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Said's Contrapuntal Reading and the Event of Postcolonial Literature

Abstract I: This article aims at exploring recent theories on the postcolonial literary text as 'event' and their echoes of Edward Said's formulation of the 'contrapuntal reading'. Taking life writing and Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* (2012) in particular as case study, the article will show how discourses surrounding the publishing and reception of postcolonial writers must be considered as part of the reading experience, as clearly emerges when the works deal with public discourses such as the 'Rushdie affair'. Following this lead, the paper offers an interpretation of the literary work as a performative act in the complex nexus of discourses constituting the postcolonial writer as a figure of the global collective imaginary.

Abstract II: Questo saggio intende esplorare come recenti teorie sul testo letterario quale 'evento' riecheggino la formulazione della 'lettura contrappuntistica' di Edward Said: entrambe queste metodologie, infatti, individuano il momento della lettura come centrale per l'esistenza del testo, che vive solo in un intreccio di relazioni metatestuali. Prende quindi in considerazione *Joseph Anton* (2012) di Salman Rushdie per mostrare come i discorsi intorno alla pubblicazione e ricezione di scrittrici e scrittori postcoloniali vanno considerati parte dell'esperienza di lettura, in particolar modo nel caso di un discorso pubblico di grande risonanza come il 'caso Rushdie'. Propone infine di interpretare il testo letterario come atto performativo all'interno del complesso intreccio di discorsi che costituiscono lo scrittore postcoloniale come figura dell'immaginario collettivo globale.

When Anglo-Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif addressed the audience of the ESSE conference in Istanbul on September 6, 2012, she narrated the inception of her latest book *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012), which describes the eighteen days of the Egyptian revolution. Many years before, Soueif had agreed to write a book about Cairo, but the work never had the chance to come into existence until, after the events of February 2011, her publisher Alexandra Pringle called her and told her this was the moment for her “Cairo book”. The event represents a typical performative moment in the current literary landscape, that of a writer speaking at an international conference; the story, told in much the same terms as in the preface from the book (Soueif 2012: xiii) also points to the text itself as an ‘event’ happening due to a complex and diverse set of agents – the writer, the publisher, and of course readers eager to know more about the ‘Arab spring’.

Soueif’s case shows how a literary text is not to be read or interpreted – or even written – but performed into being by the act of reading, as Derek Attridge has recently argued: “the inventive literary work [...] should be thought of as an ethically charged event, one that befalls individual readers and, at the same time, the culture within which, and through which, they read” (Attridge 2005: xi) (1). This framework, I will argue, echoes Edward Said’s own formulation of ‘contrapuntal reading’ in three important ways: first of all, both theories individuate the act of reading as the *locus* where the literary text happens; secondly, they postulate the existence of the text as a web of relations to other texts, a relation activated by individual readers who can in this way read ‘contrapuntally’; and finally, both stress the ethical resonance of the reading: “the event of the literary work can have powerful effects on its readers, and through them, on the cultural and political environment” (Attridge 2005: xii).

Still, where Attridge’s theory aims at encompassing the literary text in general (2), counterpointing his agenda with Said’s helps in exploring the consequences of renewed attention to reception in postcolonial literature,

where the public role of the intellectual complicates the way the event of the text 'happens' to the reader (3). Soueif's account of the 'making of' her latest literary effort addresses two strongly interrelated functions a postcolonial literary work is expected to fulfill today. On the one hand, the book is written to offer information on a non-Western country to an English-speaking audience from the point of view of an insider, a 'native informant' or an 'organic intellectual' (4). On the other, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* also works as a consumer product on the global cultural market by addressing a highly topical subject such as the Arab spring, as the publisher's pressure on the writer clearly shows.

These two drives mirror Graham Huggan's dichotomy between postcolonialism and postcoloniality, which will be addressed below; yet Soueif's book also introduces a third element. By drawing constant attention to the chronological time of reading the book repeatedly stages the encounter between reader and text: "We now have this information [on the follow-up of the revolution]. You, my reader, in more advanced form as you read these words than I as I race to write them in the summer of 2011" (Soueif 2012: 8). Starting from the crucible from which Soueif's book emerges, my aim is to elaborate some preliminary considerations on 'the postcolonial' as what Judith Butler has defined as a "performative" by looking at Huggan's elaborations on the postcolonial exotic, and then intersecting it with Said's foundational work on the role of contrapuntal reading, using Salman Rushdie's recent memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012) as case study.

