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“Ensnared in Implication”: Writing, Shame, and Colonialism

Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. Translation/Transnation ser. 224 + x pp. \$70.00; \$29.95 paper.

Shame, writes Timothy Bewes early in this thought-provoking study, is “an experience of the dissolution of the consolation of forms” (46). Bewes takes postcolonial literature as his primary example, for “the postcolonial situation is a world in which aesthetic forms are defined, as well as justified, by their representational and ethical inadequacy” (47). Yet as he recognizes—and such a recognition is a strength of the book as well as a feature that may raise questions—the postcolonial situation is not “unique” in this way. Much the same has been famously claimed about post-Holocaust writing by an illustrious series of thinkers, from Theodor W. Adorno, whose comments on “poetry after Auschwitz” have defined a field of inquiry (and controversy), to Primo Levi, whose reflections on the *Muselmann* have inspired Giorgio Agamben and many others interested in testimony (20–21). Such post-Holocaust worries about representational adequacy are, as Bewes asserts, comparable to “the aporia of impossibility with which Gayatri Spivak, with her question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ characterizes the situation of the postcolonial writer, critic, and theoretician” (58). Furthermore, the inadequacy of form and the dissolution that attends it has struck not just writers directly facing historical catastrophes such as colonialism and genocide. Bewes also ref-

erences “Lukács’s idea of the novel as the form of ‘the age of absolute sinfulness’” and “Deleuze’s framing of literature with the phrase ‘the shame of being a man’” (58). Analogies between such positions are not themselves news; the force of Bewes’s intervention lies in the hypothesis that it is precisely *shame* that serves as “an index of the inadequacy or the impossibility of writing.” And shame, in the expansive understanding made available by Bewes’s book, cuts across multiple versions of the crisis of representation.

Because the experience of dissolution has been so widespread in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it follows that the forms touched by this dissolution are also legion. Although dedicated especially to exploring the contemporary novel, Bewes has a much more expansive notion of form in mind throughout his book. “[N]ot limited to literary form,” this notion “includes ideas, habits of thought, clichés, acts of violence, and concepts in general: ‘fatness,’ ‘terrorism,’ basic racial categories such as black and white, as well as gender categories” (46). Such an all-encompassing notion of form suggests the high intellectual stakes of *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, but the generalizing concatenation of thought, action, and “concepts in general” into a singular site of concern might also awaken watchfulness on the part of the reader.

Despite a title that seems, at first glance, to suggest a concern with historicity, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* moves away from historicism and toward an exploration of structural logics that Bewes describes as possessing a very wide—if not totalizing—purview. The “event” at issue is conceived in Deleuzian terms and not linked to an actual break between the colonial and the postcolonial. Like many other critics, Bewes is rightly dubious about the rupture implied by the “post” in *postcolonial*, but in this case more because of a thoroughgoing skepticism about whether freedom can be “instantiated” at all than because of the particular trajectories of formerly colonized nations in a neocolonial world. In fact, Bewes’s work cuts against the grain of recent tendencies in postcolonial studies that have moved in the direction either of historicism and localism or of charting concrete translocal and transnational networks. Instead, with its debt to Gilles

Deleuze and its refusal to locate itself in a narrow geographical terrain or single historical moment, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* sets out on its own path.¹ Whether one finds that Bewes's move to the structural level opens up new horizons for literary study or abstracts too decisively from historical situatedness will depend on one's theoretical inclinations. For readers of either proclivity, however, his intelligent and original book is likely to elicit a lively and engaged response.

