determinations.

17 The recourse to the *a priori* and the universal, while closely associated with
 18 Kant’s philosophy, covertly or overtly underlies the greater majority of aesthetic
 19 speculations and statements, postcolonial or otherwise. So, having noted the often
 20 problematic, culturally enmeshed tendency of the aesthetic to invoke universal
 21 categories of judgement, it is worth challenging it with an important reminder
 22 from Theodor Adorno, a theorist equally preoccupied with aesthetics, if from
 23 a different theoretical and ideological perspective than Kant. Writing about
 24 cultural mass production in the essay ‘The Schema of Mass Culture’, Adorno
 25 makes the sober observation that any claim to aesthetic autonomy rests upon an
 26 untruth. In the realm of aesthetic image-consciousness, he persists, universality
 27 ‘remains allied to ideology’ (Adorno 2004: 63–4). Susan Buck-Morss and Simon
 28 Gikandi in their fascinating investigations of the *interestedness* of enlightenment
 29 discourse – of its social and political determinations in slavery – would no doubt
 30 agree (see Buck-Morss 2009). It is between these two poles of speculation – of the
 31 aesthetic as autonomous, in-and-for-itself, and the aesthetic as deeply complicit –
 32 that this essay will oscillate.

33 Turning now to the political: quite *contra* the transcendence associated with
 34 certain versions of the aesthetic, *political* writing by contrast never loses sight of
 35 ideology. To generalize for the sake of the argument, openly political, post-
 36 colonial work undertakes, without apology, to be ends-directed, programmatic,
 37 instrumentalist, didactic, intent on direct impact. It is dedicated, in the words
 38 of postcolonial critic Benita Parry, to ‘reclaiming community from the fragmen-
 39 tation and denigration attendant on colonialism’ (2004: 10). It is tasked with
 40 reconstitution. It is therefore very far from being preoccupied with an aesthetic
 41 as such. In so far as the postcolonial can be taken to signify a political commit-
 42 ment to some form of struggle and as allied to the traditions of anti-colonial
 43 resistance (Young 2001), a simultaneous commitment to an aesthetic is under-
 44 standably viewed in some postcolonial circles as a distraction, an unaffordable
 45 indulgence. It is true of course that virtually all writing from situations of crisis,

1 in the words of the Palestinian writer Hassan Khader, encounters an extreme,
 2 practical difficulty in finding distance, in making the bridge into the aesthetic
 3 and the universal, or '[surviving] the transplant into another consciousness'
 4 (Soueif 2006: 326).

5 In a nutshell, the postcolonial aversion to, or circumspection around, the
 6 aesthetic has to do with political and also national and cultural allegiances.
 7 Indeed, the majority of postcolonial writers are read with reference to a national
 8 matrix: the writing is deemed to mirror a foundational national identity in some
 9 clear and even obvious way (Ramazani 2006: 332–59). The circumspection grows
 10 especially acute where the aesthetic is regarded not as well-made expression or
 11 as a precise framework of perception that may however, as a spin-off, serve the
 12 postcolonial cause, but *rigorously*. It becomes acute if the aesthetic is seen, whether
 13 antagonistically or sympathetically, as something that does not refer beyond itself;
 14 that is irreducible to anything outside of the work. Maurice Blanchot expressed
 15 this pure inwardness, this pure circularity of the art work in these suggestive ways
 16 in the essays that make up *The Space of Literature* (1955): 'nothing', he wrote, 'is
 17 ever made of being'. 'One never ascends from the world to art', therefore art
 18 is dissimulation only superficially. 'To write is', he further said, 'to withdraw
 19 language from the world' (Blanchot 1982: 47, 48, 26).

