

Excrement and "Kitsch" in Doris Lessing's "The Good Terrorist"

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Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a *categorical agreement with being*.

The fact that until recently the word "shit" appeared in print as s— has nothing to do with moral considerations. You can't claim that shit is immoral, after all! The objection to shit is a metaphysical one. The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation. Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don't lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner.

It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetical ideal is called *kitsch*.

"Kitsch" is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: *kitsch* is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; *kitsch* excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.

MILAN KUNDERA, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

LIKE SWIFT'S GULLIVER, Alice Mellings, the bifurcated protagonist of Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* (1985), has her own "strict rules of decency" (Swift 19). The result of a comfortable middle-class childhood, these rules are ironically seen as "shit" by the other members of the revolutionary group which she calls her family. Alice, in fact, is caught between two opposing kinds of

kitsch: between the British middle-class kitsch that in her mind represents decency and cleanliness, and the terrorist kitsch that stands for the ruthless destruction of that middle-class. Besides Kundera's definition-by-negation, kitsch is more simply a word for pretension, and pretension is Alice's forte. According to *The Good Terrorist*, the contradictory roles that Alice adopts are equally mendacious. The point is that Alice and her friends cannot finally escape kitsch at all; they need it to conceal and deny the various kinds of "shit" that attend their existence even on the margins of society.

Applied to Lessing's novel, Kundera's shit/kitsch paradigm is useful in much the same way that Norman O. Brown, over thirty years ago, found Freud's theory of sublimation useful for discussing Swift's penchant for the scatological: "Swift's ultimate horror . . . was at the thought that sublimation—that is to say, all civilized behavior—is a lie and cannot survive confrontation with the truth" (188). Brown's thesis derived part of its impetus from a rigorous psychoanalysis of (or Gulliverian surgical procedure on) earlier Swiftian critics, such as Aldous Huxley, Ricardo Quintana, and Middleton Murry, who had managed either to evade or to sublimate the unpalatable truth that Swift obsessively presents in terms of excrement. The irony that Swiftian critics should "prove incapable of seeing what there is to see" (180) was not lost on Brown. He wrote, "It is a perfect example, in the field of literary criticism, of Freud's notion that the first way in which consciousness becomes conscious of a repressed idea is by emphatically denying it" (181).¹ Nevertheless, even Brown's iconoclastic criticism bows to Gulliver's "strict rules of decency." With its series of dashes to conceal the word *shit*, Brown's essay in *Life Against Death* itself formally bows to the universal human neurosis, just as Gulliver, disrobing before his Houyhnhnm master to reveal his Yahoo-like torso, refuses—with post-Edenic furtiveness—to uncover his genitals (Swift 191).²

It has taken the passage of another quarter century since *Life Against Death* for a writer like Doris Lessing to expose unabashedly our continuing desire to hide shit behind aesthetical and political ideals. Lessing, in fact, uses the words *shit*, *shitty*, and *bullshit* over fifty times throughout the novel. Together with

synonyms such as *excrement* and *faeces*, shit and its variants gather such force that terms like *muck*, *rubbish*, *waste*, *trash*, *garbage*, the euphemistic *matériel*, and even (in a manner that Freud would appreciate) *money* reverberate with excremental meaning. By thus employing scatological terminology and imagery, Lessing takes up Swift's desire to disclose the ways in which kitsch is used to conceal the unacceptable reality of the body's excretory functions, as well as how, on metaphorical levels, shit becomes a rhetorical device for denouncing the enemy. The first part of this essay therefore focusses on demonstrating how in *The Good Terrorist* excrement functions both literally and figuratively as a symbol of all that is deemed unacceptable by various individuals, fringe groups, and established institutions within society, whose definitions of what precisely constitutes *shit* or *waste* are often conflicting. Part Two examines Lessing's project from a more general historical and theoretical perspective; lastly, Part Three looks at how Lessing's radical characters are caught up in the machinations of a kitsch culture, even while they stridently claim to have freed themselves from it.

Like Brown (but with none of his refinement), Lessing shows us how persons from *all* levels of society closet the truth of the body behind aesthetical ideals. She understands how a so-called subversive like Alice Mellings will sublimate the truth as much as, say, her father Cedric, who occupies what Defoe's Crusoe calls "the middle station of life" (32). What Alice does in the novel, with her tormented attitude toward money, property, and sexuality, is to make this disagreeable fact indisputably obvious. Through Alice, Lessing's whole thrust seems to be to expose the excremental truth that lurks behind the images on which our civilization is built. About excrement Brown states:

Excrement is the dead life of the body, and so long as humanity prefers a dead life to living, so long is humanity committed to treating as excrement not only its own body but the surrounding world of objects, reducing all to dead matter and inorganic magnitudes. Our much prized "objectivity" toward our own bodies, other persons, and the universe, all our calculating "rationality," is, from the psychoanalytical point of view, an ambivalent mixture of love and hate, an attitude appropriate only toward excrement, and appropriate toward excrement only in an animal that has lost his own body and life.

