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Abstract

Early in the twentieth century, a Governor of the Gold Coast colony in West Africa circulated a minute to his staff. Such minutes were not unusual, and could cover any subject. This one, however, is memorable, for it dealt not with the minutiae of imperial administration but with a more difficult question: namely, how the agent of empire was to behave towards the subjects he ruled:

JOHN O'LEARY

‘Out here to be pleasant’: *Mister Johnson* and the Rhetoric of Niceness

Early in the twentieth century, a Governor of the Gold Coast colony in West Africa circulated a minute to his staff. Such minutes were not unusual, and could cover any subject. This one, however, is memorable, for it dealt not with the minutiae of imperial administration but with a more difficult question: namely, how the agent of empire was to behave towards the subjects he ruled:

I wish all officers to remember that a very high standard of work and conduct is expected from members of the service. We must always remember that we are Civil Servants — servants of the public. We are in this country to help the African and to serve him. We derive our salaries from the Colony and it is our duty to give full value for what it pays us. I attach considerable importance to good manners, especially towards the African. Those people who consider themselves so superior to the Africans that they feel justified in despising them and insulting them are quite unfitted for responsible positions in the colony. They are, in my opinion, inferior to those whom they affect to despise, and often betray, by their arrogance and bad manners, the inferiority of which they are secretly ashamed. (Morris 1978 253)

It is a fascinating text. Analysing it can lead us to an understanding of the complex, often contradictory late imperial culture that produced it — a culture that much post-colonial theory has represented as simple, homogenous and monolithic — as well as to a deeper appreciation of the co-texts, such as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), that this culture created.

On the surface, the Governor's minute is a liberal document, one that appeals explicitly to notions of dignity and respect for one's fellow man (or woman). Beneath the humane sentiment, however, notions of racial superiority are evident — Africans have to be 'helped', the Governor notes, which necessarily implies that they stand lower on the scale of civilisation than the imperial agent who rules them. What is significant, however, is that this sense of racial superiority cannot be voiced. To do so — to speak openly of one's superiority — is regarded as arrogant and bad-mannered. To ram home this point, the Governor ends with a subtle observation: those who despise Africans labour under a secret sense of inferiority. The inferiority here relates to socio-economic rank; Europeans who openly voice their superiority are, the Governor intimates, lower-class. This class discourse, which intersects so interestingly here with the discourse of race, is a subject I shall return to.

The Governor's minute might seem trivial, barely worth attention, were it not for the fact that the question of how the imperial agent should behave towards

the imperial subject at the day-to-day level of social interaction is a significant theme of late imperial fiction. It surfaces, for example, in *A Passage to India* (1924). In that novel, Mrs. Moore, though a liberal, humane character, does not question the right of the British to rule India, or even assert the equality of Europeans and Indians. What does worry her, however, is the rudeness that many of her fellow Britons show towards the people they rule. When, early in the book, her son Ronny dismisses the matter as a 'side issue', she reacts with dismay:

She forgot about Adela in her surprise. 'A side-issue, a side-issue?' she repeated. 'How can it be that?'

'We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments. India isn't a drawing room.' (Forster 69)

Ronny goes on to describe the civilising mission he believes he is part of, and his mother listens with a degree of respect. Even so, she remains troubled by the 'unpleasantness' (as she calls it) of British rule. When Ronny has finished she gives voice to her conviction:

'I'm going to argue, and indeed dictate,' she said, clinking her rings. 'The English *are* out here to be pleasant.'

'How do you make that out, Mother?' he asked, speaking gently again, for he was ashamed of his irritability.

'Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God ... is ... love.' She hesitated, seeing how much he disliked the argument, but something made her go on. 'God has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India, to see how we are succeeding.' (70)

Viewed historically, Mrs. Moore's idea that the English are in India to be pleasant is a curious one. Empires are not by nature pleasant; imperial peoples, whether Roman, Aztec or Russian, have seldom bothered to be nice to those they conquered. The fact that Mrs. Moore (and through her, Forster) makes a plea for niceness in imperial relations suggests a curious quirk, or psychological fault line, in late imperial British culture, that is worthy of investigation.

As the dialogue between Ronnie and Mrs. Moore shows, the notion of niceness in imperial relations was by no means uncontested. Forster himself does not view it unproblematically. In *A Passage to India*, Adela's attempt to be 'nice' to Aziz leads to disaster, while at the end of the novel, horses, earth, temples, tank, jail, palace, birds, carrion and Guest House — the whole of India — conspire to force Aziz and Fielding (who wish only to be friends) apart.

