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Thoughts from Abroad: Theodor Adorno as Postcolonial Theorist

Robert Spencer

Abstract *This article shows that the work of the German Marxist philosopher Theodor W. Adorno offers a surprisingly rich resource for postcolonial theory. Adorno's work addresses the world outside Europe more often than one might expect. But it is not so much what Adorno thinks as how he thinks that makes him a postcolonialist. Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics tracks particular phenomena to the totality of which they are a part. Everything, from the most innocuous details of everyday life to the Holocaust and imperialism, is linked to the world-encircling, thought-frustrating and violence-inducing system of capitalism. But Adorno's characteristic negativity also makes him sensitive to that system's fallibility and its vulnerability to alternatives. The article therefore touches on the normative dimensions of Adorno's moral philosophy. Adorno's work commands attention because of its dialectical style of thinking, its consequent focus on capitalism's intrinsic violence, its belief that effective political action presupposes introspection and a moral capacity for empathy with others' suffering, and its attractive conviction that these aptitudes can be enabled by aesthetic experience. Accordingly, the essay concludes with a reading of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee's novel Disgrace. This article seeks to show that an Adornian postcolonial criticism is as concerned with the gratuitous longevity of capitalism and imperialism as it is inspired by the prospect of erecting a more just and egalitarian social order.*

As long as culture lives on in a world arranged like ours, in which, whether in South Africa or Vietnam, things happen of which we know and only with difficulty repress the knowledge that they happen – in such a world culture and all the noble and sublime things in which we take delight are like a lid over refuse. (Adorno 2000: 130)

Introduction

Given the immiseration of the postcolonial world, the expectation of environmental collapse and the haunting of our imaginations by images of poverty, violence, disease and failing states, savants like Theodor W. Adorno appear to speak to us of and from another world entirely. To our dread of impending

calamity Adorno offers elaborate philosophical exegeses and belletristic appreciations of the redemptive powers of art. The musicological scholar's violin might as well be Nero's fiddle, a distraction from approaching disaster. Yet I want to insist on the enduring relevance of Adorno's *negativity*, by which I mean not his reputed pessimism but his work's ability to upturn stones and to make appear strange, bothersome and unendurable practices that are otherwise sanctioned by heedlessness and apathy. Nothing in his work, not the most esoteric philosophical treatises nor the most *outré* experiments in modern music, is considered in isolation from capitalism or from the injustice and violence that capitalism brings in train.

Adorno is negative because he counsels an unremitting focus on the defects of the present. For him, resistance to injustice does not take the form of distracting blueprints or anticipations of utopia; it is posed 'in lines such as: No man should be tortured; there should be no concentration camps – while all of this continues in Asia and Africa and is repressed merely because, as ever, the humanity of civilization is inhumane toward the people it shamelessly brands as uncivilized' (Adorno 1996: 285). Contained in injunctions such as these, as well as in my epigraph's perhaps unexpected censures of late capitalism's colonial misdeeds, are qualities that make Adorno a post-colonial theorist *avant la lettre* and even *sans pareil*: his uncompromising conviction that global capitalism is erected on violence (including, and especially, colonial violence) as well as his desire to view the world 'from the standpoint of redemption' (1974: 247), from the perspective of a transformed society to which our own condition will appear indigent, antagonistic and incomplete.

It will perhaps seem perverse to wish to claim Adorno for postcolonial studies.¹ The German critic Hans Mayer remarked of Adorno that 'Europe sufficed for him entirely. No India or China, not the people's democracies and not the workers' movement. Even in his needs for life experience, he remained a citizen – and sovereign – of a small state' (quoted in Jay 1973: 187). Frankfurt School critical theory, according to Edward Said, is 'blinded to the matter of imperialism' (Said 1994: 336). Espen Hammer writes of Adorno's 'blunt Eurocentrism': 'he seems to have been virtually oblivious to the concerns of postcolonialism, including racism, discrimination, and imperialism' (Hammer 2006: 5). 'He was deeply Eurocentric', concur Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin in their introduction to a recent collection of critical essays on Adorno, 'and possessed no real knowledge of a world outside of Austria and Germany, let alone Europe' (Gibson and Rubin 2002: 14). This is a particularly unfair judgement since, as Gibson and Rubin go on to show, Adorno's experiences in exile in the United States during the Third Reich were of considerable importance in his intellectual development.