(295)

I

If Alice and her radical colleagues view the system in excremental terms, the system's representatives, particularly the police, neighbours, and Alice's middle-class parents, associate the crew of squatters with trash and faeces. Similarly, individuals within and on the periphery of Alice's group who differ ideologically comment on each other using scatological language, and several group members' personal histories are also described in terms of shit. With the "middle-class expertise" which she despises and yet employs, Alice perceives the condemned house in which she lives as unclean and wasted (102), its top-floor room "a scene of plastic buckets, topped with shit" (6). The group itself, however, is clearly portrayed as divided over what, concerning the condition of the house, is acceptable and what is not. Finally, from the narrative point of view, the novel's sustained irony implies that the group's squalid revolutionary politics and Alice's putative middle-class expertise are themselves kinds of excrement.

Alice refers to her mother, Dorothy, as a "shitty old fascist" (407) with "shitty rich friends" (22). She also scorns her father, Cedric, for

printing fucking garbage for this or that bloody faction in the fascist bloody Labour Party, printing dishwasher newspapers for bloody liberals and revisionists, sucking up to shitty politicians on the make and bourgeois trash anyway doomed to be swept into the dustbins of history. (248)

Alice objects to her parents' complicity in what she sees as a corrupt social order: "This shitty rubbish we live in" (406). With its "shitty great enormous buildings" (20), modern Britain is condemned by Alice and her co-conspirators as a wasteland worthy only of destruction. One group member, Caroline, "saw the light—that is, that the System was rotten and needed a radical overthrow—when she was eighteen" (354). More violently, Faye "want[s] to put an end to this shitty fucking filthy lying cruel hypocritical system" (129). Jocelin takes several of the group members on a neighborhood practice bombing run to blow up "Something absolutely shitty" (359). They eventually destroy a cement bollard, its bases "stained with dog urine and shit" (361), and Alice views the bollard as "some kind of invin-

cible stupidity made evident and visible." Alice, moreover, is enraged not just by the rubbish and excrement collected in and around a house cast off by the establishment, but also by the "sordid piles" of junk in the attic, evidence of "Bloody filthy *accumulating* middle-class creeps" (193).

Dorothy Mellings, for her part, views her daughter and the group as "rotten" (399) and "just peasants" (406), "full of rubbish and pretensions" (398). Cedric calls Alice "some sort of wild animal. . . beyond ordinary judgement" (250). The squatters' neighbours are infuriated by these "Nasty dirty people" (76), and when Alice and Jim bury the buckets of excrement in the garden "shouts of 'Pigs!'" come from the garden opposite (79). Unable to hide their hatred, the police eventually knock on the door to fling a plastic bag of faeces into the hall, yelling "shit to shit" (387). Yet here the narrator also implies a kind of excremental correspondence between the revolutionaries and the police that is reminiscent of an observation by the Professor in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*: "Like to like. The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical" (94).

Ideological differences within the loosely-knit group itself are also portrayed in terms of excrement and refuse. Bert and Jasper call a meeting of "the real revolutionaries, not the rubbish" (337). With their "Furniture, pretty curtains, and a large double bed" (168), Reggie and Mary are far too "sensible" (344) and middle-class to be included in the revolutionary agenda. Indeed, Reggie's profession as a chemist suggests the kind of polluting activity which the group vehemently opposes with pickets and, ironically, spray paint (344). Solid Greenpeace members, Reggie and Mary, in turn, display contempt and loathing for their more subversive housemates. As Faye states, "We're just shit to them, that's all" (390). Yet she rejects the radicals squatting next door as "just amateurish rubbish" (130), and "shitty Comrade Andrew and his works" (346) are eventually perceived as too closely linked to corrupt Russian Communism.

The two brown cases of guns euphemistically called *matériel*, which Andrew's associates try to force Alice to keep in the house,

are dumped by the group in a scrap metal yard “where every kind of rubbish had found a place” (382). Lessing’s irony is unmistakable when Bert exclaims, on opening the packages to discover an arms cache: “You’d think we were scared shitless—and I believe I am. Suddenly, it’s all for real” (379). This irony—that the revolution is itself a kind of excrement—becomes heightened when Bert and Jasper beat “the sleek brown monsters” to make them look “just like all the other rubbish lying around”:

Jasper, deadly, swift, efficient, was rubbing soil into the smooth professional surfaces of the packages, and scarring them with a bit of iron he had snatched up from a heap, working in a fury of precise intention and achievement. That was Jasper! Alice thought, proud of him, her pride singing through her. . . . Why, beside him Bert was a peasant, slowly coming to himself and seeing what Jasper was doing. (383)

