



GAURAV MAJUMDAR

# Migrant Form

Anti-Colonial Aesthetics in  
Joyce, Rushdie, and Ray

*Migrant Form* examines the works of James Joyce, Salman Rushdie, and Satyajit Ray for the anti-colonial arguments in their unsettled, and unsettling, aesthetics. Among the questions it engages are the following: What are the aesthetic moves through which art expresses its resistance to dominance and demands for conformity? How can we define anti-colonial aesthetics? How do these aesthetics manifest themselves in different media such as literature and film? Contending that Joyce inaugurates an anti-colonial "aesthetics of reconstitution," this book mines such aesthetics in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* to propose a formal model for postcolonialism. It also draws on that exercise to consider how Rushdie extends a play with reconfigured forms into an overt politics in two of his novels (*Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*). Turning its attention to film, the book contests the common view of Ray as a gentle realist and examines a formal restlessness in Ray's earlier work, *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*), before demonstrating how Ray stages his preference for restlessness in his final film, *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*).

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For Chetna Chopra





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## SECTION ONE

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### INTRODUCTION:

#### COLONIAL AESTHETICS AND MIGRANT FORM

*Change, [Plato] protests, through the power of a true philosophy, shall not be the law of our being; and it is curious to note the way in which...that philosophic purpose shapes his treatment...of education, of art, of daily life, his very vocabulary, in which such innocent words, as "manifold," "embroidered," "changeful," become the synonyms of what is evil.*

Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism*

*"C'est la bloody guerre," she said, holding up her knitting and reflecting that two hundred miles of dusty road had not done a lot for the whiteness of her garment.*

Peter Carey, "Exotic Pleasures"

Accompanying several acts of colonial force, the modern acceleration of countries literally displaced, nationalities redefined or suspended, and people disenfranchised brings enormous stress on various symbolic apparatuses of state used to define national space: sovereignty, the body politic, unity, and international borders. These state-structures themselves exert the reciprocal pressures of surveillance, homogenization, fixity, and various other regulatory, juridical procedures on mind and body. What are the aesthetic correlatives for this contest? How can we define an anti-colonial aesthetics? How are the legacies of colonialism, and of colonial aesthetics, refuted by the mobility of forms displayed in postcolonial texts? How do these refutations manifest themselves in different media? How might the postcolony assert its aesthetics against insularity? How do apparently nugatory instances of aesthetic forms resist the conformity that the state and social conventions frequently demand? Such questions are provoked and explored, variously and urgently, in the work of James Joyce, Salman Rushdie, and Satyajit Ray. However, they have been frequently addressed as mere adjuncts to other "larger" historical dynamics constituting postcolonial narratives. The hybridity and "fragmentation" of postcolonial form, in a broad sense, have received theorization in refined and remarkably wide-ranging insights from a host of theorists, perhaps most notably in the work of Homi Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee. However, the relations of anti-colonial arguments to particular formal modes and serial strategies within postcolonial texts have not received sustained, book-length attention. This book

studies those relations, analyzing aesthetics that disrupt, question, and resist various forms of domination.

## Colonial Aesthetics and the Unitary

The repeated calls for “unity” within, or among, postcolonial states are the rhetorical obverse of arguments for the unitary in colonial aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> While unity becomes the means for resistance in the former, it figures as the trope for control, cooptation, and perfect harmony between conqueror and conquered in the latter. Repeatedly, the unitary provides colonialism the sign for colonialism’s own aesthetic models. In *The Two Paths*, John Ruskin maps out the course for perfect art to follow: “Thoroughly perfect art is that which proceeds from the heart, involves all the noble emotions;--associates with these the head, yet as inferior to the heart; and the hand, yet as inferior to the heart and head, and thus brings out the whole man” (54). The emphasis on “wholeness” propels Ruskin to declare unity the goal of art—“for true art is always and always will be one.....*There is but one right way of doing any given thing required of an artist...only one complete and right way*”—the one specified above (56, emphasis Ruskin’s). Further, “not only is there but one way of *doing* things rightly, but there is only one way of *seeing* them, and that is seeing the whole of them, without any choice, or more intense perception of one point than another, owing to our special idiosyncrasies” (57). Unity is to be attained by the subsumption of difference into an organic whole. As Ruskin states in the “Preface” to his text, “The law which it has been my effort chiefly to illustrate is the dependence of all noble design, in any kind, on the sculpture or painting of Organic Form” (v).