Being nice to imperial subjects, it seems, may not be wise, or even possible. Yet the notion that one had should behave pleasantly towards subject peoples — whatever one's private feelings of superiority — persisted. In Joyce Cary's

'African' novels, the question of how to act towards Africans in the day-to-day social context is examined in a variety of different ways. In *Aissa Saved* (1932), the first of these novels, the analysis is implicit rather than explicit. The rudeness of the missionary Carrs towards a venerable old man, Musa, who is trying to protect them, is carefully noted. Though Cary does not labour the point, it is clear that the Carrs, while generally well meaning, have behaved inappropriately: 'Musa, astonished, unable to believe his ears, stared at him and then hastily salaamed ... conscious as he was of his energy, courage, and devotion to duty at great risk to himself, [he] still could not believe that he was suffering a public humiliation before all the guttersnipes of the town' (Cary 1952 44–45). In *The African Witch* (1936), the way the white residents of Rimi behave towards Aladai, the Oxford-educated black prince, is a central theme of the novel, one that receives a great deal of discussion. Aladai's attempts to assert his social equality are met with hostility by some, acceptance by others; one character, Rackham, is confused in his reactions:

Rackham had meant to be polite to Aladai on general principles. His exclamation had exploded out of him without any premeditation. He did not know what he had said until he had said it, and, as he darted up the road as if shot there by the same explosion, he still did not know where he was going or what he was going to say.

Meeting Mrs. Pratt and Rubin on their way to the Residency, he said, 'Why not the club?' You'll have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Aladai there.'

'What!' cried Mrs. Pratt.

'He's just arrived. He's been giving us a lecture on the stars, with quotations from the poets. It was a touching scene.'

'But can't we do anything?'" Mrs. Pratt screamed.

'I'm afraid not. You see, Mr. Aladai happens to be black, and so he can do what he likes.'

'Yes, with a Resident like Mr. You-know-who. But really — this is too much!'

Mrs. Pratt began to exclaim and cry out for help in her usual manner, but Rackham was already disgusted and bored with her. How silly she was in her violence and fear. She depressed him; or rather, she increased his anger and depression by adding to it material of exactly the same sympathetic quality from her own silliness and violence. She made him savage. He would have been rude had not Rubin, seeing that there was something wrong with his temper, reminded the lady that they wanted to catch the Resident about the next chapel service before he came to the club.

(Cary 1951 119)

This confusion or instability of attitude on the part of Rackham is symptomatic, I believe, of a larger uncertainty in Cary himself, and in late imperial British culture generally. Being rude to subject peoples — openly asserting ones superiority — was no longer acceptable, yet feelings of racial superiority persisted, making social contact at the day-to-day level problematic.

In *A Passage to India* and *The African Witch*, the question of how the imperial agent should behave toward the imperial subject is debated openly, with characters

taking sides on the issue. In *Mister Johnson* (1939), the question is not explicitly discussed the way it is in *The African Witch*, but is, nevertheless, an important theme in the novel. Some of the British characters treat the Africans they meet — especially Johnson — with contempt, and voice their supposed superiority either covertly or overtly. An example is Blore, the District Officer, who 'really hates Johnson' (Cary 1995, 20) and whose manner toward him, though superficially polite, is patronisingly dismissive, a fact Johnson is aware of. Another British character, Gollup, the ex-army sergeant and trader who briefly employs Johnson, is more openly racist — he regularly assaults Johnson and his fellow shop assistant, and tries each week to kill his African mistress. Gollup has no time for the rhetoric of niceness: for him, Africans are simply 'nigs' whom it is the white man's burden to rule:

Half an hour later Gollup is in a melancholy mood. 'It's the hexile — you chaps don't know what the Empire costs us —'

'Oh, sah, dem millions and millions of gold —'

'I ain't complaining — it's a duty laid on us by God — but the Pax Britannia takes a bit of keeping up — with 'arf the world full of savages and 'arf the other 'arf just getting in the way.'

Ten minutes later, he is astonished at his own sufferings. 'You don't know what it is to leave your children — talk of hagony —'

'Oh, sah, I too sad for you.'

Gollup screws up his face like a child with some bitter medicine in his mouth and makes a peculiar noise at the back of his nose, like a sheep coughing. This is his form of a sob.

