

Postcolonial criticism¹

Background

Postcolonial criticism emerged as a distinct category only in the 1990s. It is not mentioned, for instance, in the first edition of Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985) or Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1992). It has gained currency through the influence of such books as: *In Other Worlds* (Gayatri Spivak, 1987); *The Empire Writes Back* (Bill Ashcroft, 1989); *Nation and Narration* (Homi Bhabha, 1990) and *Culture and Imperialism* (Edward Said, 1993). An important collection of relevant essays (though it does not use the term 'postcolonialism') is *'Race', Writing and Difference* (1986), reprinted from two issues of the journal *Critical Inquiry*, and edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr, one of the best-known American figures in this field. One significant effect of postcolonial criticism is to further undermine the universalist claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics. If we claim that great literature has a timeless and universal significance we thereby demote or disregard cultural, social, regional, and national differences in experience and outlook, preferring instead to judge all literature by a single, supposedly 'universal', standard. Thus, for instance, a routine claim about the 'Wessex' setting of Hardy's novels is that it is really a canvas on which Hardy depicts and examines fundamental, universal aspects of the human condition. Thus, Hardy's books are not thought of as primarily regional or historical or masculine or white or working-class novels - they are just novels, and built into this attitude is the assumption that this way of writing and representing reality is the unquestioned norm, so that the situations depicted can stand for all possible forms of human interaction. This universalism is rejected by postcolonial criticism; whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, then, white, Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted by a sleight of hand to this elevated status, and all others correspondingly relegated to subsidiary, marginalised roles. The ancestry of postcolonial criticism can be traced to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in French in 1961, and voicing what might be called 'cultural resistance' to France's African empire. Fanon (a psychiatrist from Martinique) argued that the first step for 'colonialised' people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonising power will have devalued the nation's past, seeing its precolonial era as a pre-civilised limbo, or even as a historical void. Children, both black and white, will have been taught to see history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of the Europeans. If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued. Hence, another major book, which can be said to inaugurate postcolonial criticism proper is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which is a specific expose of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not. Said identifies a European cultural tradition of 'Orientalism', which is a particular and long-standing way of identifying the East as 'Other' and inferior to the West. The Orient, he says,

¹ Source: Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*

features in the Western mind 'as a sort of surrogate and even underground self {Literature in the Modern World, ed. Dennis Walder, p. 236). This means, in effect, that the East becomes the repository or projection of those aspects of themselves which Westerners do not choose to acknowledge (cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness, and so on). At the same time, and paradoxically, the East is seen as a fascinating realm of the exotic, the mystical and the seductive. It also tends to be seen as homogenous, the people there being anonymous masses, rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions. Their emotions and reactions are always determined by racial considerations (they are like this because they are asiatics or blacks or orientals) rather than by aspects of individual status or circumstance (for instance, because they happen to be a sister, or an uncle, or a collector of antique pottery). As Said says, after quoting the example of a colonial administrator's 1907 account of life in Damascus, 'In such statements as these we note immediately that "the Arab" or "Arabs" have an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency [my italics] such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life Histories'.

