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“Listening for the echo”: Representation and resistance in postcolonial studies

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Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is an anomalous work in his oeuvre; unlike many of his later books its emphasis on the way in which cultures have been misrepresented and misused by colonial power is not matched by an equally voluble insistence on the need to contest those misrepresentations and therefore to develop more self-conscious, sympathetic and egalitarian relationships with power’s victims. The importance and availability of those relationships to western readers is explored by *The Redundancy of Courage*, Timothy Mo’s allegorical novel about the neo-colonization of East Timor or, as he calls it, Danu. Largely as a result of its distinctive narrative voice, Mo’s novel highlights the hazards and difficulties faced by the western percipient as well as that percipient’s considerable moral and political responsibilities towards the places about which he or she reads.

Keywords: representation; resistance; awareness; humanism; narrative

To ponder the partial impression given of Edward Said’s legacy by many postcolonial critics who promote *Orientalism* and neglect to call attention to his many other works is to be reminded of Dr Johnson’s description of those readers who recommend Shakespeare with select quotations: they are like the Greek who peddled his house by carrying round one of its bricks as a specimen.¹ My aims here are to show that in its radical epistemological and political scepticism *Orientalism* is but a small and rather unrepresentative slab in the larger edifice of Said’s achievement; that this edifice was built on very different and much firmer political and theoretical foundations; and therefore that postcolonial critics and students would be well advised to explore Said’s other work, especially if they wish to develop a method of reading literary texts that emphasizes those texts’ capacity to offer alternatives to dominant definitions of the postcolonial world.

Orientalism traces a durable system of representations of the Middle East stretching from Herodotus to Henry Kissinger. Orientalism, the idea, evokes images of a dependent, powerless place, a canvas for the realization of the West’s economic objectives, strategic plans and cultural fantasies. The Middle East is subjected by the West to an extraordinary campaign of distortion. Where there should be sympathy and careful analysis there is only a fraudulent wisdom based on misinformed surmises. Said’s analysis of Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (*Orientalism* 3) is salutary and convincing. But what makes *Orientalism* to my mind an unrepresentative sample of Said’s oeuvre is the way in which it has been read and the way in which a large part of it positively *asks* to be read as a Foucauldian text. What I mean by this is that *Orientalism*’s methodology and, more particularly, its very sweeping denunciations of western scholarship about the “Orient” are conspicuously and, I think,

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excessively, reliant on Michel Foucault's claim that the pursuit of knowledge is always and unavoidably entangled with the exercise of power (27–28). To an extent that is both uncharacteristic and unwarranted, *Orientalism* (which, as Neil Lazarus has argued, is actually “a relatively atypical Saidian text” [*Nationalism* 11]) casts doubt on the possibility of intellectuals, artists and citizens in the West doing anything to correct the contamination of their minds by Eurocentric prejudices.

Orientalism gave rise to – or at least, until its too often disregarded final section, did too little to discourage – many of the principal tenets of postcolonial studies. The discipline of postcolonial studies has long proceeded under the influence of *Orientalism*. Its prevailing, though contested and now somewhat embattled tendencies, include an assertion of identity at the expense of equality; an often unfounded and frequently ill-informed suspicion of Marxism and anti-colonial nationalism; an uncritical adoption of the argot and agenda of deconstruction and anti-humanism; and a widespread misreading of (and even unfamiliarity with) self-reflective but not drastically sceptical strains in European philosophy such as the dialectical and the hermeneutic traditions. Despite their considerable achievements, postcolonial critics have done too little to persuade against an extreme notion (derived from Nietzsche, developed by Foucault, then embraced by *Orientalism*): that there is no knowledge, only partial, self-serving viewpoints, and that reality itself is nothing but an effect of the various texts and discourses that we use to represent it.² This notion has led directly to a disastrous belief that it is not possible for citizens and especially intellectuals in the West to produce knowledge about interlocutors elsewhere. Typically, this impossibility is put down to the fact that cultures are discrete and imporous. But, once arguments about the unfeasibility of representation have been deemed credible, we are left with a sort of separatist ideology which bears little resemblance to the goal of universal human emancipation that has inspired – and, just as importantly, *continues* to inspire – anti-colonial theory and activism. As Satya Mohanty has argued, an extreme epistemological doubt has a tendency to snowball into a theoretically misconceived and politically unavailing cultural relativism (145). Decolonization, as Mohanty makes clear, becomes a decidedly difficult outcome to achieve when we are debarred from contemplating alternatives to the divisions brought about by colonialism. Cultural separateness, in other words, is neither an adequate characterization of the contemporary world system (which is not so much separate as unequal and is not disconnected but linked by relations of power) nor an appealing alternative to the ongoing history of imperialism (since alternatives ought to entail some element of dialogue, understanding, interaction and solidarity).

