

You *can* get there from here: critique and utopia in Benita Parry's thought

Benita Parry is justly acclaimed as an exemplary demystifier – the thinker who has provided unsurpassed critiques of the neo-colonial elements that lurk in the work of some postcolonial critics and creative writers. Less acclaimed are the affirmative, even utopian elements of Parry's intellectual project. Her writings, from imperialism to postcolonial theory to resistance, articulate optimistic belief in the achievability of political solidarity and common understanding across races, nations and cultures, brought together in the struggle for human freedom. This may sound strange given Parry's renowned emphasis on the Manichean, and her strictures against a postcolonial theory predicated on models of 'negotiation' rather than conflict, intimacy and 'transculturation' rather than violence and domination.¹

But if we revisit even the most celebrated occasion of Parry's demystificatory practice, her *Oxford Literary Review* discussion of Gayatri Spivak, we find evidence of this affirmative inclination.² I am thinking of Parry's account of Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in particular, her persuasive analysis of the black character Christophine as 'the possessor and practitioner of an alternative tradition challenging imperialism's authorized system of knowledge' (p. 39). In ascribing radical agency to Christophine, Benita Parry also ascribes radical agency to her author. Parry is suggesting, in other words, that texts produced by non-black writers such as Rhys *can* respectfully represent 'alterity', and can recognise racially disenfranchised populations as the creators of different, legitimate knowledge-systems, social structures and aesthetic codes.³ For Parry, writers who are on the receiving end of imperial privilege are fully capable of interrogating what she nicely terms their 'ethnic solipsism', and they can also go beyond the limits of this internal critique to imagine alternative lifeworlds.⁴

In the case of metropolitan writers who, like Joseph Conrad, ultimately fail to produce a vision beyond imperialism, Parry none the less

establishes a utopian dimension to their work, and goes on to distinguish its emancipatory from its dominatory forms. Thus in *Conrad and Imperialism* she sees Conrad's attempt to 'recover the spiritual forces at work ... in imperialism' as halting 'the reappraisal of beliefs demanded by the fiction's arguments and revelations', 'even as it stands as a sign of the principle of hope'.⁵ Conrad's 'hope' culminates in his reactionary celebration of European racial solidarity. At the same time, Parry traces another destination for Conrad's utopianism: 'Ironically ... the symbols of anticipation inhere in experiences ... disparaged by the texts – in the many auguries of a fuller and more extensive human condition prefigured in moments of ontological awakening which are formally denigrated' (p. 16). In other words, Conrad's ethnic absolutism, his authorised utopia, is offset by this unofficial version of utopian existential transformation.

Parry's analysis of resistance cultures reveals a similar preoccupation with the meanings, values and modes of utopian drives. The critical procedure she calls for 'retains ... that realm of imaginary freedom which these histories prefigured or configured'; such analysis will 'register decolonising struggle as an emancipatory project despite the egregious failures these brought in their wake'.⁶ Sartre's work on Lumumba provides, for her, one example of this critical approach: Sartre, she suggests, manages both to 'lament the inevitable failure of a petty-bourgeois leadership to transform the fight for independence into the overthrow of the colonial state' and to 'celebrate what an oppressed population, even when handcuffed to a native bourgeoisie, dared to do in the face of international capitalism's remorseless colonialist interventions'.

I want to focus here on the interplay of critique and affirmation in Parry's work, and will start by looking at her analysis of ethnic solipsism in the metropole. From there I will go on to discuss her contribution to the understanding of resistance. If 1987 was the year of Paul Gilroy's famous critique of the white British metropolitan left in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, it was also the year of Parry's *Oxford Literary Review* article, which gives a pithy reprimand to the same left and for similar reasons. 'Francis Mulhern', writes Parry, 'has proposed that a "socialist politics of literature" be constructed from the writings of western women. This exorbitant demand on the work of first world women to effect the subversion of the west's cultural hegemony ... displays a parochial perspective on the sources of "alternative" literary modes, which is indifferent to the implosions being made ... by

postcolonial literary cultures, and suggests an insularity that has no place in radical theory' (p. 51).