Postcolonial reading

Reading literature with the perspective of 'Orientalism' in mind would make us, for instance, critically aware of how Yeats in his two 'Byzantium' poems ('Sailing to Byzantium', 1927, and 'Byzantium', 1932) provides an image of Istanbul, the Eastern capital of the former Roman Empire, which is identified with torpor, sensuality, and exotic mysticism. At such moments Yeats adopts an ethnocentric or Eurocentric perspective, seeing the East as an exotic 'Other' which becomes the contrasting foil to his own pursuits and concerns, all of which the poem presents as normative. Interestingly, Edward Said has written an essay on Yeats which reads him in the context of postcolonialism (reprinted in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*). Said views the desire, frequently expressed in Yeats's work, to regain contact with an earlier, mythical, nationalistic Ireland as typical of writers whose own position is postcolonial, and this is closely related to Fanon's idea of the need to reclaim the past. Characteristically, postcolonial writers evoke or create a precolonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and the contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries. Here, then, is the first characteristic of postcolonial criticism - an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral 'Other'. For Yeats, as often with the postcolonial writer, an uneasy attitude to the colonial language is evident: his injunction to Irish poets, that they should learn their craft, implies the need to serve a humble apprenticeship. This 'humble' attitude to language may remind us of Stephen Dedalus's thoughts about the English language in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (published in serial form in 1914—1915), especially the early scene in which Stephen is patronised by an English priest because of his use of a local dialect word. Stephen tells himself 'the language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine ... My soul frets in the shadow of his language' (*Portrait*, chapter five). More recently, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, in a poem entitled 'The Ministry of Fear', recalls his childhood unease and self-consciousness about his pronunciation of English ('Those hobnailed boots from beyond the mountain / Were walking, by God, all over the fine / Lawns of elocution') and remarks that 'Ulster was British, but with no rights on / The English lyric' (see the collection

North, 1975). This linguistic deference amounts to a sense that the linguistic furniture belongs to somebody else, and therefore shouldn't be moved around without permission. Some post-colonial writers have concluded that the colonisers' language is permanently tainted, and that to write in it involves a crucial acquiescence in colonial structures. Language itself, then, is a second area of concern in postcolonial criticism. (For an essay on poetic language from this postcolonial perspective see Stan Smith's 'Darkening English: Post-imperial contestations in the language of Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott' in *English*, Spring 1994). As this implies, Yeats, being a member of the Protestant ruling class in Ireland, has a double identity as both coloniser and colonised, and it is the recognition of such double identities which is one of the strengths of the postcolonialist view. Thus, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, publishing his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958, was criticised by an early reviewer for affecting to identify with African villagers when actually his university education and his broadcasting job in the capital city of Lagos should make him identify, it was implied, with the values of 'civilisation', supposedly brought to Africa by Europeans. (See Achebe's paper 'Colonialist Criticism' in *Literature in the Modern World*, ed. Dennis Walder, Oxford University Press, 1990). This emphasis on identity as doubled, or hybrid, or unstable is a third characteristic of the postcolonial approach. At one level Achebe's use of a village Africa corresponds to Yeats's evocation of a precolonial, mythological Ireland of heroes and heroines. At another level, the double or hybrid identity is precisely what the postcolonial situation brings into being. The shift in attitudes in the 1980s and 1990s was towards postcolonial writers seeing themselves as using primarily African or Asian forms, supplemented with European-derived influences, rather than as working primarily within European genres like the novel and merely adding to them a degree of exotic Africanisation. All postcolonial literatures, it might be said, seem to make this transition. They begin with an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of European models (especially in the novel) and with the ambition of writing works that will be masterpieces entirely in this tradition. This can be called the 'Adopt' phase of colonial literature, since the writer's ambition is to adopt the form as it stands, the assumption being that it has universal validity. The second stage can be called the 'Adapt' phase, since it aims to adapt the European form to African subject matter, thus assuming partial rights of intervention in the genre. In the final phase there is, so to speak, a declaration of cultural independence whereby African writers remake the form to their own specification, without reference to European norms. This might be called the 'Adept' phase, since its characteristic is the assumption that the colonial writer is an independent 'adept' in the form, not a humble apprentice, as in the first phase, or a mere licensee, as in the second. This stress on 'cross-cultural' interactions is a fourth characteristic of postcolonialist criticism. This notion of the double, or divided, or fluid identity which is characteristic of the postcolonial writer explains the great attraction which post-structuralism and deconstruction have proved to be for the postcolonial critic. Post-structuralism is centrally concerned to show the fluid and unstable nature of personal and gender identity, the shifting, 'polyvalent', contradictory currents of signification within texts, and the way literature itself is a site on which ideological struggles are acted out. This mind-set is admirably suited to expressing the numerous contradictions and multiple allegiances of which the postcolonial writer and critic is constantly aware. This post-structuralist perspective is seen in the work of such representative figures as Henry Louis Gates Jr, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. In all three of these a complex Derridean-Foucauldian notion of textuality and fields of discourse is immediately apparent.