Ruskin claims ornament as crucial for such noble design, praising Indian art for its “delicate application of divided hue, and fine arrangement of fantastic line” (13). He contrasts “the love of subtle design” that “seems universal in the [Indian] race” to what he sees as the Scottish neglect of art, deeming the Scottish “careless of art, and apparently incapable of it” (14). However, Ruskin neglects the subversive, transgressive potential in ornament (see Section 4, Part 2 here), despite noting, before his praise gets too fulsome, that the Indian love of design “attaches itself...to the service of superstition, of pleasure, [and] of

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of space, I will discuss only a few significant instances of colonial aesthetics here. For more substantial discussions, see, among others, Pramod K. Nayar’s *English Writing and India, 1600-1920: Colonizing Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Sara Suleri’s *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Luke Gibbons’s *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); and, of course, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

cruelty” (14). He stresses that, to avoid “baseness,” art should strive for humility, without which it has “an influence of the most fatal kind on brain and heart[;] whereas art, devoted humbly and self-forgedly to the clear statement and record of the facts of the universe, is always helpful and beneficent to mankind, full of comfort, strength, and salvation” (22-23). Invoking the Aristotelian principles of the Beautiful (Order, Symmetry, and the Definite) as foundations for his views, Ruskin tries to demonstrate the failings of too literal a view of these principles as expressed in an eighth-century icon representing an angel (29-31). Ruskin claims that the angel’s lack of a mouth, its excessively rounded eyes, and stylized, sharpened hands reveal “the wilful closing of [the artist’s] eyes to natural facts,” adding censoriously that “whenever people don’t look at Nature, they always think that they can improve her” (31). Clearly, while stating an opposition to a literal application of Order, Symmetry, and the Definite, Ruskin produces an endorsement of it—his objections to the stylization of the icon found themselves on these very categories.

For a few pages after his examination of the icon, Ruskin advocates the importance of interpretation—“the great collateral necessity”—for the presentation of the truth, but his priorities are clear when he stresses repeatedly the formula, “Truth first—plan, or design, founded thereon” (43, 46). Ruskin does not present any means of accessing the truth, apart from a recognition of the “natural.” *The Two Paths* has already warned that, if the artist departs from what Ruskin calls “the stem of life” found in “natural form,” and prefers “the designing of ornamentation, either in the ignorant play of your own fancy, as the Indian does, or according to received application of heartless laws, as the modern European does...there is but one word for you—Death—death of every healthy faculty, and of every noble intelligence” (46, 47). Playful ornamentation translates to “pleasure first and truth afterwards, (or not at all,) as with the Arabians and the Indians,” and is offset by “truth first and pleasure afterwards, as with Angelico and all other great European painters” (66). The text adds that the perception of nature “is never given but under certain moral conditions” (70). These moral conditions are reflected in contrasting forms of ornament, a contrast that Ruskin will proceed to use as a justification for colonialism. Ruskin identifies the contrast to offer the artist two crucial choices, the “two paths” of his title: “[I]t is required of you to produce conventional ornament, and you may approach the task as the Hindoo does, and as the Arab did, without nature at all,” or “as Sir Joshua [Reynolds] and Velasquez did, with, not the chance, but the certainty, of approximating your disposition...to the disposition of...great and good men” (70). While the former displays promiscuous changes and combination of forms, the latter redeems ornament from such frivolous association.

"Get rid, then, at once," orders Ruskin (in yet another attack that claims to be a defence), "of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art. Its nature or essence is simply being fitted for a definite place; and, in that place, forming part of a great and harmonious whole" (80). Ornament that does not display such "fittedness" and a "definite place" is "a piece of degradation": "Portable art...is for the most part ignoble art" (80). Ruskin specifies that "the first order" of the Decorative art is "that which is meant for places where it cannot be disturbed or injured, and where it can be perfectly seen" (81). Further, ornament must not just be a matter of contrast and symmetry or a series of echoes: Ruskin notes that "*the nobler the materials, the less their symmetry is endurable*" (96, emphasis Ruskin's). "*Whenever the materials of ornament are noble,*" he continues, "*they must be various;* and repetition of parts is either the sign of utterly bad, hopeless, and base work; or of the intended degradation of the parts in which such repetition is allowed, in order to foil others more noble" (97, emphasis Ruskin's). The paradox in the dual injunctions for definite place and harmony, on the one hand, and for variety, on the other, is one Ruskin ignores in concern for the morality in his aesthetics: disturbance and degradation are the enemies against which he seeks even variety to serve "noble" aesthetics. If aesthetic expressions are not manifestly noble—that which "cannot be disturbed or injured, and [which] can be perfectly seen"—then they are degraded. Transparency, invulnerability, and fixity, then, are the states that combat the degradation of nobility, and so serve not merely an aesthetic, but also a moral, purpose.