20 Or, to turn from a French structuralist theorist to a writer who attempts from
 21 within his own creative practice to outline a poetics, Ben Okri in his *A Way of*
 22 *Being Free* (1997) sees a similar remove between the art work and the world. Note,
 23 however, that in the essays which comprise *A Way of Being Free*, Okri is never inter-
 24 ested in talking about a *postcolonial* poetic or even, unless glancingly and aphoristi-
 25 cally, an African poetic. For him a poetic is idealized, transformative, searching;
 26 it is not to be pinned down by epithets like African, postcolonial, Commonwealth.
 27 In this Blanchot would concur, as, too, would Okri's fellow postcolonial writer
 28 and crusader for various aesthetic affiliations with the English literary tradition,
 29 Derek Walcott (whom Okri discusses in this collection). Okri further concurs
 30 with Blanchot in regarding song and metaphor as distant from 'the unyielding
 31 world', as continually moving beyond the known, working through mystery and
 32 transgression. Poets, contends Okri, setting himself against wishful firebrand
 33 Shelley, 'are not the unacknowledged legislators of the world', which to him
 34 implies endorsing the world's present form. Driven by human suffering, they
 35 instead strive to *remake* the world. Their poetics, or indeed their aesthetic, requires
 36 poets to participate in the desire 'to be transformed into something higher', yet
 37 this aesthetic is not revolutionary in the sense of changing the world (Okri 1997: 1,
 38 25, 63). To this Okri crucially adds – and it is notable that he is still talking about
 39 the poet in the most generic of terms – that poets *therefore* are inevitably, though
 40 not dutifully, on 'the side of the greatest good, the highest causes, the most just
 41 future' (3, 6). It is something within art, not outside it, that produces this striving
 42 for justice. The question invoked by these contentions is how an ethical stance
 43 might inhere to, or be embodied within, an aesthetic, or a tradition of dissent
 44 within a generic form, and whether this might be deemed postcolonial – though,
 45 as previously observed, Okri himself would resist any such identification.

1 Depending on which side of the fence one stands, the coupling of *postcolonial*
 2 with *aesthetic* by now begins to appear either deeply abstruse, or deeply suspect, or
 3 both. So far, however, I have looked at the concept in abstract and general terms.
 4 To gain some more immediate, concrete purchase on what the term *postcolonial*
 5 *aesthetic* might signify, it is worth now proceeding deductively, even pragmatically.
 6 It is worth asking whether it is possible, for example, *deductively* to identify a piece
 7 of writing as postcolonial according to certain structural, generic and, perhaps
 8 above all, discursive features which it bears. Stanley Cavell usefully reminds
 9 us that aesthetic judgement refers to what we are able to say about art, how it
 10 encourages us to say these things, and how we justify our choices to each other
 11 (2002). On this basis, it might be possible to analyze a text as unfolding a certain
 12 postcolonial rhetoric, or as *practising* a postcolonial aesthetic.

13 But, then again, as my phrasing might imply, it may not be possible to pose, let
 14 alone answer, such a question about practice without specifying a text's context,
 15 the geographical and historical co-ordinates that inform and motivate that prac-
 16 tice. The real-world reference points are again unavoidable. Moreover, references
 17 to informing context inevitably also raise issues concerning the nature of the post-
 18 colonial in that context: how typical is it? Insofar as it produces certain distinctive
 19 or generic features, how representative is it? We may want to go to the extent of
 20 asking, for example, whether there is a regional writing, or even a period writing,
 21 say, the post-independence writing of the 1960s, that might generate a more char-
 22 acteristic postcolonial aesthetic practice than writing emanating from other kinds
 23 of location. Is there a postcolonial writing to which the label *aesthetically postcolonial*
 24 might stick more closely? In such cases the inclusiveness of chronologically based
 25 definitions of the postcolonial becomes problematic. Though some postcolonial
 26 writings might be regarded as more typical, more definitive and form-giving of
 27 the postcolonial condition than others, surely *no* world writing dealing with anti-
 28 and post-colonial dilemmas, whether in one of the former colonial languages, or
 29 in a vernacular, can legitimately be excluded from our postcolonial category? It
 30 is by now widely recognized that postcolonial writing in English is writing from
 31 around the world, produced since about 1947, in some cases earlier, and emanat-
 32 ing from a host of different cultures and communities. It is writing dealing in one
 33 way or other, obliquely or directly, with the experience of being colonized.