Bewes writes powerfully—and in fresh ways—about the limits of cultural forms in conveying the ongoing shame of a secular, fallen world, but *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* itself takes a fairly conventional form. The book is divided into three sections of two chapters each, which move through different approaches to shame focused respectively on “form,” “time,” and “the event.” After a short prologue, all the chapters conjoin the exposition and development of relevant theoretical concepts with close readings of cultural texts—generally novels, but one important chapter is devoted to film. Each page of this dense and challenging book brims with insight (although some of the insights repeat themselves). In addition, its historical range is substantial; although most works examined were published in the 1960s or later, the book also includes significant discussions of T. E. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad. Similarly, the geographical scope is wide, with novels by differently situated African writers, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, J. M. Coetzee, and Zoë Wicomb, juxtaposed with works by two quite distinct Caribbean British migrants, Caryl Phillips and V. S. Naipaul. *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* also mobilizes an eclectic group of theorists: most

1. A Deleuzian logic also underwrites the book's intervention into affect theory, one of the areas to which it might most significantly contribute. There are, however, only passing references to most other critics who have lately taken up the problematic of shame, such as Eve Sedgwick (22), Elizabeth Povinelli (38), and Elspeth Probyn (216n22), while a number of theorists of “negative” emotions whose work might have been relevant, including Sianne Ngai and Sara Ahmed, are not mentioned at all. See Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), and Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Bewes's understanding of shame might also be paired productively with Lauren Berlant's inverse but perhaps complementary notion of “cruel optimism,” although Berlant is not mentioned either. See Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *Differences* 17.3 (2006): 20–36, and *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011).

central are Georg Lukács, Adorno, and Deleuze, although others, such as Agamben, Alain Badiou, Levi, and Michael Warner facilitate particular arguments. Jean-Paul Sartre serves an important role as interlocutor and foil, while Frantz Fanon appears at strategic moments (even if his ultimate place in the study remains somewhat unclear). Spivak and Homi Bhabha make brief appearances, but in general, a direct engagement with contemporary postcolonial theory is not on the agenda.

A chapter exploring “shame as form,” which also serves as an introduction, opens “Part One: The Form of Shame” and sets the stage for the rest of the book by ranging widely across the twentieth century. Bewes’s eclecticism and expansive reading are on full display, as he artfully brings together substantive discussions of Levi, Simone de Beauvoir, Nadine Gordimer, Lawrence, Hannah Arendt, Coetzee, Franz Kafka, Immanuel Kant, Deleuze, Jean-Luc Godard, and numerous others. In the chapter’s first lines, Bewes articulates the guiding question of the book: “In a global conjuncture in which the very expression of ethical solidarity displays and enacts unprecedented disparities of power, writers of literature are in an ethical and aesthetic quandary: How to write without thereby contributing to the material inscription of inequality?” (11). With this powerful evocation of a postcolonial world marked by ongoing colonial legacies, Bewes brings together the two fields that mark his exploration of shame: “the inherent shamefulness not only of the colonial enterprise, but also, and inseparably, of the literary one” (12). Most significant to Bewes’s argument is the internal connection between these two enterprises—colonialism and writing—and the particular spiraling structure of shame that links them in paradox. The presence of shame indicates a complicity that characterizes writing and colonialism, but far from serving to free subjects by prompting recognition of that complicity, “shame itself is ensnared in implication”: it simply propagates the problem of complicity at a higher level of self-consciousness.

These insights lead Bewes to three “preliminary theses” that provide orientation for the chapters to come: “Shame Is Not a ‘Subjective’ Emotion,” “Shame Is Not an ‘Ethical’ Response,” and “Shame Is Ontologically Inseparable from the Forms in

Which It Appears" (23–41). With the counterintuitive claim that shame is not subjective, Bewes wants to draw attention to the incommensurability that marks all experiences of shame: "It is experienced when we are treated as something or someone—a foreigner, a personality type, an ethical person . . . —that is incommensurable with our own experience" (23). While Bewes convinces me with his notion that shame marks a "gap" in the subject and not a positivity (26), it is less clear in this section of the chapter why the experience of disjuncture is not a subjective experience (or an experience of divided subjectivity).