But it is important not to dismiss Said's work, as Aijaz Ahmad has done, for implying that “Europeans were *ontologically* incapable of producing any true knowledge about non-Europe” (178, original emphasis). We need, rather, to read Said *against* Said: to accentuate the resources contained in his work that allow us to develop more self-conscious but still committed and effective forms of scholarship, whilst passing over the atypical and comparatively infrequent moments at which Said appears to write such scholarship off. Said's explicit assertions of the limitations of post-structuralism, as well as his expressions of dissatisfaction with its deafness to the ways in which texts can facilitate knowledge and encourage empathy, have usually been overlooked or ignored by those post-structuralist thinkers who claim Said as an ally. *The World, the Text, and the Critic* offers a lengthy appraisal of what Said saw as the unconscious parochialism of Foucault's thought. Though he had explored the connections between the exercise of power and the discourses of reason and knowledge, Foucault had neither illuminated the sources of that power nor given due emphasis to power's limitations and weak points. Contests between classes, societies and ideologies are largely absent from his work. Moreover, Foucault's “microphysics

of power” had actually obscured power’s origins in ruling classes and dominant interests. In his qualms about subjectivity and the language of humanism, and notably in his depiction of power as undifferentiated and ineluctable, Foucault had shown little interest in the possibility and desirability – or, for that matter, the manifest *actuality* – of resistance to the effects of discursive power and to the social and economic order on which discursive power depends. Why power is exercised and by whom are questions rarely, if ever, broached by his work. Its most salient and grievous flaws are thus its tendency to depict power as all-penetrating, uncontested and inexorable and, resulting from this, its inability to provide an account of historical change: “power”, in short, “can be made analogous neither to a spider’s web without the spider nor to a smoothly functioning flow diagram” (Said, *The World* 221).

Thus, while the exasperated marginalia in my own copy are a record of my exasperation with *Orientalism*’s dramatic scepticism, one is compelled, I think, to heed Neil Larsen’s claim that intellectual scepticism does not constitute the entire book (28) and certainly does not represent the larger part of Said’s oeuvre. Not least in the unjustly overlooked final chapter of *Orientalism* itself (326–28), as well as more fully in *Covering Islam* (135–73) and *The Question of Palestine* (which complete the trilogy commenced by *Orientalism*), and in political books such as *The Politics of Dispossession* and *The End of the Peace Process*, Said both raises the possibility of a non-coercive knowledge of other societies and demonstrates that possibility by trying to represent faithfully to his readers the existential situation and political aspirations of his Palestinian compatriots. I am interested not in contesting Said’s legacy (which, for what it is worth, I consider to be profound and immensely salutary) but in showing that Said’s considerable intellectual authority cannot convincingly be employed to uphold a sceptical or relativistic theoretical position. Said’s work remains important because it points towards a very different and far more constructive theoretical position that *does* countenance the production of knowledge, that *rejects* the ideology of cultural separateness, and, crucially, that *values* the potential of literary reading to explore “new and different ways of conceiving human relationships” (Said, *The World* 17).

