

Aporia, Reason, Jouissance: Notes on Pleasure Principles in Postcolonial Writing
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What does postcolonial jouissance entail and must we laugh before we feel this rush of euphoria? Or is jouissance a feature of the process of reading and thus independent of either comic or tragic articulations? If, rather than attempt a direct answer to these questions, we declare that both say Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* and Wole Soyinka's *The Road* and *Madmen and Specialists* deliver considerable doses of euphoric pleasure, we are left to scratch our heads even further and to wonder whether the entire pursuit does not threaten to completely exhaust our capacity for enjoying their art. But perhaps another perspective is called for, for what indeed Ondaatje and Soyinka share is the crafting of aporia, not as incidental aspects to their texts but as the central operational principles of their representations. The focus on aporia also serves to problematize the process of reading or observing, for aporia by definition resist easy interpretation and yet act as the nodal points from which the textual energy emerges.

Samuel Johnson writes in the *Rambler* of July 9, 1751: "That wonder is the effect of ignorance, has been often observed. The awful stillness of attention, with which the mind is overspread at the first view of an unexpected effect, ceases when we have leisure to disentangle complications and investigate causes. Wonder is a pause of reason, a sudden cessation of the mental progress, which lasts only while the understanding is fixed upon some single idea, and is at an end when it recovers force enough to divide the object into its parts, or mark the intermediate gradations from the first agent to the last consequence." If we take Johnson's words at face value, we are bound to conclude that aporia are nothing but the staging posts to the hegemony of reason. Or that they are, to misappropriate the Bible, as landmarks in the valley of the shadow of death but necessary toward the ultimate dawning of enlightenment salvation.

But what if we evade the invitation to take aporia as mere staging posts and instead read them as the location of the reconfiguration of the text? From the early twentieth century much of what we now conventionally take as aporetic writing was informed by a series of epistemological crises brought on by the perception that realism had signally failed to properly represent a reality. What Brian McHale defines as the epistemological crisis of modernism is readily illustrated as a series of incommensurabilities seen not just in the minds of modularized minds of modernist protagonists, but in the very textual elaborations of which they were a part. Coming from another historical contextual source, this series of incommensurabilities were to be made manifest by by some postcolonial writers as the crux of a bewildering existence that was trapped unwillingly between a colonial undoing and a postcolonial malaise. This was in large part brought on by the recognition of the signal failures of the nation-state project, the the compromise of the ruling elites, and the persistence of variant forms of neo-colonialisms now disguised as globalization. Thus like the aporetic Beckett, Eliot, Pound, and Celan, the Nigerian Wole Soyinka, the Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera, the Indian Jibanananda Das, the Argentinian Griselda Gambaro, and the Sri Lankan-Canadian Michael Ondaatje all provided ready examples of postcolonial aporetic writing. The postcolonial writers listed here (and many more could be added) write in all genres of poetry, fiction, and drama; the aporia within each representational convention will no doubt

have to be examined to establish the dynamic relations that are established between aporia and jouissance.

Nevertheless the question of postcolonial aporia takes us beyond the immediate unravelling representational protocols and into the more complex questions of the translation of distinct categories one into the other, and sometimes made cognisant at different levels of the text (characterological, dialogue, symbolism, setting, etc.). From the inception of postcolonial studies, however, two major categories have always been under contentious scrutiny: History (read reality, broadly defined) and Representation (read text, broadly defined). Even if without direct reference to the literatures of the postcolonial world, J. Hillis Miller states the problematic of mimesis most suggestively: “All of [such] models belong to the problematic of inside/outside polarities, open to a variety of crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane, or partition dividing the sides. Understanding such displacements, substitutions, and crossings requires a linguistic or rhetorical analysis, a mastery of the varieties of figure inhabiting this region of linguistic transaction. Interpretation of these figures hovers uneasily around the exceedingly difficult problem of how something apparently non-linguistic, social power, or force, material means of production, distribution, and consumption, passes over the border into the linguistic.” (*The Ethics of Reading*, 7). And so let us return to Soyinka and Ondaatje, not in order to provide exhaustive answers to the questions, but to suggest a possible research agenda for elaborating the jouissance of the postcolonial text.

