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Abstract

Beside my desk is a framed print of John Atkinson Grimshaw's painting *Reflections on the Thames, Westminster* (1880). I bought it three years ago at the Leeds City Art Gallery, where the painting is on display, and hung it underneath the skylight so that it might catch as much light as possible. Like his painting *Whitby Harbour by Moonlight* (1867) it is a night-time scene, with a dark landscape faintly illuminated by pin-pricks of light. From the vantage of the Embankment we look out over the Thames, with the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge in the distance. The scene is dimly lit by the moon which sheds a thin, peaceful glow reflected in the water. Light is also cast from the face of Big Ben, the lights of the Embankment, and the lamps on the bridge in the distance. To the right of the painting, on the Embankment, some figures are depicted walking. One, a woman, has stopped. She leans against the Embankment wall and gazes across the river to the faint light before her. Her face is turned away: we cannot read her expression or determine her age. We look over her shoulder at the Thames, the House, the moon, the faint light, the shadows. A dog stands impatiently beside her, watching the walkers instead. The woman's journey — who knows where she is from, or is going? — has been arrested by the scene, and we share her motionlessness and her gaze. Distinguishing her from the passers-by, her pause enables one to see the beauty of Victorian London at a moment of remarkable stillness. Suspended are the bustle, the crowds, the hurry, the dangers of the city: instead, in the company of a stranger, we see a London becalmed, the view almost a refuge from the industriousness of the Empire's heart.

JOHN McLEOD

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Beside my desk is a framed print of John Atkinson Grimshaw’s painting *Reflections on the Thames, Westminster* (1880). I bought it three years ago at the Leeds City Art Gallery, where the painting is on display, and hung it underneath the skylight so that it might catch as much light as possible. Like his painting *Whitby Harbour by Moonlight* (1867) it is a night-time scene, with a dark landscape faintly illuminated by pin-pricks of light. From the vantage of the Embankment we look out over the Thames, with the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge in the distance. The scene is dimly lit by the moon which sheds a thin, peaceful glow reflected in the water. Light is also cast from the face of Big Ben, the lights of the Embankment, and the lamps on the bridge in the distance. To the right of the painting, on the Embankment, some figures are depicted walking. One, a woman, has stopped. She leans against the Embankment wall and gazes across the river to the faint light before her. Her face is turned away: we cannot read her expression or determine her age. We look over her shoulder at the Thames, the House, the moon, the faint light, the shadows. A dog stands impatiently beside her, watching the walkers instead. The woman’s journey — who knows where she is from, or is going? — has been arrested by the scene, and we share her motionlessness and her gaze. Distinguishing her from the passers-by, her pause enables one to see the beauty of Victorian London at a moment of remarkable stillness. Suspended are the bustle, the crowds, the hurry, the dangers of the city: instead, in the company of a stranger, we see a London becalmed, the view almost a refuge from the industriousness of the Empire’s heart.

I cannot look with neutrality at Westminster. My birth certificate is efficient with the facts. My surname is McLeod; my place of birth is given as Westminster. Yet each name hides other stories. My surname was not always McLeod; and I do not know exactly where, or to whom, in Westminster I was born. It is not the original certificate, which was destroyed once I had been adopted a few weeks after my birth by my parents. A new certificate was issued which bears their — my — family name. There is an old surname which I know, and of which I still have evidence; it appears on a feeding-card which my Mum kept for me. She used it when she lovingly explained to me as a very small child the circumstances of my birth. My birth certificate, then, frames the evidence of two journeys with these two names ‘McLeod’ and ‘Westminster’. The first is that of my parents, Catholic Glaswegians who migrated to Canada in the late 1950s, and lived in

Toronto, before moving to England a few years later and settling eventually in Manchester, in 1970, where I was subsequently raised. The second is much more difficult to plot. It involves a young Irish Catholic woman and an anonymous Scottish man who came together in Autumn 1968, the consequence of which was my birth less than a year later. Of their story there remains very little. I know of the abandoned surname and a request on the woman's part that I be raised a Catholic (which my parents fulfilled and I subsequently rejected). This story, if it can be called a story as such, is conjured for me in the name 'Westminster'. Something else is tucked away in that name, its shape adumbrating a silence or a darkness like that of Westminster Bridge in Grimshaw's painting, the outline of which encloses a dark passage across the water. I am reminded of this silence, this darkness, each time I reflect upon Grimshaw's painting.