Butler's work on performativity can find resonance in postcolonial literature: the postcolonial may be defined as a performative in Butler's sense of "a discursive practice that enacts or produces what it names" (Butler 1993: xxi). More specifically, with its entrance in the public discourse both in the publishing industry and the academia, the postcolonial has emerged as a process of repetition – of stereotypes, discourses, and all performative acts – which, to use Butler's words again, "enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition

for the subject” (Butler 1993: 95). In this sense, Soueif’s tale of the ‘behind the scenes’ of the publishing mechanism gives her readers and audience a glimpse of the enabling context for her writing process and her own positioning as a writer during the Arab spring in Egypt. Yet Soueif also describes her book as an attempt “to ‘revolute’ and write at the same time” (Soueif 2012: xiv), thus weaving a double bind between revolution and writing; and it is this marketability of her account of the revolution that remains problematic in its location between revolutionary narrative and global cultural politics, or, we might say with Graham Huggan, between postcolonialism and postcoloniality.

In his *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), Huggan elaborates a binary dynamic between postcolonialism as “an ensemble of loosely connected oppositional practices” endorsing an aesthetic of “largely textualized [...] resistance” (Huggan 2001: 6), and postcoloniality as “a system of symbolic, as well as material exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed” (Huggan 2001: 6). This dichotomy immediately brings to mind Said’s own dichotomy in *Culture and Imperialism* between the “consolidated vision” of European empires and the “resistance and opposition” it met in the colonies (5); only now the consolidated vision appears to be that of postcoloniality itself which has absorbed the postcolonial rhetoric of resistance as just another consumer product. Yet, as in the Saidian vision hegemony and subalternity are to be experienced in counterpoint to one another, in Huggan’s vision postcolonialism and postcoloniality are not just opposite attitudes towards the postcolonial: the two visions are “mutually entangled” (Huggan 2001: 6), constantly working one alongside and against the other; they exist, to use Saidean terminology again, as overlapping territories where hegemony and resistance coexist on the very terrain of postcolonial literature.

This last category – ‘postcolonial literature’ – shows the potentiality and difficulties of Said’s legacy to the contemporary critic and scholar. One of the main challenges in working on contemporary postcolonial literature as a

performative event is to face the difficulties presented by the heterogeneity of textualities which have up to now contributed to my work on the topic: *Cairo* is a diary of the days of the protest by an Egyptian woman writer living between London and Cairo; *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* is the last instalment of a fictional autobiography trilogy by J. M. Coetzee, the white South African Nobel Prize winner now relocated in Australia; *Dancing in the Dark* is the fictional biography of Bahamian-American actor Bert Williams by Caryl Phillips, a writer born in St. Kitts, raised in Leeds and now living between the UK and the US; while *Joseph Anton* by Salman Rushdie, which will be the case study for this essay, introduced arguably the most gossiped about Indo-English writer into this already rather heterogeneous body of texts.

This wide-ranging landscape is very much indebted to the most criticized aspects of Said's work: what Huggan, following Aijaz Ahmad's argument in his *In Theory* (1992) calls "commercial third-worldism" (Huggan 2001: 19). Said's point in *Culture and Imperialism* that by reading Genet or Rushdie one can "think and experience" (Said 1993: 385) Palestine, Algeria or India – the reader's own gender, nationality or ethnicity notwithstanding – is met by Huggan with the suspicion that this approach may actually assume that such experiences are indeed interchangeable, as if their cultural and social backgrounds were to be considered essentially similar because non-Western or Third-Worldist; moreover, Said also apparently equates reading with mere book consumption – the more texts by the more 'exotic' writers one reads, the better the reader's experience (Huggan 2001: 19).

However, one has just to turn to the theory and practice of contrapuntal reading to find the ethical positioning of Said's wide-ranging corpus. This new (at the time) paradigm voiced – among other things – the need to register the contradictions arising from such a wide and diverse literary landscape as the one Said encompasses in his critical practice; it also exposes the impossibility, if not the unwillingness, to reduce this diversity to an organic whole. In this sense,

as Benita Parry argues, *Culture and Imperialism* is an 'impossible' book, based on "a fondness for contrapuntalism as a signifier of the unexpected and arresting juxtaposition of incongruent concepts and disparate categories" (Parry 2010: 506). Said's legacy for postcolonial literary studies is this possibility to think diverse and divergent texts and writers together while not necessarily considering them homogeneous or reducible to a single paradigm. While writers such as Soueif and Rushdie do not share the same cultural background, political stance or even loosely comparable 'writing styles', putting them in counterpoint to one another allows to find unexpected consonances.