The stakes become clearer when Bewes elucidates his next counterintuitive thesis: that shame is not an "ethical" response. Here he makes it clear that at stake is not so much the subject as the individual, a point he illustrates powerfully by contrasting shame with guilt: "The difference between guilt and shame is a difference between the narrative viability of the individual as an ethical category . . . and the apparent dissolution or unsustainability of those terms" (28). Bewes's point, then, is to warn against the conversion of the negative affect of shame back into a narrative of redemption that "saves" the very individual it seems to indict. A long (perhaps overly long?) discussion of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* leads to the important reversal: far from being a mark of ethics, "shame is understood as compensatory: a kind of ethical bad conscience that is oblivious, ultimately, to the degree to which it too has facilitated injustice" (36–37).

The final preliminary thesis on the inseparability of shame and form generalizes the problem of incommensurability. The "gap" that disrupts the subject conceived as ethical individual is even more extensive: the "substance of shame" manifests itself not in any particular content but, rather, in "the inadequacy of form with respect to content" (39). Since, as we have seen, the compass of form extends far beyond the field of literature into (potentially) all forms of thought and action, the combination of these three theses makes very large claims and leaves in their wake important questions that resonate throughout the rest of the book: What kind of specificity can the postcolonial world and its extreme "disparities of power" retain within this model of gen-

eralized incommensurability? What possible exit exists from a conceptual framework that renders writing, shame, and colonialism consubstantial? The first chapter ends with a brief discussion of cinema that begins to sketch possible answers to these questions, but Bewes's answers take on flesh only in the book's concluding chapter—an anticipatory structure that sometimes proves frustrating.

While Bewes never halts the ceaseless movement between texts and thinkers that characterizes the first chapter—a movement simultaneously stimulating and occasionally disconcerting—subsequent chapters do settle into more sustained examination of particular authors. Chapter 2 continues the exploration of shame and form through an extended discussion of the novelist Caryl Phillips. This chapter provides a brilliant “solution” to the problem of the divided critical response that has recognized and celebrated the black Atlantic thematics of Phillips's work while sometimes complaining about the stiltedness of his prose. In Bewes's thoroughly convincing reading, Phillips's awkward prose provides better access to the “postcolonial” dimensions of the work than does the overt content, which often focuses on the slave trade and its aftermath.² Bewes identifies Phillips's use of cliché and ventriloquism as a sign not of his novels' lack of originality but rather of their “systematic evacuation of every discursive position that might claim freedom from implication in colonialism” (64). Because they are “ensnared in implication,” Phillips's works are also steeped in shame. Bewes's discussion of Phillips provides a model of how to read the politics of form against naive readings of content—a particularly useful and generalizable lesson for reading literature overtly engaged with colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic questions.

2. As Bewes mentions briefly, Phillips's work also displays a significant investment in exploring the Nazi genocide in dialogue with colonialism and slavery. For an extended analysis of this dialogue in Phillips, along with a more general framework for reading the legacies of those very different historical trajectories together, see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 2009).

The next two chapters comprise “Part Two: The Time of Shame.” In chapter 3, Bewes discusses a range of Naipaul’s fiction and goes a long way toward rehabilitating an author whom critics love to hate. The novelty of this eloquent chapter lies in its link between reification and temporality. Bewes elegantly knits together Adorno’s reflections on late style and the postcolonial thematics of belatedness, which derive especially from Fanon and Bhabha. Both shame and colonialism—as well as writing—are revealed as tokens of “existence out of joint, as a condemnation to a permanent *chronological* discrepancy” (77). This discrepancy, in turn, characterizes the more familiar—but no less important—experience of objectification that defines colonization and racism generally: “the feeling of having been oneself reduced to a form, an object: of having been anticipated, . . . which is to say, placed in the past tense” (77). Naipaul’s solution is not simply a rejection of that temporal structure but its incorporation into the work as what Deleuze’s theory of cinema would call a “crystalline motif”—a moment in which “the linear temporality of the plot-driven narrative is suspended” (95). In the crystalline structure of Naipaul’s novels, shame becomes “a pure time-image,” “in which the text we are reading is entirely implicated” (97).