Post-colonial writing is full of stories of newcomers to London, and many make reference to young, bewildered women struggling to cope with bearing or bringing up children in a hostile, anonymous city. In Janet Frame's *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962), Zoe Bryce finishes her shift at the Palace Cinema by clearing up the evening's litter and checking 'in the lavatories for newborn babies in carrier-bags' (176). Doris Lessing's documentary account of London, *In Pursuit of the English* (1960) features a distraught young working-class mother who is terrified of her abusive husband. She hurls herself down a stairwell in order to miscarry the child which she knows they cannot afford to raise. One of the least-discussed moments in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) concerns the lusty Sir Galahad, whose arrival in London from Trinidad produces 'a Galahad junior in Ladbroke Grove and all them English people stopping in the road and admiring the baby curly hair when the mother pushing it in the pram as she go shopping for rations' (35). Galahad never sees him again, nor cares less.

Buchi Emecheta's *In The Ditch* (1972) makes plentiful reference to the comings-and-goings of the English, Irish, Caribbeans and Africans in the humdrum environment of 1960s Kentish Town, united by a shared experience of poverty. The book abounds with reference to children created out of the sexual encounters between such Londoners, and concludes with the news that an English friend of Adah (the narrator) is expecting her third child and is to be married to the father, an African. The friend, Whoopey, is delighted, but Adah conceals her fears: 'She knew her people. The man was probably just lonely, like Whoopey, but to seriously consider marriage with a girl [already] with two children was out of the question. How could she tell Whoopey that she would get hurt? What help could she give?' (131). It is, of course, perhaps unfair that Adah should so quickly judge one of 'her people' through her own informing experience; yet the impression is given that, as in Selvon's Ladbroke Grove, Kentish Town may well be about to receive another child who is not absolutely wanted and for whom abandonment by at least one parent will seal their future. Indeed, in Emecheta's next novel, *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), we learn that Nigerian

parents in postwar London farm out their children to white foster-mothers because of the difficulties and meagre circumstances of their lives. By the end of this novel, Adah's unsavoury husband, Francis, happily declares in open court that he wants his five children 'sent for adoption' (185) as they are forever getting in the way of his philandering and require that he takes seriously his responsibilities as a father. He burns their birth certificates in order to make it difficult for his wife to prove his paternity.

What happened to children like these, born in one country to an absent parent or parents who have often migrated from another, sometimes left in toilets or reluctantly given up in British courts? Where do we — I — find their stories? Who, or what, made them illegitimate? In answering these questions I inevitably think as a post-colonial critic, reading the construction of illegitimacy in terms of post-war British social and political constructions of national identity and citizenship; but as I have slowly discovered over several years, that is not the only way I respond to these texts, as the two examples I give below perhaps demonstrate.

One of the most moving and important narratives of abandonment and adoption in post-colonial writing is given in Caryl Phillips's novel, *Crossing the River* (1993). In the section titled 'Somewhere in England', the reader is given access to the thoughts of Joyce, a working-class English woman living in an unnamed northern town, stuck in an unhappy and violent marriage. During the Second World War she develops a relationship with Travis, a black American soldier stationed in the town, and becomes pregnant. The pregnancy is her second; her first, conceived out of wedlock, was terminated in 1937. Travis and Joyce are married on New Year's Day, 1945. The child, Greer, is born a few months later, just before Britain celebrates military victory in Europe. Joyce records the celebrations of May 9th 1945, the streets decked with bunting and full of jubilant villagers. 'Some of them even spoke to me and smiled at Greer', she recalls. 'Just before midnight, I took him inside, out of the evening chill' (220). Greer's birth could symbolise the dawning of a new era freed from the tyranny, prejudices and pain of the past. Its optimism is hinted in the smiles Greer provokes at the street-party. Yet Travis is killed in action; and Greer is taken from Joyce by a 'lady with the blue coat and maroon scarf' (223) who demands that, as a GI baby of 'mixed' race, Greer must be given up to the care of the County Council. 'If you're lucky', she says to Joyce, 'it might be legally adopted into a well-to-do family' (223).