Alas, we will struggle to find any extended consideration in Adorno's work of the theories of imperialism put forward by the anti-Stalinist 'New Left' of the 1950s and 1960s. Nor does he engage with the activist element in

¹ There have been several efforts to use Adorno in postcolonial theory. Though they differ on key questions, all of them focus on the theoretical question of Adorno's attitude towards Enlightenment and modernity (Ganguly 2002; Lazarus 1999: 1–8; Patke 2002; Varadharajan 1995).

the work of contemporaries such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse, unless one counts his admonition to Marcuse that protest entails not taking sides but the total rejection of the existing state of things: 'protest against the horror of napalm bombs but also against the unspeakable Chinese-style tortures that the Vietcong carry out permanently' (Adorno and Marcuse 1999: 127). 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?', his opening paper at the 1968 German Sociologists' Conference in Frankfurt, nonetheless outlines Adorno's belief that society is still capitalist and imperialist in its basic structure. Unusually, Adorno even hints at his sympathy for 'the free-flowing anxiety' (2003: 125) abroad in the Federal Republic, the extra-parliamentary opposition, and the student demonstrations against the emergency laws and the war in Vietnam. Society's structure remains antagonistic, insists Adorno, for 'class distinctions have by no means been abolished to the degree that has sometimes been supposed. Even the theories of imperialism have not been rendered obsolete by the great powers' withdrawal from their colonies' (116). Ours is not a thoroughly technocratic society, he contends, but a conflict-ridden capitalist one impelled by a thirst for maximising profit to inflict inequality on a world scale. Irrational social relations, which are an outmoded inheritance from the struggle for existence against nature and each other, exist alongside the advanced development of the forces of production, which for the first time in human history have made possible the creation of a just world. This paradoxical situation is 'responsible for the fact that, in crazy contradiction to what is possible, human beings in large parts of the planet live in penury' (121). One struggles to detect any obvious 'Eurocentrism' in the outraged lament that technological resources capable of abolishing hunger are instead put to use manufacturing superfluous consumer goods and deadly weapons.

In a sense, however, the open question of Adorno's reputed Eurocentrism is immaterial, for it is less what Adorno thinks than how he thinks that is exemplary: sketching connections, contrasting complacent milieus with the violence on which they rest, and penitently acknowledging one's own entanglement in a situation of domination. It seemed for a time in the late 1960s that what offended some of his students was not what or how he thought but *that* he thought. Reflection on the political and economic basis of bourgeois subjectivity appeared a gratuitous luxury when the whole system of late capitalism was teetering on the brink of collapse. The more impatient militants disrupted Adorno's lectures with ribald stunts under the delusion that teaching is a form of thought control, a distraction from a close-at-hand utopia whose arrival required not protracted meditation but the leavening of paving stones. Yet not least among Adorno's pertinent virtues is his conviction that reflection and practice – thought and deed – go hand in hand. It is partly its ability to demonstrate and, especially, to engender a single-minded, at times almost obsessive, practice of self-questioning that constitutes the contemporary pertinence of Adorno's philosophical writing and aesthetic criticism, not least amidst the profound insularity of a wider culture coarsened and constricted by the heightened imperial violence of the 'war on terror'. The constructive (as opposed to indulgent or despairing) practice of self-critique is what makes Adorno a postcolonial scholar.

Adorno's dialectical method shows how everything, from the most innocuous details of everyday life to the worst crimes in human history, is linked to the world-encircling, thought-frustrating and violence-inducing system of capitalism. It is this method that allowed him to see the Holocaust and imperialism as intrinsic rather than contingent aspects of capitalist modernity. Adorno is an orthodox Marxist thinker in his insistence that capitalism and imperialism are synonymous but an unorthodox one on account of his belief that the acquisitive, homogenising logic of capitalism can be detected in everything from the formulaic catchiness of hit tunes and the fanatical rationality of idealist philosophy to the Holocaust and imperialism: 'Genocide is the absolute integration' (1996: 362). 'If the lion had a consciousness', Adorno contends, 'its rage at the antelope it wants to eat would be ideology' (187). Ideology is 'the belly turned mind' (23), the effort to eradicate difference, digest it and reduce things to a uniform standard. Indeed for Adorno the logic of identity, which dictates the violent incorporation of difference, is a pathological extension of the logic of capitalism itself, which must expand in order to survive and which must seek out raw materials, new markets and cheap labour. But at the same time Adorno's dialectical method permits an appreciation that capitalism and its attendant misdeeds came into being historically and are therefore mutable and changeable. Adorno's work inspires and is inspired by a tacit normative vision. If dialectical thinking is its method then its objective is a social order based on what James Gordon Finlayson's study of Adorno's moral philosophy has called 'affection' (Finlayson 2002: 7). Affection is the capacity to be moved by the fate of others and is therefore the opposite of coldness or indifference, 'the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz' (Adorno 1996: 363). Adorno's work commands attention because of its dialectical style of thinking, its consequent focus on capitalism's intrinsic violence, its belief that effective political action presupposes introspection and a moral capacity for empathy with others' suffering, and its attractive conviction that these aptitudes can be enabled by aesthetic experience. Accordingly, the essay concludes with a brief reading of the South African writer J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (2000). I seek to show that an Adornian postcolonial criticism is as concerned with the gratuitous longevity of capitalism and imperialism as it is inspired by the prospect of erecting a more just and egalitarian social order.