The usually indolent Jasper is portrayed as a man who has wasted his adult life feeding off Alice’s efforts, which he occasionally rewards by taking her out for an intoxicating evening of spray-painting slogans. Besides preying on others, Jasper can only deface and pollute the environment, and almost everyone in the novel finds him repulsive. His act of pissing on suburbia, which Alice witnesses, aptly evokes his nature: “From the top of her house a single yellow jet splashed onto the rubbish that filled the garden” (27). The irony here applies exclusively to Jasper and Alice: Jasper because he is thoroughly duplicitous and unaware of his own stupidity, and Alice because she continually rationalizes her association with a man she knows is a “rat.” She sublimates the truth about Jasper in the same way that she buries the squat’s buckets of shit in the back garden. Even more than Gulliver (who urinates on the Lilliputian Palace in order to save it from destruction by fire and thereby undermines the form or face of government) Jasper unwittingly satirizes himself and Alice by pissing out the window on a yard full of trash. As Gulliver discovers in Lilliput, the Body Politic has its own legal dress or fictive covering; and by undermining *polity* (through pissing on the Palace and outraging the Queen), his act demonstrates the conflict between truth, as represented by excrement, and kitsch, as represented “by the *fundamental laws*” that his saving action transgresses (Swift 45; emphasis added). Jasper, on the other

hand, sees himself as a ruthless, cunning terrorist when, in fact, he is a poseur much like Conrad's Verloc in *The Secret Agent*. Although Jasper does not "wallow" or possess Verloc's "fat-pig style" (Conrad 52), his laziness evokes the earlier character: he "loung[e]s, drinking beer" (86) while Alice feeds him, clears the squat of rubbish and excrement (62), and finances his sexual liaisons with other men.

What Alice witnesses when she sees Jasper pissing out the window can be interpreted as another instance of "shit to shit," and, to be sure, *The Good Terrorist* is full of such excremental correspondences. Despite the "terrorist" kitsch that motivates her existence as a squatter, Alice is solidly middle-class as she defends and forgives Jasper because he has "had a shitty family" (254). Glib psychological summaries like this are given to rationalize the actions of several members of the group, like the violent, suicidal Faye, who has had, according to Roberta, "an awful shitty terrible life" (128). Not only are the group members' "shitty" histories portrayed as spilling over into a destructive, violent present, but their inability to face and to deal with their own "shit," in Alice's view, indicates a lack of middle-class expertise. Alice, in fact, with her ability to put all kinds of shit in the appropriate place, fits Freud's profile of the anal erotic. Such personalities are

remarkable for a regular combination of the three following combinations: they are exceptionally *orderly*, *parsimonious*, and *obstinate*. Each of these words really covers a small group or series of traits which are related to one another. 'Orderly' comprises both bodily cleanliness and reliability and conscientiousness in the performance of petty duties: the opposite of it would be 'untidy' and 'negligent.' 'Parsimony' may be exaggerated up to the point of avarice; and obstinacy may amount to defiance, with which irascibility and vindictiveness may easily be associated. The two latter qualities—parsimony and obstinacy—hang together more closely than the third, orderliness; they are, too, the more constant element in the whole complex. It seems to me, however, incontestable that all three in some way hang together. (Freud 45-46)

Later in his essay, Freud goes on to say that "The cleanliness, orderliness, and reliability give exactly the impression of a reaction-formation against an interest in things that are unclean

and intrusive and ought not to be on the body ('Dirt is matter in the wrong place')" (48).³

Indeed, readers of *The Good Terrorist* can easily imagine Alice saying "Dirt is matter in the wrong place" at many points in the novel, but particularly as she and Jim bury the buckets of excrement in the garden. The cockney (and black) Jim is frightened by the thought of "how much shit we all make in our lives": "they say our sewers are all old and rotten. Suppose they just explode?" (80). For Jim, the public sewer-system's fragility has metaphorical implications that are both private and public: "'I mean, we just go on living in this city,' he said, full of despair" (81). According to Alice, Jim's sense of helplessness stems from his lack of middle-class expertise (198), and it is this lack of expertise (or plain bad luck, helped by Alice) that also gets him fired from his job by Cedric. Confronting her father later on, Alice typically calls this firing "a shitty, bloody fascist thing to do" (244), knowing that she rather than Jim is guilty of stealing money from Cedric's office. The connection between money and excrement has, of course, been made by Freud and will be examined further on in this essay, but suffice it to say, as Brown quotes Ferenczi, that "[Money] is seen to be nothing other than odourless dehydrated filth that has been made to shine. *Pecunia non olet*" (Brown 287). Alice's middle-class know-how enables her not only to steal her father's money but also to bury the shit, "have a cup of tea and forget it," all of which makes the blue-collar Jim incredulous. From his perspective, Alice's "know-how" amounts to denial, and the garden becomes a symbol of both private and public repression: "You say, Come and have a cup of tea. And that's the end of it. But it isn't the end of it, not on your life it isn't" (81).