34 Even so, identifications based on reading practice remain potentially produc-
 35 tive of a sharper understanding of a till-now theoretically inconceivable post-
 36 colonial aesthetic, so it is worth suspending that postcolonial inclusiveness for a
 37 moment and returning to the overarching question. Our search is for an aesthetic
 38 method that might allow us to refer to some of the different types of postcolonial
 39 writing as characteristically and hence recognizably postcolonial; as preoccupied
 40 with a shared, even if widely disseminated, aesthetic. Is there present in the writ-
 41 ing, say, a set of refractions of the raced body, or a shared and distinctive mode
 42 or mood, like Kwame Appiah's pessimism as articulated in his well-known essay,
 43 for example, or the anti-heroism isolated by John Thieme when discussing
 44 Naipaul (Appiah 1990: 336–97; Thieme 1987)? Might there be evidence of a
 45 common approach to mythmaking or remythifying, to 'redreaming' the world

1 through local myth, as in the many regional versions of postcolonial magic real-
 2 ism, from Vikram Chandra through to Zakes Mda? Alternatively, postcolonial
 3 writing, especially from conflict zones, may coalesce in particular around expres-
 4 sions of valediction and mourning, as Ahdaf Soueif says of Palestinian writing.
 5 Here, worlds are vanishing in front of people's eyes, destruction seems irrational
 6 and widespread, feelings of loss are extreme. In literature, she and others suggest,
 7 writers feel bound to re-invent and re-inscribe mourning rituals for their commu-
 8 nities (Soueif 2006: 324–30; see also Durrant 2005).

9 For most writers and critics, to bring the words postcolonial and aesthetic
 10 together will at once conjure up certain connotations, perhaps of hybridity and
 11 in-betweenness, possibly also of sly civility, postmodern slippage and breakage, of
 12 writing back – all of them in their ways repetitions upon the present. Canonical
 13 postcolonial theory, most notably that associated with Homi Bhabha, gives us a
 14 clear guide to the salient features we are looking for: what it is within the art that
 15 does postcolonial and historical *work*, what practice bears the deepest imprint of
 16 the collisions of the colonial encounter (Bhabha 1995). To give just one example,
 17 at once lucid and yet typical, consider this sentence from Shalini Puri's 2004
 18 study of what she calls 'the Caribbean postcolonial': 'discourses of hybridity have
 19 offered a rhetorical clearing space for assertions of Caribbean [...] identities'
 20 (2004: 44). For her, it is hybridity that most clearly identifies a postcolonial, or in
 21 particular Caribbean, aesthetic. But this identification also excludes a great deal
 22 of work. One can doubtless make an equally convincing postcolonial case for
 23 writing that is openly combative rather than subtly hybrid. Or for writing that is
 24 not so much subtly hybrid or openly combative as involved, say, in performing
 25 the colonized body, or as preoccupied with weaving myths of the past for the
 26 postcolonial present. These are surely not to be excluded from the category of
 27 works that convey a postcolonial aesthetic or carry out a postcolonial aesthetic
 28 practice?

29 Still thinking pragmatically, one could argue it is the *language* of postcolonial
 30 writing that embodies more or less what we mean when we refer to a postcolonial
 31 aesthetic. Certainly language use involves practice, and provides grounds for
 32 concreteness and some objectivity in our terms of aesthetic judgement. The post-
 33 colonial critics Jean-Marc Moura in *Exotisme et lettres francophone* (2003), and Ismail
 34 Talib in *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures* (2002), for example, foreground the
 35 post-imperial struggle with voice and language as the *defining* feature of a puta-
 36 tive postcolonial writing. Here the voice of the oppressed finds expression in the
 37 mutated language of the oppressor. For critics like Talib, postcolonial literatures
 38 in the once-European languages (English, French) contend with the dominance
 39 of these languages as the linguistic vehicles of empire, by subverting the languages
 40 from within. Moreover, in the case of writers from strongly oral cultures, the
 41 dominant language is infused with the rhythms of local orature. A text deemed
 42 most pleasing or achieved or singular with regard to this version of a postcolonial
 43 aesthetic, therefore, would be that which most successfully, movingly, harmoni-
 44 ously, interrogated and integrated the language of the former empire in these
 45 various ways.