Adorno's dialectical method

A dialectical insight is one capable of recognising that its object of analysis has been made historically; knowing a thing entails knowing its mutability and therefore tracing its complex history. The thinker versed in the dialectical method exists in a state of 'negative capability' amidst antagonisms and contradictions, conscious that whichever phenomenon he chooses to study both is and is not itself: that it is both a specific thing and a complex product of the forces that brought it into being. All of Adorno's analyses, whether sociological, literary, musicological or philosophical, share this dialectical approach: nothing is studied in isolation. This means, for example, that not even Wagner's *Parsifal* or the astrology columns of the *Los Angeles Times* can be understood without reference to the world-encircling system of

commodity exchange.² For Fredric Jameson's *Late Marxism, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (1990) this is one of the most useful aspects of Adorno's thinking: its insistence on employing the category of totality.

The difficulty of Adorno's work – its extraordinary eclecticism and labyrinthine prose style – is actually that of advanced capitalist society itself, a system in which nothing can be understood on its own terms. Not the valedictory final movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, not the working-class accent of North Berlin or the demise of the casement window, nor even the purportedly rational mind itself can be understood without reference to capitalism, its dehumanising effects, its class conflicts, its transformation of malleable phenomena into fixed things and its incubation of the mindsets and structures that spawned fascism. In the system of late capitalism the mind is faced with a massively complicated situation in which meaning is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, in which objects have been divested of their sense and value by an economic system that esteems exchange over use and in which, precisely because objects are so intricately intertwined, the intrepid mind can only track down meaning eventually and painstakingly to the overbearing system of production itself. Adorno's style thus windingly connects different phenomena or else blasts them out of their immediate context with pungent aphorisms and unexpected comparisons. Its aim is to show that each purportedly fixed and immutable thing is in fact the changeable product of the history that shapes it: 'Dialectics means intransigence towards all reification' (Adorno 1967: 31).

Adorno's *chef d'oeuvre* sets out to elaborate a theory of *negative* dialectics. Negative dialectics are negative firstly because they are aimed at showing the 'whole' of capitalism to be 'false'. In other words, capitalism is incomplete, fallible, antagonistic, incapable of stamping out resistance and the visibility of alternatives and therefore, ultimately, vulnerable to revolutionary transformation. The second reason for the qualifying adjective is Adorno's conviction that even though everything is forcibly connected, this should not be so. The dialectical thinker's task is not, like that of all the king's horses and all the king's men, to put things back together again. The liberated condition would involve neither unity nor conformity. What Jameson fails to stress is that for Adorno, totality is the principle that governs the present order, not the future emancipated one. Regrettably, we inhabit a system that expropriates the labour of the individual, distorts her thoughts and compels her body to assume pliant forms, and which for the sake of profit spreads its net ever more widely across the face of the earth. But in an emancipated society men and women would no longer be forced to march in step with the system: 'Totality is not an affirmative but rather a critical category ... A liberated mankind would by no means be a totality' (Adorno 1976: 12). Adorno envisages the state of reconciliation not as a coercive amalgamation of differences but as a kind of voluntary pacification of antipathies: 'Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity' (Adorno 1996: 150). The point of radical politics is to abolish the most hateful

²I refer here to Adorno's books *In Search of Wagner* (2005) and *The Stars Come Down to Earth* (1994).

inequalities (between those with enough to eat and those who are starving or between those who need to undertake back-breaking labour in order to live and those who need not) so that the differences that really matter (between individuals' and communities' diverse traditions, talents and inclinations) might be able to flourish more freely.