Accordingly, I want to analyse the peculiar narrative voice of *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991), the Anglo-Chinese writer Timothy Mo’s allegorical novel about the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and the subsequent war of resistance. The narrator’s irony and self-awareness are matched only by his equally powerful determination to address and to redress the gap between the uncertain western percipient and the far-flung, largely unheeded historical event. In full consciousness of the pitfalls of such a quixotic enterprise, of the inescapable bad faith involved in speaking through the dead or silenced mouths of distant victims, and of the ambiguous and estranging medium of writing itself, Mo nevertheless seeks to work the obscure events of East Timor’s colonization and resistance into fiction. His novel succeeds not in articulating the testimony of the East Timorese; indeed, its narrator’s self-consciousness is largely a result of the author’s alertness to the gulf that separates the puny powers of writing from the stifled voices of colonialism’s victims. Rather, more subtly, *The Redundancy of Courage* succeeds in puncturing western complacency and incuriosity, in exposing the media’s bias and self-interest, and, most importantly, in urging its readers to help remedy the prevailing cynicism by reaching across borders in order to engage ethically with the violence perpetrated, legitimized and eclipsed by colonial power.

The novel’s narrator, Adolph Ng, is very far from being an authority on Danu or, in any uncomplicated way, an insider in its people’s resistance to colonization. Despite his friendship with the territory’s mestizo elite, and despite being induced, partly against his will, to flee to the mountains and take part in the ill-fated armed struggle against the

invasion, this self-styled “misfit” and “citizen of the great world” (Mo 24) – a gay Chinese hotelier recently returned from a Canadian university and now wiling away the days in his coastal retreat with an obliging and youthful entourage – is distanced from the struggle’s earnest protagonists: by his patrician airs, his ethnicity, his sexuality, his foreign education, and his status as well-to-do local entrepreneur. Neither insider nor outsider, Ng is a manifestly problematic spokesman for the suppressed and disregarded Danuese version of events. The novel is narrated entirely in the first person from the partial standpoint of this mordant bystander, who is, in his own words, “a quirky guy with an odd history” (113). Ng’s perspective is partial because both fragmentary and subjective. Indeed, the complexities of perception and its effects are major themes: or rather, the hindrances faced by perception in addition to perception’s slanted, distorted and consequently problematic and deficient nature constitute both the novel’s narrative method as well as an idea that it endeavours to bring home to its readers. Yet, as we shall see, this insight into perception is not the book’s objective but the means by which it achieves its outcome, which is to engender in its readers some degree of conscionable awareness despite and even as a result of their appreciation of perception’s inescapably flawed nature.

The technique employed by Ng’s description of the first day of the *malai* invasion has a great deal in common with what Ian Watt has called, seeking to characterize Joseph Conrad’s narrative method in *Heart of Darkness*, “delayed decoding” (175). The actual subject, the invasion, is rendered only partially and belatedly by a narrator who does not so much explicate events (since he is not in a position to do so) as describe them impressionistically and from a position, as Ng puts it, “outside the events I was observing” (4). Immediate perceptions are related and then later “decoded” or explained by the narrative’s unfolding events. That is, there is not an exhaustive portrayal of events but a record of the confused visual sensations of an observer looking on from his secluded hotel: the white and silent parachutes “drifting as if they were thistledown or broken cotton-pods”, “the storm of the dust in the town” being shelled by vessels off the coast, “the dirt fountains” placed at the side of the road by airborne “silver insects”, and the bridge shaking “as if a giant hand had seized it” (3). These descriptions are fleeting sensations that demonstrate the mediation of those events by a befuddled and introverted consciousness: “I do not strive to be poetic. That was exactly how they appeared” (4). Ng and therefore Mo’s readers elicit meaning from his observations only gradually, Mo’s technique serving to make us conscious right away of what Watt describes as “the bounded and ambiguous nature of individual understanding” (174): of the only partially and painstakingly bridgeable gap between impression and awareness, or between the actual happening and our sluggish and imperfect comprehension of it. From the novel’s opening the reader is mindful that his view of events is reliant on a single observer whose version, though graphic and obviously aided by the wisdom of hindsight, is nonetheless compromised by detachment and partiality and also by the inescapable precariousness of perception itself. Therefore it is not just Ng’s irreverent, subversive commentary that mocks the ploys and pretexts promoted by Danu’s conquerors, but also the manifest literariness of the novel itself, or, put differently, the painstakingly accentuated discrepancy between language and that which it professes to describe.