Ruskin's anxiety about degradation is perhaps most pronounced when, bringing his principles for art into those for different aspects of national life, he exhorts industrial manufacturers to "produce stuffs not only beautiful and quaint, but also adapted for every-day service, and decorous in humble and secluded life" (109). Any violation of this *diktat* would be "corrupting public taste and encouraging public extravagance" (110). Ruskin advises that an inert life of such corruption can be avoided by healthy minds that exercise curiosity, sympathy, admiration, and wit (124-25). The closing pages of *The Two Paths*, however, severely limit this encouraging advice, as Ruskin launches his defence of restraint: "You hear every day greater numbers of foolish people speaking about liberty, as if it were such an honourable thing: so far from being that, it is, on the whole, and in the broadest sense, dishonourable, and an attribute of the lower creatures" (192). On the other hand, Ruskin asserts, "You will find, on fairly thinking of it, that it is his Restraint which is more honourable to man, not his Liberty; and, what is more, it is restraint which is more honourable even in the lower animals" (193). Having dispatched liberty to the realm of the dishonourable, Ruskin proceeds to link honourable, restrained unity of artistic



representation to the unity of a nation and to its sovereignty itself. This sovereignty is maintained, according to Ruskin, by “the three talismans of national existence[:] Labour, Law, and Courage,” each of which receives a metaphor in the three key images Ruskin uses in his apology for sovereignty—“the Plough, the Fetter, and the Sword” (194, 177). Eclecticism and frivolity are to be opposed with these three talismans of Empire; deviance from the right path, to be fettered, and “subdued” by the sword (177-97).

Delivered as a series of lectures in early 1858, *The Two Paths* includes an exhortation against the exploitation of the poor.<sup>2</sup> However, his sensitivity to such exploitation does not keep Ruskin from supporting an obviously analogous exploitation by colonial capitalism, when Ruskin shows no compunction about the incorporation of the world’s resources in the service of England, twelve years later, in his inaugural lecture as the first Slade Professor of Art at Oxford University. In the lecture, Ruskin issued a famous reminder to England’s youth in 1870: “There is a destiny now possible to us, the highest ever set before a nation to be accepted or refused” (69). This destiny is for England to avail, because the English “are still undegenerate in race; a race mingled of the best northern blood” and, free of degenerate influence, young England must use its racial advantage to decide an issue that science itself has placed across the nation’s path: “Within the last few years we have had the laws of natural science opened to us with a rapidity which has been blinding by its brightness; and means of transit and communication given to us, which have made but one kingdom of the habitable globe. One kingdom;—but who is to be its king?” (69; punctuation Ruskin’s).

If scientific technology has made the world navigable and habitable for England, the answer is obvious. However, as a pre-destined gift, the opportunity to rule the world comes with specific demands for the English youth. Ruskin offers them the following mission and challenge, asking, “[W]ill you youths of England make your country again a royal throne of kings, a sceptred isle, for all the world a source of light, a center of peace; mistress of Learning and of the Arts?” (69). The exhortation desires an epistemological and aesthetic colonization—England must choose if “she” will rule the world and bring it light, and, if she does, she must also be “mistress of Learning and of the Arts.” The choice is not merely important, it is crucial for England’s very

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<sup>2</sup> Ruskin admonishes his audience that “when we ought to help [the poor], we rush forward to *pillage* them, and force all we can out of them in their adversity...I say, in plain Saxon, STEALING [sic]—taking from him the proper reward of his work, and putting it into our own pocket. You know well enough that the thing could not have been offered you at that price, unless distress of some kind had forced the producer to part with it” (185-86; italics Ruskin’s).

survival: “And this is what [England] must either do, or perish: she must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of the most energetic and worthiest men; seizing any piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on, and there teaching her colonists that their chief virtue is to be fidelity to their country and that their first aim is to be to advance the power of England by land and sea” (70). The appropriation of land is to be complemented with the co-optation of people into faithful colonial servitude. Both forms of subordination signal an aesthetics of expansion that relies upon individuation, which is, at the same time, an ethical marker—a sign, the “chief sign,” of “virtue.”