1 That said, it is worth pointing out that even the linguistic formulation of a
 2 postcolonial aesthetic is based on a restricted set of characteristics and prioritizes
 3 certain kinds of language use over others. Such a formulation would ultimately
 4 operate in prescriptive and reiterative ways, privileging heterogeneity over homo-
 5 geneity. And to say as much as this does not yet begin to address the cultural
 6 and institutional contexts where such formulations originate. Seemingly, we
 7 cannot get around the problem of the coercive *a priori* in defining a postcolonial
 8 aesthetic – perhaps because there is an implication of hierarchy in any aesthetic
 9 definition. Once again we find ourselves up against the strategic but problematic
 10 inclusiveness of the category of the postcolonial. More fundamentally, to bring
 11 out a difficulty which underlies that inclusiveness, we find ourselves up against
 12 the irrefutable fact that the postcolonial entails a definition drawn not from the
 13 *work* but the *world*; that it first and foremost denotes history, not aesthetic form.
 14 This difficulty pinpoints why it is that postcolonial critics committed to diversity
 15 and democracy have generally, and no doubt wisely, steered clear of dealing with
 16 a postcolonial aesthetic *per se* at all. Apparently it implies not only a political
 17 distraction but also a complicit diktat.

18 To illustrate this general avoidance of the aesthetic in postcolonial criticism,
 19 we need look no further than any recent catalogue of postcolonial publications
 20 from a ‘postcolonial friendly’ publisher like Routledge – though I might equally
 21 mention Oxford, Duke, Manchester, Johns Hopkins, and so on. In the recent
 22 catalogue which I consulted (for 2007), titles and blurbs consistently referred the
 23 work and the artist to the post-imperial world, or trans-world. To cite a typi-
 24 cal handful: *Writing across Worlds*, *After Empire*, *Postcolonial London*, *Nationalism and*
 25 *Post-Colonial Identity*.¹ From the point of view of these books, the catalogue tells
 26 us, writing is a means of making crossings, or of coming to terms with the loss of
 27 empire, or of expressing cultural histories of resistance in London, or alternatively
 28 the role of culture in nationalism. But, joining the crowds of critics who since the
 29 1970s and the demise of New Criticism have turned their backs on any reference
 30 to the text-in-itself, these books, the blurbs suggest, make only the most tentative,
 31 qualified references to style, imaginative transformation, generic choice, singular
 32 language, modes of poetic attention. As for the word ‘aesthetic’ – as in the *Post-*
 33 *Colonial Studies Reader*, it is avoided at almost any cost.

34 It remains important of course not to lose sight of the sheer variousness of the
 35 work that we designate as postcolonial and onto which we are seeking to pin a
 36 still-hypothetical ‘postcolonial aesthetic’, as it dramatizes the difficulty of doing
 37 so. I turn now to three extracts from three recent postcolonial texts. All were
 38 published in the twenty-first century, all are decisively postcolonial, indeed post-
 39 millennial, in terms of chronology, yet all are resolutely diverse in their preoc-
 40 cupations. However, in relation to the concept of a postcolonial aesthetic, it is
 41 productive to think not only of their many differences, but also of the possible
 42 ways in which these three texts might be seen as participating heterogeneously
 43 and yet collectively in some postcolonial aesthetic. The method I am suggesting
 44 for arriving at a clearer understanding of an irreducibly postcolonial aesthetic,
 45 in other words, at this point remains advisedly deductive and *a posteriori*. In this

1 I am myself repeating upon the present. Any number of postcolonial critics
 2 deploy the same self-undoing technique in order to discuss postcolonial issues,
 3 juxtaposing work from different contexts and communities in comparative read-
 4 ings that harness together under one theme or title postcolonial writers from
 5 vastly different cultures.