Yet this does not tell us all we need to know about the narrative method of *The Redundancy of Courage*, which does not stop at molesting prevailing “truths” about the situation in places like Danu but goes on, crucially, to stress the need to supplant those “truths” with alternative accounts. After all, without defective points of view like Ng’s the events allegorized by the narrative would be threatened with oblivion. Ng is obliged to compensate us for the absence of more enlightening witnesses. We learn that the Australian journalist Bill Mabeley, one of the very few foreign reporters to remain in the territory after an Australian television

crew was massacred during a previous *malai* incursion, is executed on the waterfront in the invasion's early hours.³ Consciousness of the falsity of established "truth", an upshot of literary writing, might lead to despondency or cynicism but equally to a desire to produce new forms of knowledge, albeit with the pitfalls of that process unobscured.

My point is that it will not do to characterize Ng's narrative voice as unreliable and leave it at that, partly because his voice is the only medium we have on events that demand attention and partly also because his detached and self-conscious standpoint actually generates new and valuable kinds of understanding. For a start, Ng's ambivalence and his detachment allow him insights unavailable to the undoubtedly heroic but nonetheless too fervent and unselfconscious figure of the guerrilla leader Osvaldo. Ng's status as a "man of the world" is the cause of both a regrettable distance from the independence struggle and its fervent protagonists as well as of a decidedly admirable sensitivity to the shortcomings of nationalism. His cosmopolitanism appears more faithful to the movement's principles than, say, the zeal, the sectarianism and the aversion to ambiguity (138) that lead Osvaldo to preside over the massacre of his party's Danuese opponents (229). Notwithstanding Osvaldo and Arsenio's calculatedly ingratiating speeches to the rural "betel-chewing constituency" (64) as well as his own sympathy for the FAKOUM, Ng is conscious that "the bastards" of the FAKOUM nationalist movement had "an unofficial Chinese exclusion policy" (76). Moreover, "[i]t won't surprise you that [...] that mean son of a bitch [Arsenio] paid a great deal of lip-service to the idea of the emancipation of women" (71). His own ostracism makes Ng sensitive to the dangers of exclusion. In other words, it is precisely his status as a "misfit" that gives Ng a privileged insight into the national community and, in particular, into nationalism's insufficiency, its aggressiveness, its hostility to outsiders, and its tendency to use the rhetoric of unity to cover over rather than address inequalities between classes and genders.

There is a further reason why we must resist the temptation to dismiss Ng's standpoint as unreliable. The novel accentuates both the extreme difficulty of perceiving and narrating events authoritatively *and* the pitfalls awaiting those prepared to mistake this difficulty for impossibility. Nowhere is the reader allowed to feel comfortable with the manifest gulf between words and facts. *The Redundancy of Courage* places at the very forefront of its readers' minds the full political and even existential consequences of denying the possibility of knowledge. Hence for every occasion on which the official and accepted account put about by Danu's conquerors and their western sympathizers is revealed to be propaganda, the reader is made aware of a usually desperate and unavailing effort on the part of the Danuese to bear witness to their sufferings; in short, for every anti-communist smear there is a desperate radio operator screaming in vain for help in heavily accented English (10). This is the second reason why the characterization of Ng's voice as unreliable would not constitute an adequate reading: *The Redundancy of Courage* associates the eschewal of truth less with sophisticated philosophical critiques of the "metaphysics of presence" than with cynical misrepresentations of the facts aimed at concealing the reality of suffering and injustice. As the novel demonstrates, and as Terry Eagleton has argued, power sustains itself not just by imposing its own version of events but also by preventing and suppressing alternative accounts:

The beginning of the good life is to try as far as possible to see the situation as it really is. It is unwise to assume that ambiguity, indeterminacy, undecidability are always subversive strikes against an arrogantly monological certitude; on the contrary, they are the stock-in-trade of many a juridical enquiry and official investigation. (Eagleton 379–80)

To dismiss the notion of truth out of hand is to blind oneself to this strategy and to deprive oneself of the capacity to counter it with alternatives that, no matter how hedged – as Mo's

is – with admissions of partiality and incompleteness, seek to puncture and contest the dominant version.