Similarly in all three, the surface of the writing is difficult and the route through to any consequent political action (or stance, even) is necessarily indirect. This kind of postcolonial criticism roughly corresponds, then, to the theoreticised 'French' feminist criticism associated with figures like Julia Kristeva or Helene Cixous. The example of postcolonial criticism offered later is from the work of Edward Said, who is less overtly theoretical, seems to accept some of the premises of liberal humanism, and has a more 'up-front' political affiliation (his identification with the Palestinian Arab cause). His work is in this regard reminiscent of the 'Anglo-American' variety of feminist criticism, which likewise seems (to me) more overtly political and certainly more immediately accessible.

If the three stages mentioned earlier (Adopt, Adapt, and Adept) provide a way of seeing postcolonial literature, then a way of seeing the stages of postcolonial criticism would be to suggest, as we have just been doing, that they closely parallel the developmental stages of feminist criticism.

In its earliest phase, which is to say before it was known as such, postcolonial criticism took as its main subject matter white representations of colonial countries and criticised these for their limitations and their bias: thus, critics would discuss the representation of Africa in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or of India in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, or of Algeria in Albert Camus's *The Outsider*. This corresponds to the early 1970s phase of feminist criticism when the subject matter was the representation of women by male novelists like D. H. Lawrence or Henry Miller - the classic instance is Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*.

The second phase of postcolonial criticism involved a turn towards explorations of themselves and their society by postcolonial writers. At this stage the celebration and exploration of diversity, hybridity, and difference become central. This is the stage when, in the title of the well-known pioneering work in this field, 'the empire writes back'. This corresponds to the 'gynotext' phase of feminist criticism, when there is a turn towards the exploration of female experience and identities in books by women.

Third Phase

The analogy between these two types of criticism might be pushed a little further, so that a parallel might also be perceived with the split in feminist criticism between 'theoretical' and 'empirical' versions, as suggested above. Thus, in postcolonial criticism we might see a split between variants very directly influenced by deconstruction and post-structuralism - such as the work of Homi Bhabha - and work like Said's which accepts a good deal from liberal humanism, is written in a more accessible way, and seems perhaps to lend itself more directly to political engagement.

STOP and THINK

Postcolonial criticism draws attention to issues of cultural difference in literary texts and is one of several critical approaches we have considered which focus on specific issues, including issues of gender (feminist criticism), of class (Marxist criticism), and of sexual orientation (lesbian/gay criticism). This raises the possibility of a kind of 'super-reader' able to respond equally and adequately to a text in all these ways. In practice, for most readers one of these issues tends to eclipse all the rest. For instance, the example of feminist criticism, from Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Chapter 6) doesn't comment on aspects of *Wuthering Heights* which would interest postcolonial critics, such as Heathcliff's being described by Emily Brontë in terms of a racial 'Other' (a gipsy, 'a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway'). He is described by Gilbert and Gubar as Catherine's 'alter-ego or Id', and contrasted in his darkness with the blond Edgar who presides over the Grange, which is presented, however ironically, as 'heaven', 'society', and 'reason'. This is a conflating of racial Otherness with the irrational forces of the id or the subconscious which might be thought insensitive. Should we, in general, try to become super-readers, with multiple layers of sympathy and awareness, or will trying to do so merely produce blandness and superficiality? Obviously, it is impossible for anybody to answer this question for anybody else. My own feeling is that while an even spread of awareness across all these issues is theoretically possible, in practice aiming for this, merely in the interests of political correctness, is almost bound to produce superficiality. A genuine interest in one of these issues can really only arise from aspects of your own circumstances. These perspectives cannot be put on and off like a suit - they have to emerge and declare themselves with some urgency.