Dialectical thinking is a means not an end in itself. Its hope, Adorno states at the close of *Negative Dialectics*, is that 'it will not come to rest in itself' (1996: 406). To become conscious of the forcible interconnectedness of all things under advanced capitalism is the first step to changing that system, not an act of transformation in its own right. Dialectics, as Adorno acknowledges, 'is the ontology of the wrong state of things' (11), a philosophical expression of a durable but also hopefully transient system in which human beings, the products of their labour and the natural world to which they belong are regimented and coerced. Hopefully 'dialectics will drive men beyond bourgeois society' (337). But we cannot simply wish away that society by pronouncing its name, as the miller's daughter did to Rumpelstilzchen. It is politically counter-productive to simply renounce totalising 'metanarratives' since the biggest one of all, the catastrophe of capitalism, careers onwards and is unlikely to be brought to a halt by theoretical critiques alone. We need to be capable of holding in our minds at the same moment capitalism's daunting ubiquity and the necessity and possibility of its supersession: 'Universal history must be construed and denied' (320).

The final and most formidable difficulty of dialectical thinking is the embroilment of mind with world. 'Dialectic is the unswerving effort to conjoin reason's critical consciousness of itself and the critical experience of objects' (Adorno 1999b: 9–10). According to *Negative Dialectics*, the mind is prone to reify its theories about the shape and attributes of the external world, investing these systems with a permanence, authority and prestige unwarranted by their contingent character (Adorno 1996: 13). Instead of dealing in rigid and ahistorical systems, Adorno claims, we should make our thought vigilantly responsive to its objects. To think dialectically means to recognise that thoughts, just as much as objects, are historical products and can be revised. Because of their resistance to modification, the traditional and solidified systems that Adorno bemoans (he is thinking of philosophical idealism but here we should substitute something like colonial discourse) serve not to know that world or bring it closer but to press it into the moulds of their prejudgements. The enquiring mind should attend instead to the world's details and complexities: '[w]e are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of those things' (33). Traditional, systematic philosophies, as Adorno makes clear, are actually finite and limited, inadaptable to the rough ground of judging, interpreting and understanding specific phenomena and fit only for holding forth about generalities. They must therefore become malleable and self-critical. 'Thought', according to Adorno, 'need not be content with its own legality; without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting' (141).

The mind that seeks to capture the world's complexity and diversity with an arsenal of inflexible concepts behaves like an imperial army annexing and disciplining recalcitrant populations. The cataloguing and acquisitive

mind-set results in what Adorno dubs suggestively 'the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien' (1996: 191). But to think attentively, self-consciously and historically – in a word, dialectically – is to begin to overcome the mind's reification and its subordination to a system that violently incorporates difference. Dialectical thinking 'demands a rational critique of reason, not its banishment or abolition' (85). Its goal remains the acquisition of knowledge, though this process presupposes the most scrupulous attention to one's object of study and the most vigilant consciousness of the fallibility and revisability of one's concepts. A responsible epistemology would entail examining the world perspicaciously, conscious that one is undertaking not a scientific experiment or a bureaucratic task but an examination of human lives, which must be represented in ways that make clear the limitations and provisionality of the scholar's vision and conclusions. 'Intelligence', for Adorno, 'is a moral category' (Adorno 1974: 197), not of course because intellectuals are better people but because thinking effectively means thinking humanely: beyond the boundaries of a received wisdom that exists to legitimise self-preservation and the infliction of distant suffering. Epistemologically, dialectical thinking means acknowledging the inevitable gap between the moderate prowess of the individual mind and the complex, changeable and multiform world that it confronts. If it is not to belittle its objects of study, to homogenise them, paint them as passive or in some way endorse the various ideologies that dismiss certain peoples as inferior and even expendable, then thinking demands at all times humility and self-critique:

If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true – if it is to be true today, in any case – it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims. (Adorno 1996: 365)

Scholarship entails methodological self-consciousness, attention to detail and a sense of moral answerability to the human subjects of one's enquiries.