Hence the insistence and pertinacity with which the novel emphasizes both the *malais'* distortion of the real intentions and effects of their occupation *and* the forceful effort to broadcast an alternative narrative of the struggle. Before the invasion, Arsenio and the other FAKOUM leaders are anxious to counteract the *malais'* campaign of distortion with “an international PR drive” of their own, cultivating the handful of foreign journalists in Danu in an effort to explain their revolution and broadcast their neighbour’s malign intentions: as Ng remarks after a *malai* raiding party burns down a village, “we had to get into the frame of that bigger world” (88). He soon concludes: “*if it doesn’t get on to TV in the West, it hasn’t happened*” (91, emphasis in original). “Well, I’ll give them their due”, he says elsewhere: “they appreciated their McLuhan, the FAKOUM boys and girls” (72), which means, presumably, that they were awakened to the power and pervasiveness of the media. Their most powerful weapon in this regard was Joaquim Lobato, a character modelled openly on José Ramos-Horta, East Timor’s Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and now that wounded country’s beleaguered president. The indefatigable Lobato, a former journalist, does the rounds of unsympathetic ambassadors in Canberra and then, stranded abroad by the conquest, assumes a “later career as FAKOUM torch-bearer and thorn in the *malai* side where it mattered – abroad” (91). Danu’s representative for over a decade at the United Nations, where he meets the exiled Ng, the impecunious Lobato devotes himself, unsuccessfully but untiringly and not without swaying many onlookers, to lobbying the General Assembly to adopt a resolution censuring the *malai* invasion. Lobato tells Ng of the cynical realpolitik behind the West’s support for the *malais* and of the Americans’ green light to the invasion. The magnitude of that collusion and its indispensableness make western cities like New York, which seems to Ng so remote from the sharp end of the struggle, and specifically the battle there to raise awareness, attract sympathy, and provoke corrective action, a vital and indeed indispensable element of resistance: “‘*Remote?*’ he cried ... ‘This isn’t remote’, his voice shook. ‘This is where it’s determined; this is where it began; this is where it will end’” (404, original emphasis). Not only is the fictional quality of the dominant truth accentuated, therefore, but so too are the decisive nature of that deception as well as the profoundly urgent need to counter it with alternative versions.

In the final third of the novel, Ng is captured and put to work as a dogsbody and companion for Mrs Goreng, the wife of a *malai* colonel. Mrs Goreng is placed in charge of escorting a delegation of foreign journalists around the Potemkin villages of the subjugated territory. They are cosseted, fawned over, fed crude euphemisms for “military dictatorship” to use in their copy, flattered in their lordly preconceptions about Washington’s indelicate but altruistic world role, induced to discount if not misrepresent the Bishop of Danu’s broadsides against the occupier, and spun transparent falsehoods about Danu’s “reunion” with its conqueror and the mass base of the island’s miniscule integrationist party.⁴ The journalists inadvertently reveal to the novel’s readers what Mrs Goreng’s contemptuous helpmeet already knows: the unreliability of orthodox channels of information and therefore the gulf between reality and official truth. Asked if he would like a message conveyed to the world beyond Danu, Ng responds with the simple injunction to “write the truth”, prompting the German journalist Speich to declare that “Truth is relative, Mr Ng. Like beauty it is in the eye of the beholder” (359).

Yet if it is true that the novel demonstrates the insufficiency and, indeed, the moral deplorableness of this stance, then the ostensible disillusionment of Ng’s eventual flight and exile in Brazil as well as the pessimism of the book’s title remain to be explained.

We were correct to think that we had no control over our destinies: to consider that resistance was futile and bravery superfluous. From the start, our fate was determined not by ourselves, not locally or by the invader even, but abroad, in Canberra and Washington. That was why the *malais* had tried to destabilise the FAKOUM regime, to disseminate a campaign of lies [...] The distortions of the press campaign provided so many pretexts which, however intrinsically flimsy, could be used to veil the issue, obfuscate. The disinformation [...] was as vital to the success of the invasion as the strafing and the barrage. (110)