“Shame and Revolutionary Betrayal,” the fourth chapter, continues the investigation of shame and temporality by exploring the forms of transition made possible (and impossible) by decolonization and, in particular, the significance of transition for the attainment of freedom. In Bewes’s readings of G. W. F. Hegel on the French Revolution and Fanon on “the pitfalls of national consciousness,” the stumbling block of decolonization is the split between the conceptualization and the realization, or “instantiation,” of freedom, the “attempt to make concrete a notion of freedom conceived from the outset in abstract terms” (100).³ Bewes tracks this problem through three novels from very different historical locations that attempt to come to terms with the question

3. See Frantz Fanon, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1968) 148–205. Bewes discusses this essay on pp. 105–7.

of political transition: Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, and Wicomb's *David's Story*. The "prerevolutionary" *Under Western Eyes* becomes readable as postcolonial in Bewes's hands because of "the consistency with which [Conrad] supposes a world other than the one that his characters and narrators are able to imagine. This supposition is apparent, paradoxically, only in the consistency with which he forecloses its instantiation" (113–14). The problem of instantiation introduced in the readings of Hegel, Fanon, and Conrad—which becomes a major motif of Bewes's discussion of shame—continues in the illuminating discussions of the novels by Ngugi and Wicomb, both of which directly address failed postcolonial transitions, failures that are "met with shame" (123). The postcolonial and postapartheid histories of Kenya and South Africa depicted in these works do indeed warrant skepticism about decolonization's achievements, but Bewes's argument that "decolonization [may be] as thoroughly steeped in shame as colonialism itself" (116) aims much higher than the troubled histories of particular, newly independent or democratic nations: his target, as the fourth chapter's opening discussion of Hegel makes clear, is the very possibility of the instantiation of freedom. We see here a move from the historical to the structural level that characterizes *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*.

In Bewes's third section, "The Event of Shame," the rationale for the book's trajectory starts to come into greater focus. At this point, Bewes clarifies that there are in fact two versions of shame at stake, an "instantiated" shame and an "event" of shame:

On one hand, there is a shame predicated on the category of the ego, a shame that preserves its own substance, its self-exemption, precisely to the degree that it is able to instantiate itself; on the other hand, there is an illimitable shame that includes itself among the categories by which it is ashamed. The singularity of this second shame is measured precisely by its inability to instantiate itself.

(188)

Instantiated shame is shame that can be named, thematized, and located in a subject. The event of shame, in contrast, arises precisely in the failure of thematization, representation, and location; detached from any discrete referent, it infiltrates cultural

forms and spirals “illimitably.” Because it cannot be located in a subject, this “second” shame, for Bewes, is not ultimately an ethical term but a structural relation that is all but omnipresent.⁴

In the section on the event of shame, the “hero”—if one dares to use that inappropriate term—is the South African novelist Coetzee. Bewes insightfully considers several of Coetzee’s novels but focuses on his late works—especially *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Slow Man*—which occupy the border between fiction and non-fiction. The key to understanding Coetzee, Bewes argues, lies in reading the event of shame as a struggle, within writing, against the abstracting tendencies of literature: “The shame event is neither ethical, nor discursive, nor conceptual, but sensuous, corporeal. Coetzee, then, has been conducting his struggle *on behalf of shame* in opposition to the propensity of writing towards conceptualization, naming, and disembodiment” (153). In the context and aftermath of a political system invested intensively in racial hierarchy, Coetzee invents a writing imbued with shameful corporeality. Bewes understands Coetzee as rendering visible the “‘invisible,’ privileged” white body through “mortification” (157). For Bewes, such a corporealized approach to shame responds to Fanon’s critique of the asymmetries of racialization and renders visible not just the white body but also a fundamental level of colonial power. Bewes’s “structural rather than ethical” (164) approach leads him to argue “that a primary or fundamental shame, rooted in our definition as embodied, inter-subjective beings, is at the origin of the history of colonial domination” (165), and that this shame outlives decolonization. The carrying forward of shame into Coetzee’s late work suggests a problematic that extends well beyond the colonial past and into the postapartheid present, but Bewes makes an even more radical claim here about the origins of colonialism.