The narrative suggests that Alice tries to bury her own unacceptable past in a manner that parallels the garden scene with Jim. She gets the idea to dig the pit at the same time as she recalls the harsh political argument between Dorothy and her mother's leftist friend, Zoë (75). Their conflict suggests Alice's own divided sensibility, her two worlds (313)—the middle-class, on the one hand, and the marginalized group with idealized proletarian pretensions, on the other—which she straddles irresolutely. The memory makes her feel like vomiting (75) just before

she begins the "loathsome" task of burying the excrement—"in a miasma that did not seem to lessen but, rather, spread from the house and the garden to the street" (79). Alice, in fact, cannot repress her past any more than she can bury and forget about the faeces, which the police feel duty-bound to dig up again (316-17). The "explosion of order" (49) that she brings to the household stems from her repressed middle-class background, a background which is largely unacceptable to her as well as to the group's would-be ideologues, although they take advantage of her while they can.

Alice's background compels her to see the squat as "Waste. All this *waste*" (102), and to deal with "the weight of that vandalised house" (45) by manipulating the system which has allowed it to become unsanitary (66). While her efforts to clean and reorganize the house attract Mary and Reggie and impress Comrade Andrew (obviously for different reasons), they do not so easily win the approval of others in the house, and the ideological reasoning behind the others' scepticism is something to which, paradoxically (and hypocritically), Alice herself is committed. "We are not here," states Jasper when he and Alice first inspect the derelict squat, "to make ourselves comfortable" (6). Later, after Alice has made them comfortable, Jasper chides: "You are making us all sick. . . . We all think you've gone rotten. All you care about is your comfort" (241). Faye scathingly denounces Alice: "Any minute now we are going to have hot running water and double glazing, I wouldn't be surprised. For me this is all a lot of shit, do you hear? *Shit!*" (127). And, in terms of one part of Alice's bifurcated sensibility, the part that wants to be a genuine revolutionary, Faye may be right. In terms, however, of that part of Alice which yearns for middle-class order, it is Faye who, together with Roberta, is wasted and excremental: "They like it. . . . like living in filth. . . . They need it" (197).

Next door, Andrew tries to resolve Alice's inner rift by telling her that "there is nothing wrong with a comfortable life" (203), for he is also acutely aware that Alice's middle-class efficiency and sense of loyalty make her less prone to the "stupid silly mess[es]" that are the result even of "KGB plots" (312). (Indeed, "plump, healthy" Caroline, who "[exudes] physical enjoyment"

[310], refuses to participate in Alice's group's bombing foray against the Kubla Khan Hotel, calling it "All amateur rubbish" [446].) Andrew sees Alice as potentially "pure" because she has a fierce need for order and organization coupled with a hatred of the status quo. But Alice, who takes part in the badly bungled bombing, rejects Andrew's complimentary insight: "You couldn't use the word 'pure' like that in Britain now, it simply wasn't on, it was just silly" (280). Caught at the end of the novel between the sinister O'Leary, looking for his *matériel*, and Peter Cecil, of "MI-6 or MI-5 or XYZ or one of those bloody things" (453), Alice is certainly not pure. She is sandwiched too much between conflicting types of excrement to see Andrew's point.

II

At the close of the novel, the narrator significantly refers to Alice as "the poor baby" (456), suggesting her stunted development and seeming therefore to preclude the possibility of change. The narrator stresses that, because Alice is sandwiched between ideologies, her own personal development has been stunted: "Alice was stocky, and she had a pudgy, formless look to her" and a "plump childlike formless face" (11, 59). The "grublike" Jasper is "the meaning and purpose of [Alice's] life" (91) because he permits her to cultivate her middle-class "good-girl" virtues and to believe that she is a genuine revolutionary at the same time. Thus, on one level, the novel's oxymoronic title suggests both sides of Alice's contradictory personality. She is torn between "doing good" and terrorizing her family and society, between rebuilding the vandalized house where the would-be revolutionaries squat and tearing down the social order that she sees in excremental terms.¹

Freud's profile of the anal erotic is once again helpful to us in coming to terms with Alice's divided character; and, to be sure, the issues that Lessing explores via Alice—issues of sexuality, excrement (waste management), and money—are precisely the issues articulated by Freud as most crucial in the makeup of the anal-erotic personality. In his essay "On the Transformation of Instincts with Special Reference to Anal Erotism" (1916), Freud states:

To begin with, it would appear that in the products of the unconscious—spontaneous ideas, phantasies, symptoms—the conceptions *faeces* (money, gift), *child* and *penis* are seldom distinguished and are easily interchangeable. . . . these elements in the unconscious are often treated as if they were equivalent and could replace one another. (166)

From this perspective, which, as Freud himself notes, is not easily sorted out (Freud 169), it is possible to see how Alice might, for instance, view Jasper's penis as a form of shit, which she does not have to consider putting inside her vagina, since Jasper is a homosexual. If the child-like Alice is as alienated from her own adult body as the novel indicates (Lessing 243), then vaginal "cleanliness" would be as important to her as rectal cleanliness. "Faeces, penis and child," says Freud, "are all three solid bodies: they all three, by forcible entry or expulsion, stimulate a membranous passage, that is, the rectum and the vagina, the latter being as it were 'rented' from the rectum, as Lou Andreas-Salome remarks" (Freud 171).