I do not think it is to slight the book to say that in its exposure of the ineffectiveness of physical resistance in this particular struggle against colonialism (the redundancy of courage, in other words) the novel largely limits itself to exposing as well as reprehending the partiality and limitedness of official narratives about colonial power. The novel's primary task is to make apparent the gulf separating the turbulence of real lives and experiences from the official narratives that seek to obscure them, in Ng's words to demonstrate that "[a]n identity and a history cannot be obliterated with a switch of a name or a stroke of a pen" (406). Ng finds that in exile he is unable to "fashion a new notion of myself and impose it on others as truth" (402): "I was trying to accomplish within my own small person what the *malais* hadn't been able to do to a nation" (406). What has come into being through suffering and struggle cannot easily be obscured or reinvented. The novel's second aim is then to articulate its protagonist's awareness that this insight is essential but insufficient. It shows, via the media's gullibility and incuriosity, for example, that the discrepancy between official and actual truth must be addressed in addition to being acknowledged. In other words, unless one is prepared to respond to the dominant narrative's failures by elaborating alternatives, then one might as well succumb to the cynicism and paralysis of a Speich.

Yet the task to which this second aspect of the novel points us – the creation of alternatives to the official accounts and to the political and economic order that the official accounts uphold – is not the responsibility of Ng, because it is not and could not be the responsibility of so partial and imaginary a construction as fiction. The ostensible disillusionment of *The Redundancy of Courage* is therefore a ruse: less an assertion that resistance is futile than a hard-headed declaration that resistance is hopeless if works like Mo's are unable to encourage alternative narratives which inspire solidarity and sympathetic action. Far from being a cry of despair, then, the novel's title is an illustration of the weakness of physical resistance faced with the political, military and ideological hegemony of powerful states *as well as*, just as importantly, an admission of the limits of fiction, which does not have it in its powers to correct this state of affairs. In part, therefore, *The Redundancy of Courage* is a spur to the corrective actions of the novel's readers in distant but decisive western metropolises, a plea for them to help in discharging the tasks which the novel perforce leaves unfinished. Ng's final peroration, then, refers equally to agents within East Timor and to distant readers awakened by Mo's mediated representations of that territory: "The *malais* might have put the torch to the field, they might think they've exterminated all the creatures in it, but there'll always be one woodchuck left. There always is" (408). It is significant that Ng refers to "woodchucks", the name he gives to his young charges during his time as a sapper. The indomitable opponents of official power to whom Ng appeals are not only those at the receiving end who have learnt to contest it but also, crucially, Ng's other protégés, the far-off readers who have been instructed and galvanized by his words.

The main point I want to make about *The Redundancy of Courage* is that, unlike a great deal of postcolonial scholarship, it is not satisfied with demonstrating the erroneousness and partiality of orthodox representations of distant societies like East Timor. Of course, it *is* prepared to discredit the propaganda disseminated by powerful states, to protest the fourth estate's obedience to political power, and to censure the conformity and incuriosity

of ordinary citizens. Indeed, it is the blatantly literary (as opposed to testimonial or reportorial) nature of Mo's text or, what amounts to the same thing, its reliance on the openly partial and therefore questionable point of view of its protagonist, that draws the reader's attention to the inevitable shortcomings of any effort to speak of a situation so distant, murky and contested, and so deliberately heaped over with misinformation. The novel encourages a critical assessment of perspectives, including, of course, that of its protagonist and narrator plus, crucially, those of the characters in the military and the media who seek to exploit or cynically resign themselves to the gap between discourse and reality. It is in spite and perhaps even because of that capacity to arouse its readers' critical sense that the novel also incites dissatisfaction with the common – though, in the light of its utilization by Speich as a rationale for cynicism and by the invaders as an instrument of deception – patently insufficient and morally reprehensible conclusion that what we say about the world can bear no relation to what actually takes place there.