That Adorno enjoins a moral response to suffering is part of his conviction that violence is an integral and on-going aspect of the totality whose contours his philosophy ventures to trace. Auschwitz was not, for Adorno, a freakish interregnum but a product of capitalist modernity. Moreover, the post-war world had not fully broken with the structures and attitudes that made possible the outbreak of fascism (Giroux 2004; Rothberg 1997). The system stands ready to perpetrate further misdeeds, if not in Europe then elsewhere. 'Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for?' (Adorno 1974: 55–56). The Holocaust itself is not the catastrophe. If it were then we could proceed to draw breath and pick up the pieces, confident that the worst was over. Rather, the catastrophe is the uninterrupted continuation of suffering, and the Holocaust but its latest, most terrible manifestation. 'Auschwitz' serves in Adorno's work, therefore, as a metonym for an on-going calamity that portends even graver atrocities. For Adorno 'the path of the world spirit is the unity of terror rolling over mankind' (Adorno

1996: 341). Therefore if a new moral law were to be formulated it would resemble less Kant's blueprint for a future moral order than a steadfast refusal to tolerate the perpetuation of avoidable suffering: 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen' (365). And it must be borne in mind that for Adorno, as he announced in a lecture from the mid-1960s, 'Auschwitz' signifies 'not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam' (Adorno 2000: 101).

It is not hard to discern topical significance in Adorno's view that 'the world of torture' is a durable reality, or in his suggestion, that an alternative can be glimpsed not in high-flown ideals about brotherhood but in the simple inkling that human bodies possess a shared vulnerability to pain. For Adorno the hope that nothing similar to Auschwitz will recur rests in part on 'the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed' (Adorno 1996: 365) or, put differently, on 'the sense of solidarity with what Brecht called "tormentable bodies"' (286). The 'inability to identify with others' was 'unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred' (Adorno 2003: 30). Adorno wishes to revive a moral capacity to experience the world from the perspective of the other and in particular to imagine, empathise with and act to alleviate the other's suffering. What makes legal instruments compelling and what gives us the will and capacity to uphold them and follow their provisions is the spontaneous intolerance of injustice or, put differently, the instinctive capacity for empathy with another person's pain.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno reflects movingly on 'the drastic guilt of him who was spared' (1996: 363) and on a recurring dream that he was sent to the ovens in 1944. Indeed, existence at large 'has become a universal guilt context' (372). It is dogged by the suspicion that the comfort and prosperity of some lives is based upon the torment and impoverishment of others, both those who came before us and those who live now. Thinking for Adorno is permeated by guilt. An Adornian postcolonial theory would keep in mind at all times the conditions of those millions whose blighted lives facilitate the superficial and restricted prosperity of neoliberalism. 'To recover the memory of those silenced and "disappeared", the negativity of their difference from consumer society requires', according to Epifanio San Juan, 'critical labor that demystifies atomizing, fragmented appearances and exposes the deceptive pluralism of the "liberal" consensus' (San Juan 1998: 258). Adorno demonstrated and entreated this heightened awareness of violence and injustice more compellingly than any other thinker:

I believe that every thought that fails to measure itself against such experiences is simply worthless, irrelevant and utterly trivial. A human being who is not mindful at every moment of the potential for extreme horror at the present time must be so bemused by the veil of ideology that he might just as well stop thinking at all. (Adorno 2006: 203)

Reading *Disgrace*

I want briefly to suggest what an increased sensitivity to ongoing manifestations of imperial violence and to the emergence of genuinely post-imperial forms of community might mean for critics of postcolonial writing. Neil Lazarus has argued, via Adorno, that 'disconsolation' or the dispelling of illusions is the 'deepest aesthetic (hence indirectly social) aspiration' (Lazarus 2005: 430–32) of many of the most important works of postcolonial literature. Such works do not console their readers with images of harmony or reconciliation but disturb them and throw them off balance, whether by presenting surprising realities and perspectives or through their confounding formal qualities. Adorno's final lesson for postcolonial studies, therefore, is that works of art gain a right to exist and are more than mere distractions from injustice when they are so powerful and thought-provoking and so challenging to their audiences' customary complacencies that they persuade us to fix our gaze upon suffering and then act to prevent its continuation. 'The function of transcendence in art today', according to Adorno, 'can only be that of protest' (Adorno 2002: 154) against the temptation to coexist or rest easy with a social order founded on violence. The purpose of art is the provocation of dissent, a task that must be undertaken not didactically (since pulpity assumes in readers the passivity such works wish to counteract) but by engendering a questioning attitude that can then be applied to all the dogmas and complacencies that hold the status quo in place.