Further, according to Freud, money is merely the point of transference for shit as gift in early personal development. "It is probable," he writes, "that the first significance which faecal interest develops is not 'gold—money', but 'gift.'" On this subject, Brown adds: "Money is inorganic dead matter which has been made alive by inheriting the magic power which infantile narcissism attributes to the excremental product. . . . Money inherits the infantile magic of excrement and then is able to breed and have children: interest is an increment" (Brown 279). In other words, the toddler's faeces has value in his or her eyes because the excrement is viewed as a parcel delivered from the body to the parent, which the parent, in turn, disposes of and thus rejects; later on, the mysterious value attached to shit is transferred to money, which the child learns is emphatically not rejected by the parent. In this connection, it is worthwhile to note that Alice herself is rejected by various colleagues, friends, and family members as a kind of shit, as one who has wasted her life. Interestingly, Freud also argues that the child who decides against offering up his or her faeces consequently chooses "defiance (obstinacy), a quality which springs, therefore, from a narcissistic clinging to the pleasure of anal eroticism" (Freud 168).

Such "narcissistic clinging" is evident throughout *The Good Terrorist* and is directly related to Alice's rage for order, her deep desire to control and contain all the various kinds of excrement around her and yet at the same time remain defiant. By moving the buckets of shit from the squat's top floor to the pit in the garden, Alice simply qualifies her obstinacy, thus satisfying (at least temporarily) the demands of both her radical friends and her conventional past. She rids the house of excrement but still withholds it in such a way that the police and neighbors are outraged: for, in the final analysis, Alice does not part with her shit via conventional means, that is, the public sewer system. At the same time, her frenetic attempts to meet these conflicting requirements are also motivated by guilt, which Brown (among others) has shown to be inextricably involved with the money/excrement complex (Brown 290).

But such a complex surely includes the act of writing as well. A bill of any kind is also a written note, ascribing a unit of value to the bearer; similarly, the literary manuscript constitutes a composition, a putting together of words into a potentially valuable body of work that may be granted a high place in the civilized world or may also become mere compost. Brown is clear on this point when he states that "there is no aspect of higher culture uncontaminated by connections with anality" (199); and again, in connection with the death instinct, which plays a critical role in the formation of the anal character, Brown writes:

Civilized economic activity has this death-defying and deadening structure because economic activity is sustained by psychic energy taking the form of sublimation. All civilized sublimation, and not only the pursuit of money, has this structure. Thus in the first of his odes Horace sees poetry as a career, like all careers (trader, soldier, athlete, etc.), basically characterized by self-sacrifice and instinctual renunciation; it is nevertheless worth while if success will enable him "to strike the stars with head sublime." And at the end of the third book he celebrates his success: "I have wrought a monument more enduring than bronze, and loftier than the royal accumulation of the pyramids. Neither corrosive rain nor raging wind can destroy it, nor the innumerable sequence of years nor the flight of time. I shall not altogether die." (287)

By contrast, the pilfering Jasper is viewed by Dorothy as a wastrel who "loathes anything decent, and he once wrote a terrible novel

he couldn't get published" (407). Here Lessing's narrator not only follows Swift's strategy by implying a link between the acts of writing and defecation but also comes close to fulfilling one of Swift's own fears: that ultimately his work would be good only as a bum wipe (Flynn 209). Similarly, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy states: "For Swift, like Bacon, the reading of bodily functions was the best analogy for the reading function. The difference between them is that whereas Bacon began by noting how reading was akin to ingestion, Swift begins by noting how writing is akin to elimination" (Rushdy 3).

Discarding the convention of dividing the text into carefully-crafted chapters, Lessing gives her novel its own plump formlessness, which both evokes the characterization and strongly suggests "how writing is akin to elimination." Hence, this unbroken narrative of over 400 pages formally implies Jasper's "grub-like" character as well as Alice's inability to shape her experience into meaningful, manageable episodes. But more than that, the novel structurally mimics its content (which recounts a tale of human *waste* on several levels—physical, psychological, spiritual, and intellectual) so that together form and content constitute a process analogous to the act of physical elimination.

The Good Terrorist's formal stance toward bodily functions (especially the excretory function) is, in point of fact, an ironic comment on the kind of civilized activity, whether commercial or artistic, outlined and analyzed by Brown; and, like her predecessor Swift, Lessing often appears provoked by the ironic implications of her own words. Carol Houlihan Flynn's recent description of the eighteenth century as one of consumption, guilt, and ambivalent attitudes toward bodily functions could also describe the period portrayed by Lessing. Swift's age, writes Flynn,

became, by necessity, a time of greed, for if one is material, one can never get enough, and a time of guilt, for if one is even remotely conscious, one can see the unfairnesses implicit in the distribution of goods both physical and sexual. "We are all Adam's children," went the proverb, "But Silk makes the Difference." Within such a context of desire indulged and held in check, the body becomes a site of confused attempts at ordering what gets in the way, an appetite that can never, given the conditional uneasiness of its owner, be satisfied.