6 My first extract is from Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006), the chronicle of three
 7 generations in the life of an extended Delhi family of cloth merchants. The novel,
 8 which is quietly realist, could be called a feminine *A Suitable Boy*, though it is built
 9 up out of repeated searches for suitable marriage partners, not just the one singu-
 10 lar and definitive one. Throughout the novel social details are carefully observed
 11 and recorded. At certain points the individual occasionally seeks to define him- or
 12 herself against the group, but is all too soon subsumed by the relentless onward
 13 flow of life.

14 The patriarch was dead, and all connected to the family came to condole.
 15 Many cloth traders and relatives near and distant gathered at the Karol Bagh
 16 house to pay their respects to a man who had embodied all the virtues of
 17 the old-fashioned bania, honest, sincere, industrious, whose love had held the
 18 entire family together through trials and disagreements. During his entire life
 19 he had made no enemies, the many tears shed for him were ample testimony
 20 to that.

21 The family couldn't believe he had gone so soon. He had not troubled
 22 them enough, in itself an indication that he was free from the cycle of death
 23 and rebirth, all his bad karma expiated during six months of suffering.

24 His wife wept ceaselessly. She had been twelve, he fifteen, when they
 25 married, and now, after sixty years, she was alone. 'Why, why,' she wailed,
 26 'why did he have to go before me? Why did I have this misfortune? Kill me,'
 27 she begged her sons, 'kill me so I may go to him.'

28 (120)

29 Moving back slightly in time, the second extract is from Achmat Dangor's *Bitter*
 30 *Fruit* (2003), a cynical and realist, if somewhat programmatic, post-apartheid
 31 novel preoccupied with the necessary processes of making 'accommodations' in
 32 relation to the past, and with the hard lessons of learning to be ordinary again.

33 He grieved. He had lost Mireille and was alienated from his mother. She gave
 34 him fearful looks, constantly fighting back her tears. Soon, however, the whis-
 35 pering came to an end, a new and irresistible tension filled their lives, a force
 36 outside of their private lives, a fleeting moment when history became utterly
 37 important, inescapable, and compelling. Nelson Mandela became President,
 38 and the word 'freedom' took on an almost childlike meaning, so magical was
 39 its effect. Mikey heard Mam Agnes say, 'We're free,' when Mandela stood
 40 up to take the oath, her voice hoarse, filled with tenderness. Then, aware that
 41 Mikey was watching, she quickly reverted to her old, disbelieving self, her joy
 42 pressed like a dead flower between her unsmiling lips.

1 Still, Mikey could not believe the euphoria that swept through his family,
 2 cool Uncle Alec and laconic Grandpa Jackson, cold Gracie and an increas-
 3 ingly self-contained Lydia, their usual crusty suspicion of life's good inten-
 4 tions flung aside like an unfashionable worn-out coat. Until that enchanting
 5 April passed, and autumn came and the winter suddenly, and only Silas was
 6 left to walk about with a new sense of pride.
 7 (38)

8 The third extract is from Yvonne Vera's poetically charged and elegiac *Stone*
 9 *Virgins* (2002), a short novel that cryptically charts outrages perpetrated upon
 10 civilians during the undeclared civil war in western Zimbabwe in the early 1980s.
 11 The prose is marked throughout by its preoccupation with reinvented rituals of
 12 mourning.