In short, *The Redundancy of Courage* promotes an appreciation of the possibilities of critical reading. I have said already that some of the book's protégés are to be found outside the text; furthermore, their possible continuation of the resistance acclaimed by Ng at its conclusion makes *The Redundancy of Courage* an exemplification of Gabriel García Márquez's invaluable dictum that the best books do not end on the last page (56). The novel incites a capacity for critical reading: for scepticism towards received doctrines about the currently or formerly colonized parts of the world. Critical reading constitutes both the novel's legacy and the precondition of any effective western engagement with the situation that it describes. Indeed, the novel provides an example of the way in which it wishes to be read. Before her husband's posting to Danu, Mrs Goreng had worked for a women's magazine penning "puff" pieces about new restaurants and hotels. But so strong is Ng's craving for information about the outside world after his long confinement to the guerrilla army's remote hideaways and so determined is his new employer to keep this former subversive from gaining access to useful news that Ng must resort to picking up information from the partisan monthlies that Mrs Goreng leaves lying about the house. He does so by reading critically: that is, attentively and sceptically, so as to detect the omissions and biases of the texts as well as to perceive the traces left by historical events on even the most trivial and slanted copy.

In the middle of the trivia, the stuff that could easily have been 1930 or 1960, there was information for the gleaning [...] The articles of direct newsworthy interest in her magazine were as few and far between as the flecks of gold in a prospector's pan. What you had to do was listen for the echo – not the report itself [...] Thus I learned that Chaplin was dead and so was Elvis [...] (I'd thought the former long since gone but this intelligence of Presley startled me), that Iranians had held Americans hostage, administered show trials and televised humiliation; that a geriatric cowboy had become President of the mightiest nation on earth – all in all, show biz news. (318)

But it is not just, as he quips, "show biz news" that Ng gathers from perusing Mrs Goreng's magazines but (as is suggested by the incongruity of thinking of news of Elvis's death as "intelligence") useful knowledge. By reading texts critically – that is, in full awareness of their bias and incompleteness, and of their capacity to register if not, of course, adequately to represent a wider milieu – Ng learns from these discarded glossies something akin to what the reader ascertains from the text Ng writes: an inkling (though far from an exhaustive or disinterested chronicle) of important events, in addition to a grasp of the close relationship between showbiz and power or, put differently, of the reliance of political power on power over the promulgation of information, images and narratives. Both "the mightiest

nation on earth” and authoritarian regimes in Iran and Indonesia depend on sowing confusion between truth and fiction. What distinguishes the novel from the magazine, however, is that the intense self-consciousness of the former encourages the critical reading to which the latter is merely susceptible, that the former focuses readers’ attention on the worldly situation that the latter tries to avoid, and that the novel positively entreats its readers to cup their ears to the echo of distant events.

By telling the story through the fragmentary and idiosyncratic, but nonetheless admirably curious, self-aware, fair-minded and at times also principled voice of Adolph Ng, Mo hints at the difficulties, as well as the rewards and even the moral and political necessity of seeking knowledge about distant and hitherto obscure situations. The reader is encouraged to look inwards before looking outwards: to seek to understand others only on the basis of the most stringent reflection on one’s own biases and one’s vulnerability to the media’s distortions. Thus at the novel’s end the credulous and religiose missive of Ng’s Canadian college friend Annie condemns from her own mouth the ignorance of the average western reader and reveals the enormous chasm between her simplistic preconceptions and the realities and complexities illuminated by the novel we have just read (399–400). One can read in such works of fiction protests against the misrepresentations and falsifications perpetrated by dominant narratives as well as, if not the report itself, at least an echo of the reality that those narratives try to silence.

None of what I have been saying about the constructive potential of western reading and scholarship aims to dispute the postcolonial field’s founding contention that most of what Europeans and North Americans write, think and do with regard to other parts of the globe is erroneous and harmful. But, if this insight is not to license cynicism and various kinds of intellectual withdrawal, then it needs to preface an acknowledgement that, as Keya Ganguly has shown, the response to this situation need not be “a pendulum swing to the opposite extreme of epistemological uncertainty and theoretical relativism” (243). Mo’s novel uses the demands of reading to correct its readers’ insularity. Of course, no sufficient, let alone flawless, expression of the lives and aspirations of marginal groups is possible from a position so compromised by distance and by the history and actuality of relations of conflict between the First and Third Worlds. The process of interpretation is too sketchy, too provisional, too warped by the cultural and other involvements of the interpreter for the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups to be rendered adequately by western percipients. Nevertheless, paralysis and incomprehension are not the only responses to the prevailing myopia.