As is well known, Coetzee's *Disgrace* narrates the experiences of David Lurie, a former professor of modern languages in post-apartheid South Africa who is midway upon the journey of his life. Towards the beginning of the novel Lurie is obliged to testify before a university disciplinary committee in the wake of an exploitative relationship with one of his female students. Though he is prepared to plead guilty, he is unwilling to feign contrition and is fired. Lurie's subsequent travails and discoveries bring him to a realisation not that he is mistaken in his aversion to insincere apologies but rather, more profoundly, to a tentative and rather confused consciousness of the need for a more profound admission of guilt and a more effective act of reparation. Lurie's introspection takes the form of a tentative examination of the privileges and crimes of the white elite to which he belongs. What the novel achieves is to bring into disrepute the merely formal apologies proffered by Lurie at his hearing and by the apartheid functionaries at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) between 1994 and 1996, the events that Lurie's unimpressive confessions seem to echo (McDonald 2002). Lurie's eventual apology to his former student's family is equally unconvincing, because it is not made to Melanie herself and because it involves him genuflecting absurdly before her mother and young sister. Indeed the patent fallibility of Lurie is matched by the openly problematic novel that narrates his experiences. Neither succeeds in overcoming the divisions of the past. *Disgrace* itself is in disgrace. The novel has been subjected to public scandal and ignominy on account of its alleged pandering to racist stereotypes. It appears to allegorise the new ascendancy of South Africa's black majority in the incident in which Lurie's daughter Lucy, to whose isolated farm he has decamped, is raped by three young black men. Both protagonist and novel

are incapable of reconciliation and unable even to spell out what reconciliation might involve.

At the end of the novel Lurie's conversion from an arrogant obliviousness to his own privilege to a sincere capacity for empathy is ongoing. To that extent the novel, like *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which Lucy is reading, is unfinished. *Disgrace* bequeaths to its readers the moral and political tasks that it does not and cannot perform unaided. To Lurie, South Africa still 'feels like a foreign land' (Coetzee 2000: 197); its peoples are divided into discrete tribes (201). Their hatreds and vendettas, he tells Petrus, the black farmer who lives next to his daughter and whom he suspects of protecting her attackers, 'will go on long after I am dead and you are dead' (202). The only available signs of reconciliation are indistinct and often puzzling. Lurie starts performing menial tasks at an animal sanctuary. He assists in the euthanasia of unwanted dogs and takes their bodies to the municipal incinerator where he gently loads them onto the feeding trolley. This task is not, of course, an augury of some virtuous moral order since the work is inconsequential; as Lurie admits, the dead dogs obviously do not care if he dumps their bodies and lets the orderlies feed them unceremoniously into the oven by beating their stiffened limbs. But his actions do at least nurture, not least for those who ponder his emotive justification, the prospect, albeit a distant one, of such an order. For whom does he perform this strange duty? 'For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing' (146). This 'idea' is suggestive without being prescriptive. Provocatively, these ovens recall those of Auschwitz, just as Lurie's description of the euthanasia of the dogs as a '*Lösung*' (142) or solution calls to mind '*die Endlösung*' or 'Final Solution'. This is an analogy that, depending on one's point of view, is either a grotesque trivialisation of the Holocaust or an effort to learn lessons from it about callousness and inhumanity and therefore to obey Adorno's new categorical imperative to forestall Auschwitz's repetition in any form. In short, this is a novel unusually attuned to what Coetzee himself has called 'the fact of suffering in the world' (Coetzee 1992: 248). It seeks to break 'the spell of coldness between men, without which the calamity could not recur' (Adorno 1996: 347). *Disgrace* gestures towards and traces the outlines of its many silences, whether they be the atrocious legacy of apartheid, the off-stage horrors inflicted by sexual violence or even the torment inflicted systematically on 'mere' beasts. The novel's epigraph could be the first line of Lurie's projected chamber opera: Aeneas's famous lament at the ubiquity of suffering as he inspects the memorial at Carthage for his compatriots slain in the Trojan War: '*Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*' [Tears in the nature of things, hearts touched by human mortality] (Coetzee 2000: 162).³

In an effort to ensure her safety, Lucy accepts marriage to Petrus, her former tenant. Furthermore, she seems to interpret the rape as a form of reparation for the history of racial domination. Pregnant but powerless, Lucy resolves to start 'at ground level' in a state of abasement and dispossession

³ The translation here, from the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, is by Cecil Day-Lewis (1954: 23), though Day-Lewis opted for 'transience' instead of 'mortality'.