Parry's concern with socialist eurovision has intensified since then, as is evident in her forthcoming article 'Liberation Theory: Variations on Themes of Marxism and Modernity'. But if in 1987 she was content merely to identify a problem, now we find she is concerned to *analyse* the problem of the left's non-engagement with colonialism, locating as crucial the 'shift away from the political' in European Marxism that began in the 1930s. However, Parry's politics of hope *and* her analytic rigour prevent her from blanket denunciation. She gets at the problem of European socialist racism by highlighting two major exceptions to it, Sartre and Althusser. By exploring their explicit and theoretical engagement with anti-colonial struggles, Parry shows again how much radical international agency was actually available to the metropole, even if the left chose, for the most part, not to exercise this. The default ethnic solipsism then emerges as another active choice by the left rather than as historically inevitable racial and national baggage. In giving a qualified affirmation of Sartre and Althusser, Parry more powerfully exposes the failure of political imagination at work in the majority of the European left.

Parry's accounts of metropolitan fiction writers demonstrate the same refusal to subscribe to white racial or European continental essentialism. And the same generous willingness to affirm the achievements of those writers who do try to challenge imperialist perspectives. To fully get at Parry's analysis of ethnocentric *and* emancipatory processes, we need to grasp the contrapuntal basis of her work. In 1983, long before Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* popularised the phrase 'contrapuntal reading', Parry used the 'contrapuntal' word in her book *Conrad and Imperialism*. She argues Conrad's fiction to display 'disjunctions between established morality and moral principle' in which 'ethical absolutes are revealed to be pragmatic utilities for ensuring social stability and inhibiting dissent'. These innovations ... produce a *contrapuntal discourse*' (p. 2; emphasis added). Edward Said's version of contrapuntal model of writing and reading suggests, at times, the aesthetic harmonisation and displacement of social conflict, the promotion of liberal pluralism over radical struggles for justice. Parry's 'contrapuntal discourse' suggests the opposite: she uses the phrase to designate the fissures produced by what she calls 'Conrad's struggle to escape ideology' (p. 7).

This emphasis recurs in her *Oxford Literary Review* call for critical 'engagement with the manifold and conflicting textual inscriptions – the

discontinuities, defensive rhetorical strategies and unorthodox language challenging official thought, the disruptions of structural unity effected by divergent and discordant voices – as the location and source of the text's politics' (p. 49). Contrapuntal critical reading seeks to make these discords audible, not to resolve them. This leads Parry to develop a methodology that is both meticulously political and painstakingly literary. If you look at her analysis of Conrad, or Kipling, or Wells, or Forster, for example, you will find that she approaches each selected text as a complex totality whose political meanings cannot easily be reduced to any one axis or axiom, to use Spivakian terms.⁷ The operations of ideology have to be traced as they work across landscape, metaphor, character, rhetoric, action and narrative logic. Most important is the way Parry's contrapuntal reading theorises the notion of the colonised. She apprehends colonised peoples as participants of societies that consist of heterogeneous spheres of social reproduction, including knowledge systems, aesthetic practices and metaphysical traditions. A properly Parryan contrapuntal analysis has then to disaggregate both the metropole and the colony, and explore the metropolitan text's representational politics by foregrounding and differentiating its engagement with epistemology, aesthetics and ontology.

This contrapuntalism impels Parry, in 'Materiality and Mystification in *A Passage to India*', to give an account of Forster's novel that distinguishes between the politics at work in the representation of individual characters and those at work in the representation of the Indian geographical space; this reading technique also differentiates overt contents from symbolic form. She argues that 'the fiction, far from rendering India as epistemologically vacant, reconfigures the sub-continent as a geographical space and social realm abundantly occupied by diverse intellectual modes, cultural forms, and sensibilities' (p. 185) and that 'the novel's dissident place within British writing about India does not reside in its meagre critique of a colonial situation ... but in configuring India's natural terrain and cognitive traditions as inimical to the British presence' (p. 180). And Forster's representational politics also lie in his stylistic tentativeness, his intellectual modesty. Even as Forster here affirms India as a complex and oppositional space, he refuses to exercise metropolitan authority. Parry argues that 'the novel approaches Indian forms of knowledge with uncertainty, without asserting the authority of its representations' (p. 184).