'Heugh — hew — worse than 'ell.'

'Oh, sah, I too — when I go away from my little baby — I feel my heart all burst — I say I fit to die soon. Only if I die, what happens to my poor Bamu and my little son?'

'It isn't a life, it's a bloody sacrifice. I ain't complaining. But you don't know what it costs us, you nigs, to tidy things up for you — you ain't got the same feelings.' (130)

Gollup, in other words, speaks openly of his superiority (as he conceives it) in a way the other British characters in *Mister Johnson* do not. This openness — one might say, honesty — marks him as deficient; he is one of those inferior beings, alluded to by the Governor in his minute, who despise and insult the people they are meant to be helping. The fact that Gollup clearly comes from a lower socio-economic level than the other British characters in the book (who are all middle class) is significant; the British working class or lower middle class is here viewed as the repository of overtly racist attitudes, an unpalatable 'other' within colonial white society from whom the right-thinking imperial agent will distance himself.¹ Gollup, indeed, is not merely inferior; he is an anachronism, for the language he speaks, with its references to 'nigs' and the white man's burden, was out-of-date and discredited by the time Cary wrote his novel, a throwback to

an earlier, cruder, more jingoistic phase of empire. Cary himself was quite conservative in his views on Africans — he appears to have had little regard for their capacity for self rule, for example, observing that an ‘overcrowded raft manned by children who had never seen the sea’ would have a better chance in a typhoon than Africans would have in organising their independence (Cary 1951 12). By the time he wrote *Mister Johnson*, he clearly felt uncomfortable, however, with overtly racist or imperialist attitudes of the kind expressed by Gollup. In *Mister Johnson*, he assigned them, accordingly, to a working-class or lower-middle-class character who is both comic and repellent.

If Blore and Gollup, in their different ways, refuse the rhetoric of niceness, other British characters in *Mister Johnson* embrace it, behaving in a way that would have pleased the Governor of the Gold Coast colony. Celia, the wife of Rudbeck, for example, is consciously pleasant towards the Africans in her neighbourhood, which in her case means visiting the local populace:

Every day there is a new excursion, to see women making water pots without a wheel, to see a house being built, mats being plaited, cotton woven on the native loom.... Everywhere Celia is curious, attentive and charmed by the African people, and tells Rudbeck in the evening how much she has enjoyed herself, how marvellous Africa is. (Cary 1995 90)

Celia, of course, understands very little of what she sees; as Cary says, Africa for her is simply ‘a number of disconnected events which have no meaning at all’ (91). What is significant, however, is that Celia makes an effort to effect some kind of social rapprochement; she even visits Bamu, Johnson’s wife, and invites her to tea. It is a trivial enough act, viewed from a modern, post-colonial perspective, but socially and historically it is significant. The English in Nigeria, it seems, to paraphrase Mrs. Moore, *are* in Africa to be pleasant. If they feel superior, they are careful not to show it in any overt or insulting way.

Rudbeck himself has a more straightforward attitude towards the Africans he deals with, but he too displays a degree of consideration towards them that suggests — if we believe Cary’s writing here — that relations between the imperial agent and the imperial subject were not always marked by neurosis and struggle, as theorists such as Fanon and JanMohamed have suggested.² Unlike his superior, Blore, Rudbeck does not scorn Johnson merely because he is black; when he growls at the clerk, his speech is not, Cary assures the reader, the speech of a white official ‘speaking to a Negro whom he despises,’ but simply an ‘angry exclamation’ (48). Rudbeck, in fact, has a certain affection for Johnson — ‘he’s a good chap’, he tells the mercilessly upright Tring (102) and he goes to the trouble of re-employing him as a foreman on his road after Johnson has been fired from Government service. During Johnson’s trial, Rudbeck is careful to offer the clerk a way-out: if Johnson confirms the killing of Gollup was an accident, he will be convicted of the lesser charge of manslaughter and so escape the death penalty. When Johnson does not confirm this, thereby laying himself

open to the charge of murder, Rudbeck recommends a reprieve. He even accedes to Johnson's request to be shot rather than hung, shooting the clerk himself — an act which can be interpreted as one of mercy and consideration, for hanging was viewed as a shameful death, incompatible with the gentlemanly status that Johnson has been keen to assert throughout the novel.³ Rudbeck's execution of Johnson, in fact, is shocking precisely *because* his relations with the clerk have been, by and large, relatively pleasant. It is less an imperial subject being disposed of, one feels, than a friend being snuffed out.

