THE PROBLEM WITH POP

Ken Hirschkop

Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds), *On Record*, Routledge, London 1990; £35.00 cloth, £10.99 paper.

For the imperial explorers of cultural theory and analysis, music has been the final frontier. Followers of modern 'theory' have conquered the fields of human endeavour one by one, moving from literature through art history, film and philosophy, on to shopping and fashion, all the while postponing the confrontation with that seemingly most formal of arts. Such a situation could not last, not only because cultural studies abhors an open file, but also because as a symbol of post-1960s rebelliousness and radicalism popular music has no peer. However intractable an object of analysis music appears to be, however resistant to otherwise tried and true methods, music has to be dealt with, sooner or later. It is too central to the 'whole way of life' so beloved of cultural analysis to be ignored.

The inevitable assault on music has been both as passionate and as indirect as one would have expected. Indirect in two related senses: first, because popular musical studies have emerged for the most part as tentative forays by people working in English, communications or sociology; secondly, because these studies have typically focused not on the analysis of the music 'itself' but on the decoding of that which surrounds or codes the music – forms of performance, styles of dress, lyrics, fan culture, social context. There is, however, a simpler and more provocative way to put this: the analysis of music has proceeded by making an enormous detour around an existing left-wing sociological, 'cultural' account of music, the work of Theodor Adorno. If Adorno's work had been the starting point for the cultural analysis of pop, then this body of work would have emerged from music departments, which it didn't; (in Anglo-American departments he was virtually ignored). If Adorno's theory had been the basis, then the formal qualities of pop and rock would have been the central focus of studies, which they aren't. Whether the evasion of Adorno has been a cause or a symptom of the present state of cultural studies of music, his work stands as a kind of absent centre in the analysis of pop music.

Adorno does make an appearance in *On Record*, a collection of articles on popular music which arguably marks the coming of age of Anglo-American pop music studies. That he does so is hardly surprising, for the volume is nothing if not wide-ranging and generous in its selection of articles, ranging from observations by the American sociologist David Riesman written in 1950 and elegiac commentary by Barthes, to state-of-the-art cultural studies. Its object – pop music – is complicated and the editors have responded by

approaching it as industrial concern, star system, art practice, semiotic medium and sociological arena, with some fine articles on each topic rounded off by confessions from pop music fans that will test the faith of the most ardent populist ('When I make love with my husband I imagine it's Barry Manilow'). Donning the hat of a different kind of reviewer for a moment, one should say that it is also ideal as a teaching text, broad and deep enough to support a course in its subject.

One can't help but notice, however, that the range of electicism of the collection corresponds to a curious unevenness of style. A fine section on subcultural theory contains bits of Hebdige and Willis together with substantial critiques of the same (by Angela McRobbie and Gary Clarke; sadly, however, Frith's recent brilliant critique of Hebdige is missing).[1] And it is followed by three interesting accounts of the music industry in terms of the internal organization of production firms, the competition between them and the effects of technological development. All of which, however, make an odd counterpoint to the pieces devoted to direct commentary on particular groups (e.g., The Ramones, Kate Bush and 'new pop'), which frequently yield to the sort of sleeve-note impressionism which wouldn't last, for good reason, ten seconds in literary criticism. When talking about the outside of the pop music world, the collection seems sure of its footing; when it takes on the particular examples of music, there is a noticeable switch in register, from the analytical to the sometimes merely enthusiastic or assertive.

1. Simon Frith, 'The Cultural Study of Popular Music', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treicher (eds), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London 1992, pp174–86.