I want to spend a little more time on this as I think it gives a useful illustration of Parry's originality as a critic of imperial solipsism, and as a

contrapuntal thinker. The contrast between the value she gives to the colonial silence in Forster's text and the colonial silence portrayed in J.M. Coetzee's texts is so acute as to suggest, at first, an active theoretical contradiction.⁸ Look here at her discussion of the mute Marabar Caves of *A Passage to India*. She locates the caves as belonging to a Jain tradition, in which 'negation has alternative significations'; Jain belief 'unlike Islam and Hinduism has no sentient protagonists in the book' but through the caves Jain culture 'has written its antique Indian philosophy of renunciation over a material space' that is '*already* in possession of a language without syntax and expressive of abnegation' (p. 186; emphasis added). Forster's text has the decency, she suggests, to admit 'its own incapacity to bring this alien realm into representation' (p. 187).

The silence of the Caves bespeaks both a deliberate narrative non-mastery on Forster's part *and* the positive validation of an autonomous, alternative indigenous tradition that resists European incorporation. The silence of Coetzee's racial 'others' carries an entirely different textual politics: a neo-colonial romanticisation of the dispossessed. For Parry, Coetzee's rendition of silence emerges from 'the cognitive systems of the West' and ultimately serves to ratify those systems and the narrative authority that they assume (p. 150). Furthermore, she suggests, 'the homages to the mystical properties and prestige of muteness undermine the critique of that condition where oppression inflicts and provokes silence' (p. 158). This representation is the result of deliberate authorial exclusion: 'the principles around which novelistic meaning is organized in Coetzee's fictions owe nothing to knowledges which are not of European provenance, but which are amply and variously represented in South Africa' (p. 150). The meanings of Forster's novel, by contrast, are openly and implicitly mediated through non-European knowledges. Again, we see the operations of Parry's optimism here: it is because she thinks it entirely theoretically possible for European writers to recognise and affirm alternative knowledges that she finds Coetzee so lacking here.

There is nothing remotely contradictory about Parry's arguments concerning silence as the expression, respectively, of cultural relativism (in E.M. Forster) and cultural absolutism (in J.M. Coetzee). Whether or not you accept Parry's conclusions, you have to accept the consistency of her reasoning across these texts. I have perhaps risked misrepresenting Parry's work here as that of a romantic who in affirming the legitimacy of non-European cultures and knowledges systems renders the systems static or

immutable. Parry's quoted reference to Indian 'cognitive *traditions*' may support this view, as may her previously quoted *Oxford Literary Review* reference to Christophine as 'the possessor and practitioner of an alternative *tradition* challenging imperialism's authorized system of knowledge' (emphasis added). But the 'tradition' word, as Parry uses it here, does not reify so much as it draws the reader's attention to the structural foundations of non-Western practices. In other words, Parry insists here on the systematic, historical character of Indian and Caribbean practices: the metropolitan text is prompted to recognise alternative systems *as* systems, and to address the *langue* as well as the *parole* of its 'others'.

That Parry has anything but a reified conception of non-European traditions is clear from her writings on Fanon, Césaire and other resistance workers. One of her most striking contributions to the study of resistance cultures is her insistence on their constitutively heterogeneous character. This leads her to offer a powerful critique of developmentalist approaches. The hegemonic understanding of resistance is the trajectory 'from protest to challenge', to borrow from Carter and Karis whose multivolumed anthology is organised on the basis of this teleology.⁹ A similar developmental telos inheres in Fanon's own 'three stages' theory.¹⁰ And it is also to be found in Said's *Culture and Imperialism* classification of 'decolonising discourses' as a progression from nativist through nationalist to liberationist theory.¹¹ Rebutting Said, Parry points out that

Not only are the stages less disjunct than the periodisation suggests – messianic movements and Pan-Africanism were utopian in their goals, Nkrumah's nationalism was not exclusively Africanist, acknowledging as it did the recombinant qualities of a culture which had developed through assimilating Arabic and western features, and so on – but the liberation theory of Fanon and Césaire was more impure than is here indicated, nativism remaining audible despite the strenuous endorsements of a post-European, transnational humanism as the ultimate goal.¹²

As Fanon's nativism – the promotion of black racial unity and pride – continues into his 'final', universal humanist stage, Said's linear historiography is found to be inaccurate.