... In an attempt to achieve stability in a complex, modern world of patterns threatening to break down, theorists put their minds to material at hand, material guaranteed not to go away, the body itself. It could be crammed, purged, overfed, or starved, serving as an index for outside ills more difficult to resolve. As Lord Hervey . . . complained, all physicians "jog in one beaten track; a vomit to clear your stomach, a glister to give you a stool, laudanum to quiet the pain, and then a purge to clear your bowels, and what they call 'carry it off'." (Flynn 94-95)

Flynn rightly wonders what "it" is: "When Moll, the *Jade*, lets 'it' fly, she is letting loose the same symptoms of repletion that Swift attempts to modify and displace" (95). Whatever name we give such "symptoms of repletion," they are found everywhere in Lessing's novel: "it" is constituted by the various forms of literal and figurative shit which threaten to overwhelm civilization, and Alice is the frenzied agent who attempts "to modify and displace" them. Not surprisingly, then, *The Good Terrorist* is also "post-modern" in so far as it denies the possibility of bringing conventional modes of order to bear on certain kinds of experience. At the same time, however, Lessing portrays Alice as both desiring and rejecting such modes, with consequences that are nothing short of pathological. Perhaps the novel's most potent irony resides in its portrayal of the self-abortive character of revolution in the late twentieth century. Indeed, behind the facade of Alice's desperate activism are the familiar prostration and deadlock associated with *aporia*.

III

In poststructuralist terms, Alice's situation is "undecidable" (Eagleton 146-47) since she has adopted roles that violently contradict one another. This "undecidability" or *aporia*, which Samuel Beckett explored forty years ago in *The Unnamable*, repeatedly surfaces in her compulsion to switch voices. Alice is, in fact, a kind of changeling whose various voices signify different representations of self. In general, her voice is what she calls "basic BBC correct" but she also has her revolutionary "'meeting voice,' for she had learned that this was necessary if she was to hold her own" (30, 9). Beckett's narrator appears to anticipate a character like Alice when he says: "I seem to speak, it is not I,

about me, it is not about me. . . . What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple?" (267). *The Good Terrorist* contains a multiplicity of projected voices or auditory images—all forms of kitsch—and Alice's reflect the warring sides of her personality. She seems to have an awareness (at least at certain points [30-34]) of the images she and others hide behind, but her insight is not great enough to enable her to resolve her inner conflict. As Hannah Arendt observed of Adolf Eichmann, "his conscience spoke with a 'respectable voice,' with the voice of respectable society around him" (Arendt 126).

The connection between Lessing the novelist and Arendt the political scientist is a significant one because both writers have extensively examined how individuals within totalitarian political movements are able to rationalize acts of atrocity. In this respect, *The Good Terrorist* performs an operation similar to the political and psychological analyses that Arendt took from Eichmann's trial. Alice, in fact, displays many of the characteristics of the "systematic mendacity" that Arendt delineated in her study of Eichmann's personality (52). As Arendt frequently points out, Eichmann's case is riddled with ironies and her own response to his self-deception—to the ridiculous disparity between appearance and reality—is often caustic. Eichmann, after all, was a salesman for the Vacuum Oil Company before he joined the ranks of the S.S. and became Hitler's expert on the Jewish question (Arendt 29).

Lessing's narrator can also be caustic, as Alice's partial awareness of her own duplicity merely makes her more adept at manipulating appearances in order to achieve her goals on behalf of the group. While she is fanatically dedicated to "[pulling] everything down" (406), she is equally committed to cleaning up the squat so that, as she tells Jim, "we will be just like everyone else in the street, and after a bit no one will notice us" (36). The group's subversive activities can, according to Alice's rationale, be more effectively carried out if the excrement and rubbish collected in and around the abandoned house are cleaned up. And she can, in fact, deftly manage her own appearance in order to deceive her new neighbors or the bureaucrats who want to tear the house down:

She knew how she seemed: the pretty daughter of her mother, short curly fair hair nicely brushed, pink-and-white face lightly freckled, open blue-grey gaze. A middle-class girl with her assurance, her knowledge of the ropes, sat properly in the chair, and if she wore a heavy blue military jacket, under it was a flowered pink-and-white blouse. (25)

Similarly, Alice appears to her neighbors as "such a nice girl, standing on the green lawn with daffodils behind her," as she switches smoothly from the discourse of hate and subversion to that of "a nice street": "How do you do? I'm Alice Mellings. I've just moved into forty-three, and we're fixing the place up, and getting the rubbish out" (76-77).