13 It is true, everything else in Gulati rots except the rocks. On the rocks
 14 history is steady, it cannot be titled forwards or backwards. It is not a refrain.
 15 History fades into the chaos of the hills but it does not vanish. In Gulati I
 16 travel four hundred years, then ten thousand years, twenty more. The rocks
 17 split open, time shifts and I confess that I am among the travellers who steal
 18 shelter from the dead.
 19 (95)

20 Looking at these three extracts alongside one another, juxtaposed, strong differ-
 21 ences almost immediately emerge, or radiate forth. Respectively, one is mutedly
 22 realist, strongly informed by the cyclical temporality of generation. The second is
 23 bitterly realist, with something of a Keatsian 'design upon us', sombre about the
 24 delusions of revolutionary romance; the third poetically mournful, imbued with
 25 an epic sense that history, or the past, is eternally present in every moment.
 26 Despite the largely superficial similarities of realism, the differences of form and
 27 style between the three texts are palpable. The most prominent element which
 28 links them, and which might allow us to speak of all three as postcolonial, refers
 29 in each case outside of the work. All three novels comment on and reflect elegia-
 30 cally upon the societies and the histories of loss from which they rise. Yet, as I
 31 have tried to demonstrate by quoting at length, it would be extremely difficult if
 32 not impossible to isolate in these three works, even if we were able to look at them
 33 in full, and side-by-side, *aesthetic* features in common which might invite the label
 34 postcolonial. Although they do all participate in a valedictory mode, they do not
 35 noticeably share a formal language of mourning or elegy.

36

37 By probing the doubtful salience of aesthetic approaches to, and concepts within,
 38 postcolonial writing, I have fetched up with a cluster of open-ended questions and
 39 suggestions, and few, if any, points of resolution. It is clear that the concept of a
 40 postcolonial aesthetic brings into tension – if not into crisis – what we mean when
 41 we seek greater-than-subjective standards of judgement when approaching litera-
 42 tures that rise out of the blood and mire, as Yeats might have put it, of oppression

1 and struggle. What then might a postcolonial aesthetic signify if it is to avoid the
 2 charge that, no matter how responsibly framed, it represents exclusion and
 3 insidious evaluation, the re-imposition of a so-called disinterested but in fact
 4 always imperializing western poetic? That it produces, yet again, the reiteration
 5 of tried and tested humanist definitions in a late colonial guise?

6 Ben Okri, with his attention to the forms of beauty that emerge even out of
 7 day-to-day suffering, or to the Fanonian ‘occult sphere’ where the people dwell,
 8 exercises, in his own particular poetic language, precisely such concerns (Fanon
 9 1986: 43). Okri is specifically interested in a poetics, one might even say an ethics,
 10 which emanates from outside the work of art, from the world, from people’s
 11 suffering, yet which only finds adequate expression, which can only be realized,
 12 within the art work. The latter is the domain in which this poetics achieves
 13 its transformative potential. For Okri, there is evidently something within the
 14 aesthetic that for the reader bridges and links together the material and the tran-
 15 scendent. This may be the same impulse that Adorno perceived when he spoke
 16 of the *forceful* construction of texts – their forceful, even purposive conflict with
 17 life – as allowing them to rise above and overcome their social and economic
 18 predetermination (Adorno 2004: 72, 77).² This suggestion of a mediation or cali-
 19 bration between work and world appears to lead us away from a too hermetic
 20 and inward definition of the aesthetic, offering us something more productive
 21 than the contradictory divide or oxymoron that the term ‘postcolonial aesthetic’
 22 otherwise seems to impose.