But nativism is itself, for Parry, far more impure, more composite, than either its detractors or contemporary Afrocentric supporters can allow. Consider Parry's pathbreaking analysis of Negritude (the Caribbean and African formation that argued for a distinctive black

culture and philosophy) in her essay 'Resistance Theory'. This demonstrates how in Césaire's thought, 'Negritude is not a recovery of a pre-existent state, but a textually invented history, an identity effected through figurative operations and a topological construction of blackness as a sign of the colonised condition and its refusal' (p. 182). This formulation goes way beyond Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism. Indeed I read Parry, like Spivak, to emphasise both the utility and constructedness of black identity. But to this she adds a profoundly dialectical twist, and this, I want to argue, emerges from her utopian disposition, something that is altogether lacking in Spivak's work. The dialectical utopian idea lies in her construction of blackness as a sign both of colonisation and its refusal. This is a dialectical notion that has no tendency towards a raceless sublation. The goal of emancipation from colonialism, or racism, is not, for Parry, tantamount to liberation from blackness itself. A similarly frozen dialectical argument can be found in Parry's *Oxford Literary Review* account of Fanon as the articulator of 'a process of cultural resistance and cultural disruption', in which he writes 'a text that can answer colonialism back, and anticipates another condition beyond imperialism' (p. 44).

If Parry's account of Césaire's Negritude goes beyond the Spivakian model of strategic essentialism, her account of Fanon's resistant/disruptive text goes beyond the models of 'reverse' or 'derivative' discourse that we find in a number of contemporary postcolonial theories. For Parry's models refuse the exclusively reactive basis of these theorisations, and instead present us with an insurgent agency that is as creative as it is reactive: it is the product of a utopian imagination. Listen again to the passage I quoted near the start of this chapter, in which Parry refers us to 'that realm of imaginary freedom which these [resistance] histories prefigured or configured'.¹³ Her equivocation between the verbs 'prefigure' and 'configure' is a different manifestation, I want to suggest, of the utopian force of her own imagination. She presents the freedom produced by liberation struggles as both a verifiable historical event and a subjective condition awaiting future actualisation.

I have been writing about Parry's utopian dimensions as if they have always taken the same expression in her work. In her resistance writings, however, we see changes of style that are also, I think, changes in political conceptualisation. Her *Oxford Literary Review* article makes heavy use of the 'discourse' word, and uses this word interchangeably to designate aesthetic literature and anti-colonial political thought. By the time of her

‘Resistance Theory/Theorising Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism’ article, the discourse word is still a favoured term for the analysis of resistance cultures, but is beginning to be differentiated into its consciously literary and social modes. Parry argues for Césaire’s poetry as the most emancipatory instance of this resistance ‘discourse’, and suggests that the aesthetic medium allows the greatest space for contrapuntal articulations of identity. By the time we get to her forthcoming ‘Liberation Theory’ article, the discourse word has all but vanished. So has Parry’s privileging of the aesthetic medium for the creation of sophisticated political identities and the play of utopian desires. Her focus is now on political movements themselves, rather than literary texts, as the protagonists of utopian imagination. And with this comes an emphasis on the extraordinary range of liberationist thinkers – including Sankara, Cabral, Machel, Nkrumah, Lumumba – who creatively ‘co-authored’ these movements with the mass of the insurgent populations. This new work gives less centrality to Fanon and Césaire, who, as the most officially sanctioned voices of resistance culture within the metropole, have less urgent need of critical rehabilitation. While I applaud the exploration of political action as imagination (and I certainly applaud the departure of the discourse word) I also want to register Parry’s removal of aesthetic culture from her resistance radar as an analytic loss.