Indeed, Alice can dispense with the killer inside whenever it seems necessary or convenient (65), and contrary to what she would like to believe—and have others believe—about herself, she is "full of the energy of hate" (5), and ready to steal from and use her friends and family. At her friend Theresa's expensive flat, she goes "to the bathroom, where she emptied herself. . . . She was hungry. She went to the kitchen and cut herself a lavish sandwich" (22). Even as Theresa agrees to lend her £50, Alice calls her a "rich shit" and later is tempted to "take one of those little netsukes and run out, they'll think it was the Spanish woman" (22, 40). She also loots her mother's house, stealing all the curtains and an expensive rug: "At the end of the street her mother was coming towards her. . . . Alice ran fast the other way, clutching the heavy rug" (57). Despising her father, Cedric, for "sucking up to shitty politicians on the make" (248), Alice has no qualms about stealing large sums of cash from both his house and his office (94, 231). To be sure, she empathizes with Philip and Monica, but, again, in order to be of help, particularly to Philip, she must set aside her violent instincts. As the narrator rather awkwardly puts it: "The murderess in Alice took herself off" (65). Although she can usually read others quickly and accurately, she does so to detect weaknesses that she can use to her own advantage. Even when she identifies with Monica, who desperately needs to find decent accommodations for her family (146), Alice's compassion constitutes the exception rather than the rule, and when her plan to send the destitute Monica to her mother's house backfires, Monica tells Alice, "You are all evil and

mad in this house" (224). Philip also refers to the group as "parasites" (335).

Lessing's ironic narrative not only consistently portrays the gap between what Alice is and what she purports to be, it also demonstrates how Alice tries to conceal this disparity from herself. Her definition of "a thief, a real thief" excludes her own pilfering activities only by distorting reality:

How could she describe herself as a revolutionary, a serious person, if she was a thief? . . . No. Besides, she had always been honest, had never stolen anything, not even as a child. She had not gone through that period of nicking things out of her mother's handbag, her father's pockets, the way some small children did. Never. (228)

Alice even adds another twist to the lie by implying that a real thief is one who "[chooses] a likely house, watching for its inhabitants to be out," which constitutes "a step away from herself." By some sleight-of-hand, she excludes herself from this category (although "She felt confident that she could succeed") while simultaneously convincing herself that she had never stolen anything from "her father's pockets." This process of rationalization then leads to the decision to rob her father's firm (228). Thus, although Alice ostensibly is a terrorist who is "good"—although her middle-class rage for order seems to modify, if not contradict, her hatred of the status quo—she hardly fits the description of an "honest criminal." When she throws a rock through her father's window, "the speed and force of it, the skill, could never have been deduced from how Alice was, at any other time of the day or night, good girl Alice, her mother's daughter. . . . She heard the shattering glass, a scream, her father's shout" (160).

Moreover, just as Alice conceals her own dishonesty from herself, she also represses her middle-class upbringing, hiding from herself the fact that her maternal activities are the result of her need to please her mother:

At home Alice was a good girl, a good daughter, as she had always enjoyed being. It was she who managed the kitchen. . . . Of course, her mother was pleased to have her do it. (There was an uneasy little thought tucked away somewhere here, but Alice chose to ignore it.) (54)

To be sure, both her yearnings for family life and her terrorist activities stem from the model provided by Dorothy's earlier matriarchal and left-wing pursuits. But when her mother renounces left-wing politics, sells her house for a dingy two-room flat, and calls Alice "an all-purpose female drudge" (406), Alice, her self-image still contingent on Dorothy, feels betrayed: "[Dorothy] laughed bitterly, demolishing all the lovely years Alice thought about so longingly, killing the old Dorothy Mellings" (406).

Like Winnie in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, however, Alice prefers not to look into things. Deeply repressed and divided, and unable even to begin to re-define herself, she is subject to sudden eruptions of malicious fury: "a scene of suburban affluence and calm provoked in her a rush of violent derision, like a secret threat to everything she saw. At the same time, parallel to this emotion and in no way affecting it, ran another current, of want, of longing" (27). As I have outlined above, Alice's view of her backyard, where she and Jim have buried an eight-month accumulation of faeces, evokes her own repressed sensibility and preoccupation with surfaces. Because she secretly knows this about herself, Alice is threatened by any kind of access to knowledge. Universities are "the visible embodiment of evil" (290), and she avoids reading books:

She used to wonder how it was that a comrade with a good, clear, and correct view of life could be prepared to endanger it by reading all that risky equivocal stuff that she might dip into, hastily, retreating as if scalded. She had even secretly read almost to the end of one novel recommended as a useful tool in the struggle, but felt as she had as a child: if she persevered, allowing one book to lead her on to another, she might find herself lost without maps. (73)

Finally, when other modes of denial and rationalization are inadequate or unsuitable, Alice simply blocks information from her memory: "For the thousandth time the situation was recurring where Alice said, 'I don't remember, no, you're wrong,' thinking that her mother maliciously made things up, while Dorothy sighed and pursued interesting thoughts about the pathology of lying" (401-02).