One common ground between *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* and *Joseph Anton* is the use of autobiographical material, which also emerges as a key issue of postcolonial writing, one which has seen a precursor in Said himself. In his *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography*, David Huddart retraces the many critiques to Said's public persona, from Ahmed's highlighting of the class privilege behind this capability of situating himself to Weiner's suggestion that some inconsistencies in his account would undermine Said's own claim to a Palestinian identity (Huddart 2006: 13-21). Still, more than grounding the self in the authority of truthfulness, autobiography in Said's own writing exemplifies "a kind of invention of personal and communal beginnings – and it is an invention that, under limitations of various kinds, is undergoing constant denial and is therefore constantly re-starting, repeating itself with variations" (Huddart 2006: 45).

Authorial identity, whether in fiction or criticism, is thus an 'invention', a function of writing itself; and of course, as Timothy Brennan states, "Said's identity as a Palestinian is paramount to his performance" (quot. in Huddart 2006: 33). This performance necessarily relies on a public, that is, on readers and their ability to put the biographical 'facts' related to Said's Palestinian positioning in relation with a plethora of other sources of information on the writer. Hence, the apparent contrast between truthfulness and invention –

between the necessary reliance on biographical facts and the acknowledgement of the equally unavoidable fact of narration – finds a resolution in reading as a relational event: the literary and critical work ‘happens’ (to use Attridge’s terminology) to the reader in her/his individual encounter with the postcolonial text, or with ‘the postcolonial’ – work, writer, theory – as text. In this event the performative of the postcolonial takes shape as a constant negotiation between postcolonialism and postcoloniality (as defined by Huggan), in that empowering and prescriptive space which requires authors to conform to the Third World writer public persona to enter the English-speaking global literary landscape.

Going back to Butler’s definition of the performative, postcoloniality may be considered as the enabling temporal condition for the ‘postcolonial writer’ subject; yet postcolonialism’s contrapuntal reading allows for postcoloniality’s fractures and fissures to emerge. Said’s well-known formulation states that “as we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said 1993: 194); re-reading Said’s lines today, contrapuntal reading may be reinterpreted as a way of reading performatively – reading postcoloniality with an awareness of its role in the global cultural archive against and together with postcolonialism as anti-(neo)colonial practice.

In particular, postcolonial life writing excites contrapuntal reading because it taps into readers’ previous knowledge of facts and events in such a way that the appeal for truth is not as important as exploring another version of the story. This emerges rather clearly in Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton*, the writer’s recent memoir on the fatwa years (6). Here the question of the fatwa emerges as essentially linked to the question of reading (Newman 2009: 38), of how different people from many and diverse cultural backgrounds have read *The*

Satanic Verses in deeply different and equally affecting ways; these readings have in their turn produced narratives on and about Rushdie, and one of the main themes in *Joseph Anton* is precisely the overlapping of different readings of 'Rushdie' – the writer on the cover but also the narrating character in the novel. The book hence engages the reader in its own storytelling by directly addressing the writer's own public image as circulated in the media, hence exposing the book's own narrative – if not entirely fictional – discourse.

Differently from the deeply affecting first person narrating Soueif's experience of the Arab Spring, *Joseph Anton* is narrated in a strictly male third person which has been defined as "de Gaulle-like" (Heller 2012), but in the context of postcolonial life writing also reminds one of the narrative devices chosen by J. M. Coetzee in his memoirs. Two of the three instalments of the South African writer's *Scenes from Provincial Life* feature a third-person narrative by a main character called John M. Coetzee (Coetzee 1997, Coetzee 2002), who gives a partial and explicitly incomplete account of the main events of the writer's early life (7). Rushdie's narrator strikes a rather different note, though, as he thinks of the possibility to write his story in the not-too-near future: after musing on turning it into "something other than simple autobiography", he resolves otherwise: "After a while he abandoned this idea. The only reason his story was interesting was that it had actually happened. It wouldn't be interesting if it wasn't true" (Rushdie 2012: 340-41) (8).