This is how we first encounter Professor in *The Road*, Soyinka’s 1965 play set in an unnamed Nigerian town:

Professor is a tall figure in Victorian outfit -- tails, top-hat, etc., all thread-bare and shiny at the lapels from much ironing. He carries four enormous bundles of newspaper and a fifth of paper odds and ends impaled on a metal rod stuck in a wooden rest. A chair-stick hangs from one elbow, and the other arm clutches a road sign bearing a squiggle and the one word, ‘BEND’.

PROF: [*he enters in a high state of excitement, muttering to himself*]: Almost a miracle. . . dawn provides the greatest miracles but this. . . in this dawn has exceeded its promise. In the strangest of places. . . God God God but there is a mystery in everything. A new discovery every hour -- I am used to that, but that I should be led to where this was hidden, sprouted in secret for heaven knows how long . . . for there was no doubt about it, this word was growing, it was growing from earth until I plucked it. . . (157)

Professor’s extravagant motley Victorian outfit is a marker of his previous middle class affiliation from which he has obviously been severed by the start of the play. The whiff of anachronism suggested by his peculiar sartorial style is not entirely misplaced, since his domineering character is also meant to recall a cross between a demented visionary and Fagin, the familiar lord of the underworld in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. Professor is in a vigorous quest for what he calls the Word, the essence of which he strives to arrive at by assembling a range of quotidian scripts (the bundles of newspapers; paper odds and ends) and road signs, alongside the deployment of a hybrid interpretative mechanism that combines Yoruba semiotics with a quasi-Christian sensibility. He claims to have a pact with risks, dangers and death and the social periphery on which he undertakes his quest is populated by jobless lorry park touts and other characters that make their living from petty document forgery, the provision of

“protection” for politicians, and epic daydreaming. Professor’s declaration that “there is a mystery in everything/ a new discovery every hour” suggests something of what Walter Benjamin, following Leibniz and others, defines as the monad, where each moment is saturated by entirety of potential within a historical epoch. As Benjamin points out in the *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* the release of that often suppressed and unrecognized historical potential can unleash the revolutionary upheaval nestling inside of ordinary Time itself. This is definitely one dimension of Professor’s understanding of time, and yet his monadic sensibility is somewhat undermined within the play by the essentially aporetic character of his speech forms. Professor places mystery simultaneously upon the very surface of his speech acts whilst also positing it as a reality concealed inside of everyday scripts. But this duality produces a sense of enigma that is both surface and depth that ends up baffling his interlocutors. The problem with the enigmatic oscillation between surface and depth in a play set amongst the desperate unemployed is that it appears utterly counter-productive and far from revolutionary. In this play the aporetic language generates epistemological doubt rather than any form of certainty for the unemployed touts. It triggers extreme bafflement and indeed anxiety amongst the lorry park touts, and this becomes an instrument of control and power for Professor. And yet the bafflement of the touts is in an inverse relation to how much laughter and indeed pleasure it generates for us readers or spectators. Why this contradiction?

For Soyinka, the value of his aporia is precisely this: as a mnemonic of disaster whose modality is the laughter of the audience. In this respect he is not distant from Beckett, for as is well known, in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, the point of the laughter was to rivet our attention more securely on the absurdity of existence that was reflected within the plays themselves. The difference between Soyinka and Beckett, however, is that in plays such as *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *Kongi’s Harvest* (among various others), the purpose of the laughter is to galvanize a new way for understanding the social worlds that subtend the plays. For the urban Nigeria in which most of his plays are set suggests a laugh-to-avoid-crying kind of quality that can only be captured in the kind of aporetic idiom that he provides for us.