It would be unfair to blame this unevenness on editorial choice or the weakness of certain contributors, for it clearly reflects a problem characteristic of the field as a whole, in short, the inability of cultural studies to come up with a convincing account of the way pop music works *as music* in anything like systematic terms. This will be a problem for any approach to music derived from literary and cultural theory, for it is attempting to interpret a medium – the core of which is non-representational – with theoretical tools designed for the study of representations and signification. No doubt this basic theoretical block accounts for the long delay in the approach to music, as the concepts of sign and signifier aren't much use here. With music the 'problem' is not the endless deferral or provisionality of the signified but the latter's inappropriateness as a concept for musical meaning and effects altogether. Thus attempts to decode music seem to miss the point, and every text entitled 'The Meaning of Music' is forced to admit ultimate theoretical defeat somewhere in its opening paragraph.

Significantly, the section of *On Record* entitled 'Musicology and Semiotics', in which this issue might have been directly confronted, isn't about semiotics at all; if anything, it is devoted to exploring the inadequacy of semiotic models in the face of musical experience. Not surprisingly, it is Roland Barthes, in many respects the begetter of the semiology which modern theory takes for granted, who chews over this problem explicitly in the collection. His already well-known short piece 'The Grain of the Voice', by means of a comparison between two classical singers, struggles to define or at least evoke that within

music which expresses without signifying, which embodies a materiality of sound (here leading to – what else did you expect? – *jouissance*) which we feel in music and which means something without meaning something beyond itself. That Barthes can face up to the limitation of the semiological is testament to his own flexibility, but it doesn't issue in a solution, let alone a system others could adopt.

In the absence of a way into the music itself, those of a semiological disposition must therefore treat the music as a blank screen onto which social context (all those fancy clothes, the gender-bending, the styles of performance) projects meaning which can be interpreted with the usual structuralist or poststructuralist hardware. Or one can turn this necessity into a virtue and argue that the nature of pop music demands such a treatment: that it is not interpretable as a musical structure, but only as a total experience, a complete work of art. This tack is taken by contributors throughout the volume, but it is left, perhaps not accidentally, to the musicologists Susan McClary and Robert Walser to attack the issue head-on, arguing that musical analysis of the old-fashioned kind (to which Adorno is deemed natural heir) misses the real point of pop, abstracting as it does from the social conditions and unique moment of performance.

On this reading, music has no independent form or language which could be understood or decoded, and those who imagine that it does invent an autonomy which music does not itself possess. Against the formalism of musical analysis, McClary, Walser and others appeal to a sense of pop as a cultural practice, the true meaning of which is lost when reduced to the pitch structures amenable to traditional musical analysis. Their case at one level is airtight, but the tenor of their piece and the weakness of some of the criticism on offer point to a complementary problem: insistence on the total experience of pop renders the object so complex that only existential descriptions and impressions are available as commentary.

Which brings us back, with a thud, to Adorno, whose critique of twentieth-century musical life (not of popular music alone, as is often imagined) was founded precisely on the claim that music enmeshed in the culture industry (radio and recording) had lost its autonomy. Adorno is represented here by 'On Popular Music' a piece much weaker and more psychologistic in method than his first major critique, the not-so-winningly titled 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression in Listening'. His account of musical history has always regarded the emancipation of music from court and church, and so from directly symbolic functions, as a crucial progressive moment in its development. That music should be driven, and driven forward in its development by the progressive unfolding of its own logic seemed to Adorno not just a historical fact but a historical achievement as well. It represented the moment at which composing subjects could represent themselves by the exploration and extension of an existing musical language, when the very form of one's work on musical material had a utopian, critical content, reproduced in the musical experience itself. Autonomy never meant

music itself becoming a self-developing object, but a certain desirable relationship between subjects and developing, historical musical resources.