(205). It is as if the novel sees personal rapprochements, which involve an extraordinarily painful moral and material self-sacrifice on the part of the white minority, as the only basis for a new dispensation or, so problematic and even perverse is Lucy's partial acceptance of the violence done to her, as if it is throwing up its hands and confessing its own inability to picture a satisfying state of reconciliation. As Jane Poyner notes (2008: 109), *Disgrace* countenances such a state only very hesitantly in its description of the changes undergone towards the end of the novel in Lurie's planned chamber opera about Byron. The conceited Lothario and probable rapist, Lurie demonstrates a newfound capacity for empathy not in his life but in his art: by making the focus of the libretto not the philandering poet but the poet's jilted lover Teresa and his abandoned daughter Allegra (Coetzee 2000: 182–86). Yet art here is blatantly, even comically, deficient; Teresa's soaring arias are replaced by plaintive calls accompanied by the dissonant racket of a toy banjo and a barking dog. Works of art are too marginal and too powerless to effect or even portray reconciliation. Their value is rather their capacity to provoke introspection, to arouse a capacity for introspection beyond the novel's pages rather than trying (inevitably without success) to paint a pallid likeness of it within. In short, *Disgrace* tries to persuade us to think dialectically: to conjoin a critical consciousness of the imperfect milieu it represents with a critical consciousness of oneself.

Lurie's viewpoint, as Patricia Duncker has pointed out, is rarely contested in the novel (Duncker 2002: 168), which, though told ostensibly in the third person, sticks closely to Lurie's point of view, is narrated throughout in the present tense, and slips frequently into Lurie's own idiom and attitudes. But this free indirect method of narration does not mean, as Duncker implies, that Lurie's views and actions are endorsed. For his voice is usually too haughty and complacent to elicit sympathy and his subsequent attempts to place himself in others' shoes, though impressive, are clearly deficient. The silences of which Duncker complains are not 'managed, controlled by the author' (2002: 171). *Disgrace* seems to me to be acutely self-conscious about its own limitations and quite prepared to confess them. Even Lurie is aware that English 'is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa' (Coetzee 2000: 117). English, which as he points out, is 'tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites' (129), is also, obviously, the language of the novel we are reading, a novel that employs just such a blank, expressionless style. *Disgrace* is a bleak anti-pastoral; like the land of the Karoo it is sparse and almost bereft of ornament. Here English is a medium of power that has lost its expressiveness as well as any capacity to articulate the distinctive experiences and aspirations of those to whom violence has been done. This familiar novel is worth returning to because its inability to impose or even picture satisfactory instances of reconciliation is employed to discharge the most important functions of art as Adorno sees them. Exerting itself time and again to discredit its own authority and that of its protagonist, *Disgrace* brings its own milieu into disrepute. It heaps shame on the world of privilege that it portrays (and from within which it is narrated) whilst destroying confidence in the redemptive power of art. In so doing however, and paradoxically, it embodies the complex edification of which works of art are capable. It entreats introspection and directs attention to suffering.

In the first instance, the prospect of a just reparation from the crimes committed under apartheid and for the inequalities that continue to disfigure South Africa entails what Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello dubs the 'sympathetic imagination': thinking oneself into the place of one's victims (Coetzee 2003: 80). Solidarity is the foundation of a just order. We should value *Disgrace* for its ability to disclose cruelty and violence, to discredit the limiting doctrines that permit such depredations, and to foretell and, far more importantly, to *instil* (though not effect) the imaginative sympathy required to prevent such acts from recurring indefinitely. Coetzee's critics are wrong when they attack *Disgrace* for being mired in (and even an example of) the racism that endures in South Africa; others are mistaken when they defend the book by bestowing praise on its capacity to imagine alternatives to this state of affairs.⁴ Instead it does both: discrediting (or consigning to disgrace) its own authority and that of its protagonist in order to clear a path to a social order based not on privilege, violence or exploitation but on a value (solidarity) which presupposes a capacity for empathy.