With almost-syllogistic certainty, Ruskin goes on to propose that, “if we can get men, for little pay, to cast themselves against cannon-mouths for love of England, we may find men also who will plough and sow for her, who will bring up their children to love her, and who will gladden themselves in the brightness of her glory, more than in all the light of tropic skies” (70). That these colonized peoples will be ready to work and care for England, and to bask vicariously in its glory, is a foregone conclusion for Ruskin. The greater challenge lies in England’s own preparation of itself as a model for the colonized world:

She must make her own majesty stainless; she must give them thoughts of their home of which they can be proud. The England who is to be mistress of half the earth cannot remain herself a heap of cinders[;] she must yet again become the England she was once, and in all beautiful ways more; so happy, so secluded, and so pure, that in her sky—polluted by no unholy clouds—she may be able to spell rightly of every star that heaven doth show; and in her fields, ordered and wide and fair, of every herb that sips the dew; and under the green avenues of her enchanted garden, a sacred Circe, true Daughter of the Sun, she must guide the human arts, and gather the divine knowledge, of distant nations, transformed from savageness to manhood and redeemed into peace. (70-71)

Extending the drive for seclusion in *The Two Paths*, the passage orders that England “must yet again become the England she was once” and then exceed that condition to be “so happy, so secluded, and so pure.” Desire for temporal sameness shapes the first instance—the paradisaical scene is a function of nostalgia for origins or prior glory; and desire for a sealed physical condition shapes the second—insularity and purity are its sources of happiness. If such temporal continuity, isolation, security, and purity are the conditions of any paradise, the “enchanted garden” of “sacred Circe” enlarges the role of unity and conformity: it operates on propriety (its light enables the goddess to “spell *rightly*”) and on harmony between heaven and earth. Ruskin concludes his views on the imperial programme by making it an aesthetic one—the English colonial

mission must be such that the once-Hellenic-now-English goddess must remove from her sky the pollution of “unholy clouds,” conduct the global arts, arrogate the world’s knowledge, and finally provide both aesthetic and moral redemption.<sup>3</sup> (Ruskin obviously overlooks—or presumes no contradiction in—his characterization of the knowledge of the colonized as simultaneously “divine” and in need of English guidance.)

Ruskin’s rhetorical hinge-move—the one that enables him to unfurl his grand imperialist vista—is his emphasis on the single forms of both empire and ruler, state and sovereign, in his ringing statement that there is “[o]ne kingdom;—but who is to be its king?” (69). He does not care to explain how science provides the evidence that recent technological change necessitates the transformation of the world into a single empire—in fact, for his rhetorical evidence to stand, he needs to cancel or occlude scrutiny of that claim. As long as his logic of the unitary (*one* kingdom, *one* king) holds, so do his colonizing plans and his aesthetics for cooptation and expansion—there is, for Ruskin, an unquestionable need for a single kingdom and its single monarch; England should satisfy that need.

As colonization embraces unity and expansion as its aesthetic modes, the production and maintenance of these modes announces power, continuity, and sustained worth. According to Sara Suleri’s important insight, Edmund Burke is uneasy about the sublimity that he observes in colonial India. As Suleri notes, for Burke, India’s excess seems uncontainable in, and irreducible to, language. Further, Burke sees darkness, the mark of both skin and landscape in the colonies, as “terrible in its own nature” (*A Philosophical Enquiry*, 131). Darkness, which Burke identifies as a signature element of sublimity, is not merely an analogue for race: “[W]hat Burke is beginning to envisage is a sublime whose proportions bear a disquieting resemblance to a Conradian heart of darkness, in which aesthetic and epistemological questions are inextricably linked to the economy of historical specificity” (Suleri, 44). Burke’s guilt and discomfort notwithstanding, the conditions that produce the unease are functions of a colonialist stress on largeness: they are consistently immense. A presumption of sovereignty over such immensity discomfits, but also adds to the colonizer’s greatness. Burke’s theorizations suggest this paradox vividly in *A Philosophical*

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<sup>3</sup> The cooptation of the Hellenic, and the absorption of the world’s knowledge, *as* rightfully English feeds an especially strange contradiction in the colonial drive for the unitary. As Homi Bhabha suggests in reference to Jeremy Bentham’s colonial views, Bentham sees the small group as representative of the whole society—the part is *already* the whole. Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative) that disallow a stable unitary assumption of collectivity. The “part” (which must be the colonialist foreign body) must be representative of the “whole” (conquered country), but the right of representation is based on its [superior and] radical difference (*The Location of Culture*, 111).