The conversion of the child from 'Greer' to 'it' underlines the wrench of separation, and anticipates the post-war ascendancy of race as a signifier of (il)legitimacy in national citizenship, as well as the persistence of class inequality and prejudice. The unanticipated encounter between a white working-class English woman and a black American man thrown together by the vicissitudes of war 'somewhere' must not, it seems, be allowed to interrupt the legitimacy of

the white community 'in England'. Greer is more than a lost child; he signifies a lost opportunity for post-war England split by the divisions of race and class. Like the other African-descended characters in the novel he has arrived on the other side 'loved' (237), yet that love is first rendered dangerous by state officialdom and then force-sacrificed for the greater good. 'Let's be sensible', says the lady in the blue coat, and Joyce unhappily complies. Greer's new-found illegitimacy is the price he must pay for the production of that 'sense' which upholds the legitimacy of race and nation.

Eighteen years later, in 1963, Greer comes again into Joyce's life; but it is not a return. He is no longer a baby, and 'he would never call [Joyce] mother' (223). They are separated by silences, yet bonded by love. Joyce asks him to leave before her new husband, Alan, and her children arrive home; but the narrative does not conclude with his departure; rather, Phillips positions Greer's unexpected visit, which Joyce vividly recalls, as the climax of the narrative:

He stepped by me, dipping a shoulder as he did so in order that we didn't have to touch. I closed in the door but for a moment I didn't turn around. I was ashamed. I wasn't ready. Standing there in a plain dress, with my lank hair, and my bare legs, and my slippers looking like the left-over scraps from someone's fluffy rug. Forty-five years old, and I knew I looked awful, but there wasn't any time to fret over appearances. Not now. I took a deep breath and turned to face him. I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that. Sit down. Please, sit down. (232-33)

When I read these electrifying sentences I find the scene most forceful in the way it pinpoints the novel's general challenge to received notions of home. How could Nash ever make himself at home? Where is his home? Not at his birth-mother's house which is as strange to him as any other, and in which he cannot stay. Not in the US, where he has not been raised. Not comfortably in England, the country which has declared him illegitimate and a problem. Greer's ambiguous location is, perhaps, captured in the term 'somewhere' in the chapter's heading, 'Somewhere in England'. Is this a vague, ill-defined yet utopian and necessary space where the prejudices of yesterday and exclusionary logic of home no longer matter? Or, less hopefully, is this term a signpost for a certain kind of cultural or identificatory limbo, where Greer and others like him remain isolated, abandoned and adrift, desperately searching for a place in the world which has, to all intents and purposes, rejected his legitimacy and denied him the intimacy of touch? For me, to read these sentences brings further responses and rewards. The sensitivity with which the 'reunion' is narrated raises my pulse, and Phillips judiciously leaves us at the very moment of which many adoptees dream: the encounter with the lost 'mother'. It is not, of course, a return — these characters are strangers to each other — but a moment full of possibility, of acknowledgement of hidden pasts, of new beginnings. It admits a love which has been 'delegitimated', but not destroyed.

It is certainly not a failing on Phillips's part that we never hear Greer's version of events in *Crossing the River*. Greer's story remains a mystery: Joyce knows nothing about his upbringing and his voice is never heard. Yet, in drawing our attention to Greer's predicament, Phillips reveals the shape of a silence, one which is of a part with many other silences of the novel — of the transported slaves held in James Hamilton's ship, of the wife of the Edward Williams, Amelia, who has taken her own life. The itineraries of silencing which have kept these stories untold, hidden in the shadows of history, require recognition. It is the exposure of the process of their illegitimation which makes the novel so powerful, to this reader at least. Greer cannot be heard; but he exists 'somewhere'. Like the love he has experienced and been denied, he will not simply disappear.

Whereas Phillips's 'Somewhere in England' is set in the north of England, David Dabydeen's *The Intended* (1992) is set in London. In this novel, Dabydeen takes us closer to the realm of experience of an abandoned child, although the character in question, Joseph, remains displaced from the reader, refracted through the narrator's fascinated view which at times struggles to bear witness to the world as Joseph sees it. Joseph is described as a black Rastafarian aged 'seventeen or thereabouts' (87) — he has no way of being sure. The narrator encounters him in a children's home and they become friends, working together at the Battersea Fun Fair one summer. Abandoned as a baby by his father on the death of his mother, Joseph has been through a number of institutions, including a Bethnal Green borstal and 'welfare hostels all over London' (81). Although he is illiterate, he is an accomplished guitarist; his sole aim in life is 'to give love to people' (88). Forgotten by his father, chewed up by welfare institutions and declared a criminal by the police, his illegitimacy coupled with his race makes Joseph appear as the antithesis of social and national propriety. He lives in the ruins of London; for a spell, in 'an abandoned house in a Balham back-street, in a row of derelict buildings' (88). Yet to rent Elspeth Huxley's famous phrase, 'back streets' admit 'new worlds'. Joseph comes to embody an alternative knowledge, nurtured in the ruins of the city, which challenges the legitimacy of the conventional and pushes at the limits of the narrator's epistemological frame. As well as a musician, Joseph becomes a film-maker using a home-video camera, and is also temporarily — marvellously — a literary critic despite being unable to read. In one scene the narrator recites a passage from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which he regards as evidence of the book's exploration of suffering and redemption. But Joseph disagrees with the narrator's reading:

'No, it ain't, is about colours. You been saying is a novel 'bout the fall of man, but is really 'bout a dream. Beneath the surface is the dream. The white light of England and the Thames is the white sun over the Congo that can't mix with the green of the bush and the black skin of the people. All the colours struggling to curve against each other like a rainbow, but instead white light want to blot out the black and the green and reduce the world to one blinding colour.' (98)

The ‘white light’ of the Thames and England challenges the ‘rainbow’ vision of Joseph — whose name, of course, is paralleled by Conrad’s. The young Londoner is revealed as both critic and creator; not just Conrad’s novel but Dabydeen’s post-war London are bathed in white light — the white light of the authority of the nation and the institutions of the old Empire’s heart of which Joseph is a victim. The narrator is suitably ‘spellbound’ (98) by Joseph’s reading of Conrad, and the insight of Joseph’s vision is further endorsed by the films he goes on to make (before the police, arbiters of the law, take his camera). They are of a part with his music and criticism, born from the same dissident cultural reading of England made possible in London by those abandoned to the very state which has declared and endorsed their illegitimacy. ‘I can’t read nor write’, says Joseph, ‘but I can see’ (107). *The Intended* takes us close to the wisdom of Joseph’s sight. The novel cannot articulate Joseph’s visions with accuracy, but it can describe their shape and presence, and project the city and its knowledges in a different light.

When I look to my past in London, I can see only dim shapes, shadows of stories, ghosts behind the names on that certificate. The light is thin, as in Grimshaw’s painting, and as with the painting, I have to look closely and take what definition I can from the scene. Some things are clear, however. Mine is not a tragic story of loss. Far from it. A curiosity is not a trauma. I grew up in a loving family without secrets and lies. I would change nothing. When I think about my early life I encounter a sense of anonymity, but do not feel an absence. Nor are the circumstances of my life at all co-incident with the literary examples I have drawn above. A white child in a white family raised few eyebrows in 1970s Manchester. Unlike Joseph, I never knew a children’s home. And, unlike Joseph, I *can* read and write. One of the lucky ones, indeed. In reading, teaching and writing about post-colonial narratives of London I am given a way of thinking about my circumstances, a critical context for the conditions of my creation, a sense that my story is distantly related to those of other Londoners at a particular period of London’s history. I am in the company of strangers, but that does not matter. ‘There is no return’ (237), writes Caryl Phillips. The woman on the Embankment in Grimshaw’s painting will forever be turned away from me, but I look over her shoulder just the same, and in gazing across the Thames I share her space, if not a knowledge of her face. Similarly, through reading many of these texts London becomes — temporarily, imaginatively — a place for me. It loses its anonymity. When I look at it from a distance, through the words of others, there is a little more illumination, a touch more light. Although hardly intended, these writers gift me the city of my birth.

‘Texts travel’, Shirley Chew once told me. She meant, I think, that they have agency far beyond the horizon of their immediate contexts and concerns. My experience of researching the contexts and literature of post-colonial London has underlined this lesson on many occasions. My critical explorations have

brought me *imaginatively* closer to the circumstances of my creation. They have given me stories which, although they do not unfold or explain my particular situation, nonetheless give me a space in which I can think upon my creation.

A couple of years ago, not long after I had bought my print of *Reflections on the Thames, Westminster*, I was talking with Shirley Chew in my office. She looked at the painting. 'That is very beautiful,' she said. I began to explain to her the painting's significance. My explanation was not a good one because I had not given it before. It was full of broken sentences, awkwardnesses, hesitations. But I had started. Eventually I stopped talking. We looked together at the painting.

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