4. Although Bewes does not draw on this terminological distinction, one might call the first version of shame an “emotion,” while the second, depersonalized form corresponds to what theorists have lately explored as “affect.” Emotions, according to Eric Shouse’s helpful definition, are socially processed feelings that are “projected,” “displayed,” and “broadcast to the world,” while affects are, in contrast, “prepersonal” and involve the “non-conscious experience of intensity.” See Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/JC Journal* 8.6 (Dec. 2005).

The skill with which Bewes demonstrates the twists and turns that the spiral of shame takes and the “shamelessness” of most attempts to move beyond it only heightens the question that builds—at least for this reader—over the course of the book: is there an *outside* of shame and thus of the colonial structures of power that it indexes? In the final chapter, Bewes begins to sketch an alternative scenario, beyond shame, that might “instantiate” what he calls a true “postcolonial writing to come” (192). In a book intensively concerned with the literary, the model for this writing is, ironically, cinema—but a model of cinema that, for Bewes, opens up literary possibilities as well. Bewes’s theoretical guide here is, unsurprisingly, Deleuze, but his “practical” example—Louis Malle’s multipart documentary *L’Inde fantôme* (1969)—is unexpected and seems somewhat arbitrarily chosen. That is to say, one suspects that many other films might have been selected to fulfill the role of counterexample, and indeed, the argument ultimately appeals more to an understanding of cinema as medium than to a particular cinematic work or oeuvre.

To set up his reading of the film, Bewes first extends his analysis of shame and the colonial. Echoing well-known texts such as Ngugi’s *Decolonizing the Mind*, he suggests that “[t]o free ourselves of this most intimate residue of the colonial enterprise [shame], it is necessary to overcome the very models of thought and perception that made colonialism possible in the first place” (165). Bewes means this challenge to be taken in a more literal sense than one might first expect; that is, the fundamental structures of thought and perception he indicts are truly basic to most understandings of how the human mind works. There is, he asserts, a “structural continuity between shame, perception, and the colonial project” (167) that is rooted in “the conceptual opposition of identity and difference” (165) and the distinction between subject and object. Given this framework, it is even more surprising that cinema figures as an alternative, since it has been associated, at least since the 1970s, with voyeurism, the male gaze, and the staging of subject/object and identity/difference relations.⁵ But for Bewes, following Deleuze and Godard,

5. The understanding of cinema as a form of voyeurism, against which Deleuze and

"Cinema's essence, which is to say its existence, is entirely without shame, false or otherwise" (178). It "brings into effect a historical dismantling of the regime of category thinking, . . . of the ontology of subject and object, of 'us' and 'them'" (176). Cinema operates beyond shame and shamelessness because it operates beyond categories and binary oppositions, in a realm that resembles Henri Bergson's "pure perception" (177).

In a selective but acute reading of Malle's long film, Bewes finds this categorical dismantling in the "discrepancy between words and images" that *L'Inde fantôme* enacts, that is, the difference it installs between the voice-over narration and the flow of images "detached . . . from any direct narrative purpose" (186). The becoming-autonomous of the image radically disrupts the colonial gaze. This disruption allows Bewes to make a "distinction between an ethnographic project organized around the shame-ridden perception of an immobile center and an ethnography liberated from those perceptual limits by the presence of the camera" (188). Having found an aesthetic practice that seems to evade the problematic of shame and thus the structure of perception and knowledge that underlies colonialism, Bewes is able, in his concluding paragraphs, to return to the literary texts he has discussed and reread them in these Deleuzian terms. He remarks, for example, that, like *L'Inde fantôme*, Naipaul's *Guerillas* and Coetzee's *Slow Man* also use "a machinic apparatus"—a camera and a bicycle accident—"to put into suspension the anchored consciousness of the Western ethical subject" (189). A form of writing emerges that suggests a nascent sensibility disengaging itself from a shameful ensnarement in colonialism and its modes of perception and cognition.