Rudbeck, of course, is not really Johnson's friend, and the fact that Johnson believes he is, is a source of much of Johnson's trouble. Yet Rudbeck's comparative politeness toward Johnson, and Celia's attempts at rapprochement with the Africans around her, suggest that relations at the personal, day-to-day level between the imperial agent and imperial subject, while still complex and problematic, had grown more humane in the last phase of empire. The reason for this humanisation is to be found, surely, in changes in the social environment in Britain during this period. In the early years of the twentieth century a succession of Acts of Parliament had extended education, healthcare and welfare provisions to the poorer section of the population (Seaman 483; Ashley 161; Cecil 134). Above all, the trauma of the Great War had united the nation and started to dissolve traditional class barriers. A century before, the British working class had been regarded by the bourgeois almost as another species — a frightening, turbulent domestic 'other' to be kept in order, if necessary, by troops. By the 1930s, when Cary was writing *Mister Johnson*, class relations had become gentler — at least on the surface — and life for ordinary people more humane (Seaman 470). Such a change in the social relations of the mother country inevitably made itself felt in the Empire, for if the domestic 'other' of the working class was being accorded a new level of consideration, it was difficult to argue that the imperial 'other' of the subject races should not also be accorded a similar degree of respect. Hence the Governor's minute, quoted above; hence Mrs. Moore's curious outburst in *A Passage to India*. Cary's 'African' novels, often viewed as conservative and reactionary, debate this awkward question, and in so doing position themselves very much as products of their troubled, uncertain period.⁴ They also position themselves very much as 'colonial' novels, an identity which some critics of Cary's 'African' novels have disputed.⁵

It can be objected, of course, that the rhetoric of niceness, as I have termed it, was no more than a ploy to ensure a degree of collaboration on the part of the imperial subject: the imperial agent treated him/her with a modicum of respect in their day-to-day relations, and thereby persuaded the latter to accept and even endorse imperial domination.⁶ It can even be argued that the rhetoric of niceness represented a final, devastating assertion of superiority on the part of the imperial agent: he was so superior (supposedly) that he could eschew any overt expression of superiority, establishing once and for all his moral dominance over the imperial subject, who cannot even reproach him for bad manners. Viewed from this

perspective the rhetoric of niceness as it appears in the texts and co-texts of the late imperial period can be seen as a discourse of the kind frequently identified by New Historicist critics, in which the power of the state (or empire) is endlessly and subtly re-affirmed.⁷

It would be wrong, however, I believe, to judge this rhetoric so cynically. Rather, I suggest, it should be viewed as a genuine — if to modern eyes rather patronising — attempt to inject a degree of respect into imperial social relations, relations which too often had been marked by condescension and rudeness on one side and fear and resentment on the other. Such a desire, of course, was symptomatic of a loss of certainty about the whole imperial project: convinced imperialists do not need to make friends with their subjects. This loss of certainty is to be found in many late-imperial novels; it runs unspoken through *A Passage to India*, and surfaces very explicitly in at least two of Cary's 'African' novels. In *An American Visitor* (1933), for example, Cottee, a cynical young official, challenges Bewsher and Gore, the local District Officer and judge, about the lack of conviction he detects in his colleagues:

'We haven't got a system at all — no sort of principles. None of the people we send out have the faintest idea of what they're for.'

'I suppose not,' said Bewsher.

But Gore could not allow his District Officer to pass over such violent exaggeration as this. 'Isn't it one of the chief principles to leave people to run their own affairs as much as possible. That's actually laid down in plenty of instructions and memoranda.'

'That's not a principle at all — it's just lack of intelligence. We don't even know what to do with an empire. We can't even guess what it's for.' (Cary 1952 98)

In *Mister Johnson*, these doubts are voiced more obliquely, but still powerfully. In a revealing conversation toward the end of the book between Rudbeck and his superior, Bulteel, Cary illustrates the uncertainty that informed the late imperial period:

[Rudbeck] has said to Bulteel, 'But, sir, if native civilization does break down, there'll be a proper mess one day.'

Bulteel takes off his hat, lifts it in the air in a line with the sun, and then at once puts it on again. They are taking their evening walk along the river road at Dorua.

'Ah! That's a big question.' Bulteel hates talking shop out of office hours.

'We're obviously breaking up the old native tribal organization or it's breaking by itself. The people are bored with it.'