Novels like *Disgrace* hold fast to the potential for a fundamental moral and political transformation that is to be undertaken not by the book, which is a patently fallible and problematic document, and the narrative of which is unfinished, but by its readers. Readers' appreciation of the inequalities that still mutilate 'the Rainbow nation' and of the urgent need to resolve them, will hopefully have been intensified by the act of reading *Disgrace*. This is why Derek Attridge's otherwise noteworthy book on Coetzee strikes me as an inadequate or at least incomplete response to the novel. It is, to my mind, far too enamoured with a fashionable ethical rhetoric that, though it loudly proclaims the need for some sort of personal commitment to others, tends to think of that commitment in somewhat woolly, voluntaristic, and even mystical and frequently theological – at any rate anti-political – terms (Attridge 2004: 162–91). I am arguing, against Attridge, that such is the depth of the malaise described by the book, in which callousness and slaughter lie behind the most routine activities, in which racism and misogyny endure, in which violence has taken the place of communication, and in which global capitalism's 'great rationalization' (Coetzee 2000: 3) has replaced ordinary bonds of human sympathy with competitive avarice, that the solution to this state of affairs, though it is at no point delineated or even countenanced by the novel, would involve far more than states of grace, acts of penance or vague gestures of obeisance to 'the other'. In disclosing division and injustice whilst conferring on its readers the essentially political (as opposed to merely ethical) task of remedying this situation, *Disgrace* conforms to Adorno's dictum that '[t]hose works are deep that neither mask the divergent or antagonistic nor leave it unreconciled' (1999a: 190).

Lending a voice to suffering

Unless we are concerned above all else with expanding awareness and challenging complacency then we postcolonialists will resemble the dons on

⁴David Attwell (2002) has discussed the controversies about the book's 'racism'. Louis Tremain applauds Coetzee's novels for portraying characters 'in the act of trying to imagine lives radically different from their own' (2003: 597).

Swift's Laputa whose families must employ a servant to rouse them from their speculations with a slap from an inflated bladder. We need Adorno's radical negativity, his flair for making surprising and uncomfortable connections, his insistence that society is susceptible to both critique and radical change, and his belief that the amplification of distress and injustice is scholarship's very *raison d'être*: 'The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth' (Adorno 1996: 17–18). Seen in this way, Adorno's relentless fixation with his European milieu is not a weakness but a strength; he perceives its deficiencies, promotes its capacity for self-criticism and urges its supersession. The 'extreme horror', before which Adorno's philosophy maintains the most vigilant awareness in addition to the most profound guilt, against which it measures every thought and evaluates every work of art, is a persistent reality. 'The history of the past four centuries', as the late Pakistani intellectual Eqbal Ahmad has written, 'is a history of barely recorded holocausts' (2006: 225). The atrocities bemoaned by Adorno are symptoms of an ongoing catastrophe that calls today for the far-reaching reflection and for the acute sense of moral and ultimately political responsibility that his work exemplified, even though it only hinted at the larger sphere in which these aptitudes must be applied.

One essay of Adorno's that has received relatively little attention provides something of a missing link between his studiedly European philosophy and a more broadly conceived postcolonial project.⁵ In 'Words from Abroad' (1991) Adorno explores the limits of native languages and intellectual traditions. He discusses the difficulties of translating German texts into English, which he attributes not to some especially profound property of the German language but rather to the generally fraught relationship between native and foreign tongues. He likens the difficulties undergone by the translator to the puzzlement and even occasional hostility that is aroused by the unanticipated appearance in texts of foreign words, which usually provoke accusations of pretentiousness or obscurantism. But this experience of incomprehension, of the alarming distance and difference between languages, is, Adorno argues, potentially salutary. It can leave the reader conscious of the limitations of his national tongue, limitations that are briefly manifested in the incongruous, unfamiliar and sometimes untranslatable term. Rather than anger and intolerance, the foreign word should be greeted with a self-conscious recognition of the limitedness of one's idiomatic resources and a hospitable recognition that foreign words, though they may defy immediate understanding, can be made less strange by reflection and study. Foreign words remind us that our native milieu is not matchless and unchallengeable or stuck fast in parochial idioms and traditions. Here, in essence, is the dialectical vocation of the postcolonial critic, which is to take her readers beyond the markers of the known world and to explore the territory beyond. It is to test the tenets of theories and worldviews against the rejoinders of a previously unheeded reality and against the retorts of distant voices. Postcolonial criticism encourages self-scrutiny therefore, and provides knowledge; it is

⁵ Two exceptions to this neglect are Thomas Y. Levin (1985) and Asha Varadharajan (2007).

also inspired by an impulse to replace unjust political and economic systems whose endurance relies upon ignorance, complacency and inaction. It is a very short step from Adorno's dialectical philosophy to postcolonial critics' eschewal of ideologies and systems that belittle or render nugatory and even expendable lives that are conducted outside the insular spheres of Europe and North America. Not only words from abroad but thoughts from there are what sustain critical activity.

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