23 To address this, it is helpful to turn to a critical consideration of postcolonial
 24 close reading from Ato Quayson, in a study that confronts precisely this kind of
 25 question. In *Calibrations* (2003), he attempts to theorize how we read or understand
 26 ‘the structures of transformation, process, and contradiction’ which inform not
 27 only literature but also society. For Quayson, not the ‘literary-aesthetic domain’
 28 alone, as he calls it, but the social or social realm, too, is ‘produced’ or ‘config-
 29 ured’: the aesthetic and the social are involved in one another’s production, linked
 30 through a structure of ‘interacting thresholds and domains’ (Quayson 2003: xiii,
 31 xvi). To him, a way out of the postcolonial versus aesthetic divide lies in seeing the
 32 social not as a primary determinant of the aesthetic, but as intricately intercalated
 33 with it, in such a way that the aesthetic equally prepares us to read the social as
 34 the social the aesthetic. Paradoxically, Quayson’s way out is more concerned with
 35 the world than the text, and therefore cannot be used to produce a closer under-
 36 standing of a postcolonial aesthetic as such. He is also not particularly concerned
 37 with privileging the postcolonial aesthetic domain over any other, though he *does*
 38 refer to postcolonial cultures as being by necessity particularly preoccupied with
 39 ‘a mediation between terms and discourses’, and hence with calibrations. Where
 40 Quayson is illuminating is in his repeated emphasis on the textual element as
 41 the ‘threshold’ of particular problems or enigmas, and not as the ‘disclosure of a
 42 discrete social or cultural verity as such’ (xv, xxii).

43 Quayson’s formulations are allied not only to those of Raymond Williams,
 44 whom he acknowledges, but also Said, whom he does not. Yet Said’s thoughts
 45 about the simultaneous worldliness and shapeliness of texts, though apparently

1 more conventional, are equally preoccupied with what Quayson terms ‘the great
 2 dialectic of acquisition and representation’ in texts (xxxiii–xxxiv, 59, 63). It was
 3 also Said who helpfully argued in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1984) that we
 4 cannot have solidarity (postcolonial or otherwise) before criticism, by which he
 5 means aesthetic criticism, because criticism is productive of the meanings and
 6 values we must live by. Texts are not mere symbols of something else, but ‘devia-
 7 tions from, exaggerations and negations of, human presence [...] phenomena of
 8 excess and rupture’ (Said 1984: 23, 28, 147).

9 Drawing together these various materialist and post-materialist critical obser-
 10 vations and suggestions, the following proposal can be tentatively formulated.
 11 *Perhaps* there is that within a postcolonial aesthetic that clarifies or sheds light on
 12 the postcolonial condition, be it hybrid or manichean, though without setting out
 13 to do so, without intention, without set and specific interest. There is that within
 14 an aesthetic that we might call postcolonial that draws in the postcolonial world,
 15 imbibes its affect, and constellates and reconstellates its meanings through our
 16 reading of it, our participation in it. It may be this that Quayson was suggesting
 17 in his discussion of the particular in art as a threshold of meaning always opening
 18 out to other levels. By this token we might even venture to say that there is that
 19 within an aesthetic which we might want to call postcolonial, that catalyzes a post-
 20 humanist or non-western humanism, though again this effect is largely incidental –
 21 the process plays itself out with mostly unanticipated consequences.

22 What a post-humanist humanism and consequence-less process might entail
 23 has for the present to be the subject of another chapter. In this essay, I point to
 24 what a postcolonial aesthetic might *do* rather than define what it *is* – indeed it
 25 may *be* nothing at all. The postcolonial aesthetic, then, is *in* language rather than
 26 *of* language; it requires participation from readers; it draws us into a process
 27 that makes possible certain kinds of postcolonial understanding. Books, suggests
 28 Hanif Kureishi throughout his biography of his father *My Ear at his Heart* (2004),
 29 allow us to ask questions of the final *unknowability* of other human beings. Perhaps
 30 that is ultimately all we can say about a postcolonial aesthetic. Like other kinds
 31 of aesthetic, it allows us to interrogate, and, as compensation to our questioning
 32 selves, tell stories about, the mystery that is not so much the Other, generically
 33 speaking, as the ultimately unknowable other human being.

34 **Notes**

- 35 1 For rhetorical effect I only cite titles at this point. Full references are listed at the end of
 36 the essay, in Bibliography.
 37 2 Adorno writes: ‘Certainly every finished work of art is already predetermined in some
 38 way but art strives to overcome its own oppressive weight as an artifact through the force
 39 of its very construction’.

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