Yet the 'truth' in *Joseph Anton* is necessarily intertwined with the process of storytelling: as the narrator points out, "The storytelling animal must be free to tell his tales" (Rushdie 2012: 361). Naturally, freedom is a contested term in the fatwa years, and the narrator spends many pages discussing the issue of freedom of speech in the face of both open and covert censorship (9); yet *Joseph Anton* also points to the empowerment coming from the ability to manipulate the stories told about 'Rushdie', especially by the media. In a move reminiscent of Said's own remarks about the dichotomy embedded in his own

name (10), the narrator finds his own self torn between 'Salman' and 'Rushdie': "He was aware that the splitting in him was getting worse, the divide between what 'Rushdie' needed to do and how 'Salman' wanted to live" (Rushdie 2012: 251). 'Rushdie' is the name talked about, the scapegoat of public discourses about the fatwa:

'Rushdie' was a dog. 'Rushdie', according to the private comments of many eminent persons, including the Prince of Wales, who made these comments over lunch to his friends Martin Amis and Clive James, deserved little sympathy. 'Rushdie' deserved everything he got, and needed to do something to undo the great harm that he had done. 'Rushdie' needed to stop insisting on paperbacks and principles and literature and being in the right. 'Rushdie' was much hated and little loved. He was an effigy, an absence, something less than human. He – it – needed only to expiate (Rushdie 2012: 252).

The last shift between 'he' and 'it', between the male third person which also marks the narrator's voice and the neuter pronoun identifying the object of narration marks the overlap between writer and character, the one who is written about and the one whose life commitment has been to write about others. This living paradox is embodied by Joseph Anton, the secret name under which Rushdie lived during the fatwa years, chosen by the writer himself by putting side by side the first names of his two favourite writers, Conrad and Chekhov. The character-writer – the narrator 'Salman Rushdie' – confronts his own fictional nature through the act of naming himself anew: "He had spent his life naming fictional characters. Now by naming himself he had turned himself into a sort of fictional character as well" (Rushdie 2012: 165).

Joseph Anton also remarks the diffuse nature of agency embedded in a text deeply dependant on other, multiple textualities, and on the readers' knowledge of what during the years has become known as the 'Rushdie affair'.

The book writes back to each and every politician, journalist or writer who has written on the fatwa, whether to support Rushdie or to criticize his work or attitude, in order to reclaim the authority of the writer on his own image (11). Yet, as the narrator realizes when informed that Gabriel García Márquez is writing a novel based on his life (a novel that will never be published), he realises that reclaiming authority over his own life may prove an impossible task: "He was to be someone else's 'novelisation' now? If the roles were reversed he would not have felt he had the right to come between another writer and his own life story. But his life had perhaps become everyone's property" (Rushdie 2012: 408).

The only possibility for the fictional Salman Rushdie to reclaim his own story, a story that has become 'everyone's property' is not, or not necessarily, by 'telling the truth', the book's reliance on the truthfulness of the account notwithstanding. As the narrator stresses in more than one occasion, the only power left to him in his utterly disempowered state is the power of storytelling. As a contemporary, male Sharāzād, he quickly acknowledges he needs to feed the media a different story to keep himself, and public attention on his case, alive: "it was [...] a time of rapid change, in which no subject held the attention for very long. [...] *Tell us a new story*, that was the general opinion, or else please go away. [...] So, yes, a new story. If that was what was wanted, that was what he would provide" (Rushdie 2012: 337).

Joseph Anton is a conspicuous example of how postcolonial life writing invites a Saidean contrapuntal reading by constantly highlighting its fictional nature, including a complex web of metatextual references that only the act of reading can activate. Its extensive reference to the event of reading as constitutive of the text emerges not only in the wide-ranging reference to other texts (12), but also through a constant reference to the practice of reading. For example, reviews on *Fury* identifying its main character Malik Solanka as proxy for the writer leads the narrator to muse again on the relationship between writer and character:

It was puzzling that in both cases [Malik Solanka and Saladin Chamcha from *The Satanic Verses*] these characters whom he had written to be other than himself were read by many people as simple self-portraits. But Stephen Dedalus was not Joyce, and Herzog was not Bellow, and Zuckerman was not Roth, and Marcel was not Proust; writers had always worked close to the bull, like matadors, had played complex games with autobiography, and yet their creations were more interesting than themselves. Surely this was known. But what was known could also be forgotten. He had to rely on the passage of the years to clear things up (Rushdie 2012: 596).

It is indeed interesting – at least to my postcolonially-oriented reading eye – that among all the writers the narrator quotes in this cursory overview of character-writer mirrorings, ‘Salman Rushdie’ is the only one which could be defined postcolonial by contemporary academic standards, and *also* the one picked up as an example of the apparent inevitability of the autobiographical reading – as if postcolonial literature could not but reflect discourses surrounding the writer’s public persona. Yet the conclusion of the argument handles final judgement onto the reader – today’s readers as well as future ones, in a gesture erupting from the page and from the temporal scope of the narrative. The explicit location of the text in the ephemeral moment of reading deprives the word on the page of its claim to authority and ontological fixedness; in this way, it questions the codes of postcoloniality as a marketing strategy, reinstating the centrality of Said’s theoretical insights for contemporary postcolonial practices.