There is also, as Said avers and as much of his work exhibits, the thorny but not unfeasible or trifling task of transcending self-involvement and lack of awareness in order to accomplish something like knowledge, empathy and solidarity.

There are then the alternatives either of silence, exile, cunning, withdrawal into self and solitude, or more to my liking, though deeply flawed and perhaps too marginalized, that of the intellectual whose vocation it is to speak the truth to power, to reject the official discourse of orthodoxy and authority, and to exist through irony and skepticism, mixed in with the languages of the media, government, and dissent, trying to articulate the silent testimony of lived suffering and stifled experience. There is no sound, no articulation that is adequate to what injustice and power inflict on the poor, the disadvantaged, and the disinherited. But there are approximations to it, not representations of it, which have the effect of punctuating discourse with disenchantment and demystifications. To have *that* opportunity is at least something. (Said, “Silence” 526, original emphasis)

By encouraging us to “listen to the echo”, not the report itself, postcolonial literature can amplify the otherwise silent testimony of the oppressed, can discompose our ignorance and

complacency, and can make us aware of unheeded experiences, unanticipated realities and disregarded or suppressed aspirations. Critics who fail to emphasize the possibility, actuality and desirability of such cross-cultural contact are prone unintentionally to impugn and perhaps to deter acts of conscience and solidarity, which, though they pale in comparison to the tangible and potential results of the self-representations of the oppressed themselves, are not negligible.

My point is that the shortcomings of Orientalism (as well as the shortcomings of *Orientalism*) do not diminish but actually *increase* the opportunities for progressive intellectual work.⁵ Elaborating alternatives to “the official discourse of orthodoxy and authority” (Said, “Silence” 526) is an endeavour which I think should allow postcolonialists to perform all kinds of useful critical work: from investigations of the fruitful aspects of the ongoing history of inter-cultural contact between metropolises and colonies, to the formulation of principles, arrangements, and institutions that make it possible to conceive a post-imperial condition, and to analyses of the ways in which postcolonial literary texts do not just dramatize the conflicts and miscommunications of the colonial condition but also try to imagine their way beyond them. In the end, of course, the postcolonialist is like Walter Benjamin’s “destructive critic”; he devotes most of his energies to critique. But critique is neither the sole focus of his work nor its objective. He never allows his awareness of the pervasiveness of established ideologies or his inhabitation of a society suffused by them to trail off into cynicism and despair. This careful self-situating entails vigilance not lassitude, dissidence and solidarity where before one might have been beguiled or intimidated by orthodoxy’s prevalence. “What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it” (Benjamin 159).

Notes

1. The many anthologies of and introductions to postcolonial theory, which invariably bring up *Orientalism*, rarely include a flavour of Said’s other writings. Valerie Kennedy’s introductory *Edward Said* (2000) discusses Said’s writings on the Palestinians but not his neglected early texts or the later essays’ exploration of post-imperial arrangements and attitudes.
2. See John Beverley’s *Subalternity and Representation* (1999) which argues “the absence, difficulty, or impossibility of representation of the subaltern” (40) and reduces radical scholarship to a sort of penance or self-mortification, and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), which devotes almost all its energies to denouncing Eurocentric thought. In other words, a sustained critique of Eurocentric assumptions about the postcolonial world is hardly ever accompanied in these works and in postcolonial scholarship more broadly by a *discriminating* critique of European thought of the kind undertaken by, say, Asha Varadharajan in *Exotic Parodies* (1995) or Leela Gandhi in *Affective Communities* (2006).
3. The character of Mabeley is based on the freelance journalist Roger East who arrived in East Timor in order to investigate the deaths of the Nine Network TV crew and was then, as the novel dramatizes, shot by Indonesian forces on the first day of the invasion.
4. The real Bishop of Dili, Carlos Ximenes Belo, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with Ramos-Horta in 1996.
5. See Daniel Martin Varisco’s *Reading Orientalism* (2008), which, though a little quarrelsome at times and very fond of bad puns, is nonetheless a prodigious survey of the many pertinent objections and qualifications with which scholars have responded to Said’s *Orientalism*.

Notes on contributor

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