'Yes, yes, and I'm not surprised,' Bulteel says.

Rudbeck is greatly surprised. 'Don't you believe in the native civilization?'

'Well, how would you like it yourself?' Bulteel smiles sideways at him with a kind of twinkle.

'Then you think it will go to pieces?'

'Yes, I think so, if it hasn't gone already.'

'But what's going to happen then? Are we going to give them any new civilization, or simply let them slide downhill?'

'No idea,' Bulteel says cheerfully. He takes his hat off again and replaces it at once because he finds it a nuisance to hold at arm's length above his bald head.

'I suppose one mustn't talk about a plan,' Rudbeck says.

'Oh, no, no, no. They'll take you for a Bolshy.'

'Well, sir, an idea. I suppose some people do have an idea of what life ought to be like — the Catholics and the missionaries do, or ought to — and I suppose Arnold did.'

'Oh, Arnold, the Rugby man — yesss.'

'I don't mean their ideas would do now, but only that a general idea might be possible — something to work to.'

'Well, what idea?'

'That's the question.'

'Yes, that's the question.' (Cary 1995 168–69)

'What idea?' — Rudbeck's question functions as a kind of puzzled epitaph for an empire moving rapidly towards its own dissolution. Such a lack of self-belief could be dangerous, as Morris has observed (Morris 1978 254), but it created a space in which — briefly — the rhetoric of niceness could be articulated, and through this rhetoric a gentler, more humane form of relationship established between the imperial agent and the imperial subject, at least at the day-to-day, social level. The existence of this rhetoric belies the stereotype of imperial relations as simply and uniformly negative, as much postcolonial theory has proposed.⁸ While not excusing the fundamental immorality of empire, it asks us to look more closely, I believe, at the texture of late imperial life and the fictions it produced, noting their revealing psychological nuances and fault lines.

NOTES

- ¹ It would be wrong to charge Cary with simple class snobbery, however. There is plenty of evidence that at this period concern for the sensibilities of subject races — where it existed at all — was largely a middle-class phenomenon (see Morris 1973 448).
- ² See Fanon: 'The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority, alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation' (60). JanMohamed, following Fanon and disputing Bhabha's notion of the unity of the colonial subject (both coloniser and colonised) finds a 'profound conflict' in the relation of conqueror and native (1).
- ³ See *Mister Johnson*, where Johnson chides a soldier for not treating him like a gentleman (202). Rudbeck's shooting of the clerk has always been a controversial aspect of the novel. JanMohamed sees it as an example of the desire, common to writers of what he terms 'imaginary texts' produced by imperial/colonial writers, 'to exterminate the brutes [natives]' (JanMohamed 9). It is possible, however, to interpret Rudbeck's act in a more positive light.
- ⁴ The Nigerian critic Michael Echeruo argues that Cary was very typical of his time when it came to his cultural attitudes. 'The African experience which Cary recorded in his letters and drafts was shaped by the cultural assumptions which, at that point in history, were as public as they were personal. The voice is that of the representative

- Englishman and the incidents recorded belong to the life of the white-man-in-Africa.' (Echeruo 144–45). Certainly Cary's depiction of Rudbeck as a kind of school captain rather than imperial master (Cary 1995 81) can be seen as a typical expression of late imperial ideology, when the white man was envisioned as an adviser or trustee, whose duty it was to prepare subject peoples for self-rule.
- ⁵ For example, Andrew Wright thinks that Cary's interest was 'not in Africa as such' (57–62).
- ⁶ The complex, important question of collaboration during the colonial period has received insufficient attention. Ania Loomba, discussing Gramsci's notion of hegemony and quoting Arnold, notes that 'in colonial societies, harsh coercion worked in tandem with a consent that was part voluntary, part contrived ... even the most repressive rule involved some give-and-take' (31). The rhetoric of niceness, in this light, can be seen as an example of imperial give-and-take.
- ⁷ See Kiernan Ryan: 'New historicists are prone to regard cultures as regimes of constraint, designed to absorb resistance or ultimately turn it to their own account. In this scenario, not surprisingly, works of literature tend to be cast as conspirators in the plots hatched by power to secure our subjection' (xv).
- ⁸ See Fanon, for example, in *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'Face to face with the white man, the Negro has a past to legitimate, a vengeance to exact; face to face with the Negro, the contemptuous white man feels the need to recall the times of cannibalism' (225).

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