I hesitate to bring in a negative dimension to the discussion of Parry’s work, though I imagine that she would prefer me to do this rather than deliver an unconditionally glowing account of my fave rave. And we have only to go to the new preface of *Delusions and Discoveries* to observe Parry’s dedication to the socialist tradition of rigorous auto-critique.¹⁴ Taking up her critical cue then I suggest that Parry’s relative lack of engagement with the aesthetic accomplishments of anti-colonial and post-colonial cultures is perhaps where her own historical utopian imagination gives way to a critical sensibility nourished by more restrictive metropolitan aesthetic values. She and I have a long-standing disagreement over the literary merits of Olive Schreiner’s work, and, more generally, over the aesthetic contributions made by anti-colonial and post-apartheid South African literatures. Parry’s own taste tends, I think, towards the modernist, although she has done a great deal, in her work on Forster and Wells, to extend the canon beyond the modernist monopolies presented by Edward Said and Fredric Jameson. Willing as she is to credit metropolitan mimetic modes of the Victorian, Edwardian and modern periods with literary sophistication, she is over-inclined, I think,

to disparage the mimeticism of, say, an Alex la Guma, or, indeed, a Nadine Gordimer, as the sign of aesthetic failure. (These two authors receive her critical attention in the *Oxford Literary Review* article.) It falls to other scholars to apply her insights into metropolitan literary-political complexity to the terrain of South African literary production.

I have focused on the utopian rather than the Manichean, the literary rather than the polemical, in Parry's work, for a number of reasons. One is that I feel very acutely, and personally, the need for 'signs of promise', the 'principle of hope', in our contemporary political situation. Parry's work provides a large archive for the student of optimism. But if she eschews the easy comforts of a post-structuralist pessimism premised upon convictions of epistemic violence, the impossibility of 'unlearning privilege' and adequately 'representing alterity'— she also precludes the easy refuge of a postmodern optimism, found, say, in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent *Empire*.¹⁵ In Parry's work, the utopian drive cannot be realised without extraordinary struggle. Here she concurs with Frederick Douglass in his celebrated West India Emancipation speech, August 4th, 1857, when he argues that

If there is no struggle there is no progress ... This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Allison Drew (ed.), *South Africa's Radical Tradition: A Documentary History. Volume One 1907–1950* (Cape Town: Buchu Books, Mayibuye Books and University of Cape Town Press, 1996) supplies historical context for Benita Parry's political origins in Trotskyist South African activism of the 1950s. Useful recent critical discussions of Parry's Manicheanism and the relationship of her thought with that of Gayatri Spivak include Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

- 2 Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9, 1–2 (1987), pp. 27–58.
- 3 See Peter Hulme, 'The Locked Heart: The Creole Family Romance of *Wide Sargasso Sea*', in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 72–88, for a probing discussion of the novel. Hulme argues that the 'really troubling figures "in the margins" ... are the coloured Cosways, Daniel and Alexander', p. 80.
- 4 Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 4.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Benita Parry, 'Liberation Theory: Variations on Themes of Marxism and Modernity', in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds.), *Marxism and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
- 7 Benita Parry, 'Conrad and England', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity. Volume 3: National Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 189–98; 'Narrating Imperialism: *Nostromo*'s Dystopia', in Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry and Judith Squires (eds.), *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), pp. 227–46; 'The Content and Discontents of Kipling's Imperialism', *New Formations*, 6 (1988), pp. 84–112; '*Tono-Bungay*: Modernisation, Modernity and Imperialism, or the Failed Electrification of the Empire', *New Formations*, 34 (1998), pp. 91–108; 'Materiality and Mystification in *A Passage to India*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 31, 2 (1998), pp. 174–94.
- 8 Benita Parry, 'Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee', in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (eds.), *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 149–65.
- 9 Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882–1964* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1972).
- 10 Frantz Fanon, 'On National Culture', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 166–89.
- 11 Edward Said, 'Resistance and Opposition', *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto, 1993), pp. 230–340.
- 12 Benita Parry, 'Resistance Theory/Theorising Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism', in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, p. 180.
- 13 'Liberation Theory: Variations on Themes of Marxism and Modernity'.
- 14 Benita Parry, 'Preface', *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880–1930*, with a foreword by Michael Sprinker (1972; London: Verso, 1998), pp. 1–28.
- 15 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

- 16 *Two Speeches by Frederick Douglass: One on West India Emancipation, delivered at Canandaigua, August 4th and the other on the Dred Scott Decision, delivered in New York, on the occasion of the anniversary of the American Abolition Society, May 1857* (Rochester: C.P. Dewey, 1857), p. 22.