In these final pages of *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, the ultimate polemical thrust of Bewes's book emerges: an argument against the politics of the overtly engaged author. Not a new

Bewes argue, is widespread throughout the feminist film theory and apparatus theory of the 1970s associated with the journal *Screen*. Bewes cites as a foil the most influential exemplar of this tradition, Laura Mulvey's classic essay on the male gaze, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 833–44. Mulvey's essay was originally published in *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18.

argument, to be sure—there are echoes of the critique of Sartre in Adorno's essay "Commitment."⁶ However, one would expect that the real target is no longer Sartre himself but rather some other unnamed proponents of a (humanist?) politics of culture. Additionally, the weapons come not only from Adorno; they derive especially from a more emphatically antihumanist Deleuze: "If for Sartre the purest embodiment of the free consciousness is the writer, for Deleuze the free consciousness is found not in the writer at all, but in the machine, the camera" (192). At the beginning of his argument, Bewes had ruled out an ethics of shame because of its foundation in a particular understanding of the individualist subject; at the conclusion of the book, he rules out the viability of any mode of representation predicated on the subject *tout court*. The solution to the problem of shame and to the problematics of writing colonialism, it would appear, lies in the embrace of a nonhuman apparatus.

There are many compelling aspects of this argument, as of the wide-ranging and nuanced readings that buttress it. Yet the thoroughgoing nature of the critique of ethics, perception, and subject/object relations raises questions as well. First, in a book dedicated above all to revealing the force of incommensurability at many levels, an equally strong tendency to isomorphism also exists. Thus various approaches to the crisis of writing in the twentieth century—Lukács's reflections on the novel, Adorno's meditations on Auschwitz, and Spivak's interrogation of the subaltern—are aligned without much effort at distinction. Even more crucially, we can see that the problem of isomorphism derives from the assertion of a "structural continuity" between shame, writing, ethnography, perception, and the colonial project. Paradoxically, the appeal to structure leads Bewes to render various forms of incommensurability as commensurable and isomorphic.⁷

6. Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982) 300–318.

7. See, for example, the discussion of Michel Leiris, in which ethnography is first linked to colonialism and writing and then to perception and shame (167–69).

Remarking on some of these continuities has become conventional in postcolonial studies, and Bewes's revelation of overlapping structures is often insightful and potentially fruitful. Yet the structuralist reduction of one of the terms to any (or all) of the others distorts the value of the insight and raises more questions than it answers. Is colonialism, for instance, really to be defined *uniquely* as a "conceptual opposition" or a "model of thought and perception"—however significant cognitive and affective frameworks may be—as Bewes seems to argue (165)? The provocation, but for me also the limit, of Bewes's rigorous, challenging book lies here, in the extent to which it pushes a structural understanding of both colonialism and literature beyond the historical terrain in which those structures emerge and mutate.

If shame is an index of implication in a structurally unjust world (our world), then understanding implication will also demand a differentiated account that not only dissolves subjects and objects as we know them but also reconstructs their relations, distinctions, and proximities. What is needed, it seems to me, is a way of rejoining the structural "evacuation of every discursive position that might claim freedom from implication in colonialism" (64) with a stronger sense of how those implicated positions remain, nevertheless, unequal and mired in "unprecedented disparities of power" (11). *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* reveals a broad terrain of complicity that outlives the end of formal colonial relations; now we need to map the unevenness, jagged edges, and internal borders of this territory so that we are better prepared to find an exit.

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