NOTES

1. Although Attridge does not refer directly to Deleuze's formulation, I still think it useful to borrow Cliff Stagoll's definition of the Deleuzian event as "instantaneous productions intrinsic to interactions between various kinds of forces" (Parr 2005: 87).
2. Attridge's own work actually stems from his reading of J. M. Coetzee, as emerges from his twin monographs from 2004 and 2005; still the central example from his 2011 essay expanding on the performativity of the literary text comes from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), and the essay does not make any reference to postcolonial literature as a field with any specific relation to the argument explored there.
3. This essay will principally focus on life writing as the place where the public persona of the writer and the experience of the text overlap, creating some peculiarly visible conditions for the 'event' of literature to happen. Yet this does not exclude other, more elusive textual self-positionings which enact in the text the role of the 'public intellectual', such as those where another public figure is the subject of the author's life writing as proxy for her/his own. This happens, for example, in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark* (2006), as I have elsewhere argued (Guarracino 2012).
4. I am borrowing these definitions from two very different fields, which both contribute to the discussion on the role of the postcolonial intellectual I will be addressing in the following pages. The term 'native informant' comes from ethnography, where it defines "a figure who [...] can only provide data, to be interpreted by the knowing subject for reading" (Spivak 1999: 49); Spivak has notoriously appropriated the term to define "the limited access to being-human" of the postcolonial subject (Spivak 1999: 30). 'Organic intellectual', on the other hand, is a Gramscian definition used by Stuart Hall to describe the role of the postcolonial intellectual as bearing "the responsibility of

transmitting those ideas [...] to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class" (Hall 1992: 281).

5. Here I am referring to the titles from two of the sections in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*: the first, "Consolidated Vision", looks at the "structure of attitude and reference" (Said 1993: 62) integrating the empire in nineteenth century British literature; while "Resistance and Opposition" looks at the "charting of cultural territory" at the heart of the "ideological resistance" to the empires (Said 1993: 252).
6. It is not in the scope of this essay to review the fatwa proclaimed on Rushdie by Ayatollah Khomeini on 14 February 1989; discussions on the events and its aftermath can be found in Swan 1991 and Ranasinha 2007. On the other hand, it must be noted that *Joseph Anton* has received up to now very sparse critical attention, mostly limited to book reviews (see Blackburn 2012, Drabble 2012, and Heller 2012).
7. I will not be able here to expand on Coetzee's own life writing, which I have recently analysed in the framework of recent performance theory (Guarracino 2014).
8. The same preoccupation with truth emerges later on in a related exchange with Doris Lessing: "Doris Lessing was writing her memoirs and called to discuss them. Rousseau's way, she said, was the only way; you just had to tell the truth, to tell as much truth as possible" (Rushdie 2012: 373).
9. For example, when the narrator tells about his realization about what he is fighting for: "Freedom of speech, freedom of the imagination, freedom from fear, and the beautiful, ancient art of which he was privileged to be a practitioner. He would never again flinch from the defence of these things" (Rushdie 2012: 283).
10. In his memoir *Out of Place*, Said identified the two strands of his hyphenated identity in the fracture between his first name and his surname, between "'Edward', a foolishly English name forcibly yoked to the unmistakably Arabic

family name Said. [...] For years, and depending on the exact circumstances, I would rush past 'Edward' and emphasize 'Said'; at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear" (Said 1999: 3-4).

11. One example, among many, is the detailed account of the trading barbs, mostly through the pages of *The Guardian*, between Rushdie and John Le Carré in November 1997 (Rushdie 2012: 525-529).
12. Rushdie's unpublished diaries are the main reference, quoted in brackets throughout the text; but *The Guardian's* coverage of the events narrated in the book (including interviews and commentaries) is also extensively quoted, together with *The Daily Mail's* and others, from some point onwards collectively referenced as *The Daily Insult* (482). The book also includes correspondence, real or fictional, between Rushdie and a plethora of public figures and friends such as the representative of the Bradford Council of Mosques Shabbir Akhtar (208), his own mother (438), Tony Blair (535), Harold Pinter (542), and a cheeky exchange between himself at 52 and at 65 on his relationship with model Padma Lakshmi (582).

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