As a way of arriving at a sense of the aporetic character of Ondaatje’s writing let us look closely at perhaps one of the most well-known scenes in *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). This is the scene where the nun drops off the Bloor Street Viaduct, blown over by a very strong wind. While the nun’s sudden vanishing over the parapet has been much remarked upon, the lead up to it is as suggestive as the unexpected event itself. This is what we see:

An April night in 1917. Harris and Pomphrey were on the bridge, in the dark wind. Pomphrey had turned west and was suddenly stilled. His hand reached out to touch Harris on the shoulder, a gesture he had never made before:

Look!

Walking on the bridge were five nuns (30).

Now if, like Harris, we follow the pointing finger, we are obliged to look into the middle distance, where we see five nuns, having alighted from a bus and turned east toward the uncompleted side of the bridge suddenly, being buffeted by sudden strong winds. The nuns walk towards a thirty-yard point on the bridge from where Harris and Pomphrey are standing when the winds begin to scatter and throw them against cement mixers and steam shovels, and makes

them career from side to side in imminent danger of serious injury. Four of the nuns are grabbed by various of the workmen, who hold them tight to themselves against the strong winds, but one of them is not so lucky: “Harris and Pomphrey at the far end looked on helplessly as one nun was lifted up and flung against the compressors. She stood up shakily and then the wind jerked her sideways, scraping her along the concrete and right off the edge of the bridge. She disappeared into the night by the third abutment, into the long depth of air which held nothing, only sometimes a rivet or a dropped hammer during the day” (31). The reference to a rivet or dropped hammer during the day could not have been from the viewpoint of Harris and Pomphrey but from that of the workers desperate to save the women. Thus the rivet and hammer also exercise a momentary split in the perspective between the perspectives of the two groups of men, who as we already know have been placed in different different spatio-temporal depths in relation to the unfolding action.

Note also that this remarkable scene is also shaped by a series of contrasts between the stillness of compressors and the bridge itself and the frightful motions of the wind tossing the nuns and that the scene unfolds predominantly from the perspective of Harris and Pomphrey who still stand transfixed and horrified on the far west side of the bridge. From their perspective and ours, the nun has dropped off a precipice, never to be seen again. She has vanished frightfully into thin air, as it were. And yet in the very next paragraph, which follows after a strategic small break on the page, we rejoin the arc of the nun’s progress through the air, but this time from the perspective of Nicholas Temelcoff, the daredevil workman hanging from pulley ropes right under the bridge where she was blown off. On seeing the shape hurtling towards him, and completely on impulse, Temelcoff stretches his right hand and catches her. The arc of the nun’s fall through the air has perceptually been broken into two halves, with the Harris and Pomphrey pair on the one hand and Nicholas on the other each seeing only one half of the arc while being completely oblivious to the other half. It is only us, as privileged readers, that have the benefit of recognizing the “cut” as it were, and thus of experiencing the entire range of heightened emotions (pleasurable?, shocked?, anxiety-generating?) that equally saturate both halves of the dramatic scene. The device of constructing a broken narrative arc, here situated squarely within the sphere of what become constituted as two different yet contiguous scenes, is one that is repeated so many times throughout *In the Skin of a Lion* as to constitute an aporetic signature of the text. Sometimes the cut is not made in the middle of contiguous scenes; quite often the related scenes are dispersed across vast expanses of narrative and amidst dense tracts of intervening narrative threads, thus inviting a special kind of reader attentiveness for their deciphering (often futile, it has to be added). And at other times the cut is temporal rather than spatial, such that it is not clear whether the events that are being described are recollections from the past or directly unfolding within the present time of the action.

In an unpublished fragment to *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes: “Glance into the world just as though time were gone: and everything crooked will become straight to you”. I think Nietzsche is implying here that the suspension of all expectations of both past and future produces clarity in our perceptions of the present. But his remark may also be read as pertaining to perception in the face of death and thus the obliteration of experiential space-time. What we see in both Soyinka and Ondaatje, here and elsewhere, is the workings of a heightened intensity of perception, but routed securely through the aporia in the texts. The are elevated beyond the

level of the cognitive to become something like an chronotopic apparatus, a conceptual switchboard for grasping the confluence of space and time. And libido and death.