Perceiving herself as betrayed and abandoned by her mother, Alice clings to Jasper, "the meaning and purpose of her life," in

order to continue to sustain her beliefs about herself and the world. Repeatedly throughout *The Good Terrorist*, Alice's wrist is described as "caught . . . in his bony grip" (178), indicating her desire to be controlled and used by him. She is, in effect, wilfully in his thrall so that she can continue to uphold both the middle-class virtues of caring for hearth and home and the left-wing political beliefs inscribed during her upbringing. (Indeed, Alice's situation is "ideal" during the four-year period when she and Jasper live with Dorothy, even though the latter two detest one another. The triangle nourishes Alice's beliefs until Dorothy breaks with her left-wing past, propelling Alice back into the world of squats.) Alice's self-image, moreover, vigorously qualifies her perception of Jasper, and thus proliferates the denial and self-deception.

To Alice, Jasper is "like an avenging angel" (238) whose dedication to social justice requires her unqualified admiration and support. In her mind, hatred is linked with purity, and Jasper becomes "good," so "good," in fact, that others are "Afraid of his truth" (23). Thus she interprets her first memories of him in terms of "something extraordinary. . . . The real thing" (271): "She remembered how she, too, when she had at first seen Jasper all those years ago, had felt some instinctive warning, or shrinking. And look how mistaken she had been" (120). Even when Jasper's ugliness and treachery are undeniable, Alice processes the information stupidly in order not to jeopardize her skewed sense of self: "He looked like a rat, she thought steadily, knowing that her love for him was not by an atom diminished" (184).

Again, although Alice and Jasper have no sexual contact with each other, although they actually do little together except spray-paint slogans on public property, Alice nevertheless imagines that this is "like a marriage: talking together before falling asleep" (100). In fact, the asexual nature of the relationship and the hooliganism both indicate Jasper and Alice's stunted development, and the narrator suggests at several points in *The Good Terrorist* that the pair are still children who are acting out rebellious fantasies. Jasper's homosexuality, what Alice calls "primly . . . 'his emotional life'" (37), suits her own repressed desires, her "secret breathing body, which she ignored" (243), and the hooli-

ganism clearly nourishes not only their infantile anger but also their need for immediate gratification: "The intoxication of it, the elation: *pleasure*. There was nothing like it!" (179). Jasper and Alice are married—grotesquely—in so far as they share a desire to destroy society, and Dorothy's scathing comment, "And then you are going to build it all up again in your own image," discloses a terrifying prospect (406). With striking similarities to what Arendt found in her analysis of Eichmann, Lessing portrays both Alice and Jasper as having built up a huge body of "self-deception, lies, and stupidity" (Arendt 52) in order to account for their failure to come to terms with their personal histories and with the world around them.

Dorothy Mellings is right when she tells Alice, "Against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain" (64). As Lessing writes elsewhere of society in general, "Our left hand does not know—does not want to know—what our right hand does" (*Prisons* 13). Yet perhaps not all gods contend in vain. In a century in which terrorism has almost become banal, Lessing's irony makes for a lucid unveiling and examination of the psychology of kitsch. If Kundera is correct when he contends that kitsch conceals reality (or at least assumes that appearance *is* reality), then Lessing's irony makes it possible to understand more precisely how characters like Alice and Jasper can overwhelm others with their lies, twisted motives, and distorted communication.

NOTES

- ¹ Regarding Swift's scatological poems, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy has recently stated: "Swift, more than any other English poet, has been the purveyor of the carnival consciousness; yet Swift, more than any other poet, has been the victim of a critical attention that attempts to deny the ramifications of the content of this consciousness" (2).
- ² Specifically, Brown states: "Murry, like Strephon and the other unfortunate men in the poems [of Swift], loses his wits when he discovers that Caelia —, and thus unconsciously bears witness to the truth of Swift's insight" (186); and, again, "The peculiar Swiftian twist to the theme that Caelia — is the notion that there is some absolute contradiction between the state of being in love and an awareness of the excremental function of the beloved" (186-87). In "The Protestant Era," Brown's second essay on *Studies in Analogy*, he admits: "Other anal weapons employed by Luther in his fight with the Devil—my language is here more refined than Luther's—are injunctions to 'lick (or kiss) my posteriors' or to 'defecate in his pants and hang them round his neck,' and threats to 'defecate in his face' or to 'throw him into my anus, where he belongs'" (Brown 208). For all the praise and admiration he rightly bestows on Freud, Swift, and Luther for their blunt and unrelenting exposition of our culture's tendency to sublimate, Brown himself is strangely delicate at key points in his work.

- ³ In a later and perhaps more crucial essay on anal erotism, Freud interchanges the terms *orderliness*, *parsimony*, and *obstinacy* with avarice, pedantry, and stubbornness, all of which are still easily seen in the character of Alice Mellings. See "Character and Anal Erotism" (1908) and "On the Transformation of Instincts with Special Reference to Anal Erotism" (1916).
- ⁴ There is, to be sure, reason to suppose at the end of the novel that if Alice isn't arrested by Peter Cecil, an intelligence officer, she will certainly be maimed or killed by Gordon O'Leary of the IRA for spirited away his arms cache.

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