This case has debts to Romantic aesthetics which need not be enumerated here, and a debt to a very partial account of the history of classical music (inherited from Schoenberg as a means of justifying the latter's own musical innovations) which places in question its authority even as an account of so-called 'classical' music. From the perspective of Adorno, it's not just pop which fails as music, but, for example, most of French and Russian modernism as well. At the same time, his is the only extant case available in English which accounts for musical sound in a philosophical and sociological spirit, and which can explain the significance of change in musical forms. Much pop music analysis, by contrast, stops short of an analysis of musical sound, content to describe merely its effects. Change in music therefore appears spontaneous or merely a reflection of the sociological, as the musical problems which might confront pop musicians, and the solutions to which result in the development of music, disappear from view. Likewise it becomes meaningless to speak of better or worse solutions to those problems, or even of better or worse bands, at which point pop music analysis parts company not with classical music snobbism but with the common-sense evaluations of pop made by any listener.

The light at the end of this tunnel comes, interestingly enough, not from the section devoted to semiotics but from that entitled 'The Creative Process' and in particular from an article by Antoine Hennion on the role of the producer in the creation of pop success. That the discussion of the compositional and production process yields the most significant account of musical meaning is only initially surprising. For Adorno's account of autonomy is not a semiotic account of the rules of a musical language but an analysis of the compositional process itself, the distortions of which in pop become the centrepiece of his polemics with the music of the culture industry. Therefore, articles describing the new compositional process and the aesthetic goals and methods proper to it actually provide the most telling historical account of what it is that makes pop music tick from the inside.

Hennion's argument is that the producer, by the accumulation of an unsystematized instinctive knowledge of what 'works', becomes a representative of the public actively intervening in the production of pop, bringing together voice, lyric, arrangement and personality into a combination in which each 'fits' the other. The remnants of traditional aesthetic goals are alive here, as is a charmingly old-fashioned definition of taste as an ability to perceive wholes which can't be reduced to rules or prescriptions. Likewise, Hennion is sensitive to the overwhelming importance of details of arrangement and phrasing and the relative insignificance of melodic invention in the creation of a successful pop song. By taking the hit song seriously – assuming that there is something musically distinctive about the song that succeeds in capturing the public imagination – Hennion is able to construct a modern aesthetic of pop, which tells us how musical elements and structures control the fate of the pop song.

Hennion's method reminds us that the pop music we tend to be interested in is successful pop, the stuff which makes it onto the charts, not everything that is produced. We therefore ought to know what it is that makes such music successful, the historical essence which provides any kind of music with a goal and techniques for reaching it. Cultural studies prides itself on the seriousness with which it treats its popular cultural objects, but in the field of music this will have to lead to some account of music on its own terms, and not merely as the transmitter of subcultures, or a conduit for lyrics. *On Record* provides resources for this task, but these resources remind us of the work that remains to be done.

I'D LIKE TO REFUTE IT THUS

Gary Day

Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1992; £9.99 paper

Postmodernism is Norris' *bête noir*. Nor is it hard to see why, when thinkers like Baudrillard make such ridiculous pronouncements about the Gulf War. It was Baudrillard's infamous *Guardian* piece of 11 January 1991 in which he said war would not break out that had Norris reaching for his word processor. But, as he admits, the more he reflected on Baudrillard's relation to other contemporary movements of thought, 'the more it became apparent that this was just the limit point ... of a fashionable *doxa* whose symptoms ranged from the breakdown of informed critical debate ... to the specialized varieties of bad faith manifested by thinkers of a kindred persuasion'. (p84) Thus, what began as a brief rejoinder to an individual quickly developed into a critique of postmodernism generally.

What chiefly appals Norris about current theory is its disregard of truth. For Baudrillard, of course, truth doesn't exist, for we live in a hyperreal world where it is impossible to tell image and reality apart. Stanley Fish retains the notion of truth, not as something that can be proved but as something which conforms to the pre-existent beliefs of a given interpretive community. On this analysis, truth becomes a matter of consensus. Lyotard may be said to share this view when he argues that truth is a function of a specific discourse with its own self-validating criteria, but he takes it a stage further by arguing that there can be no final interpretation of an event because it involves so many different 'phrase regimes' or 'language games', all of which are incommensurable. Thus, for Lyotard, history belongs to the sublime, the register of all that is ultimately unrepresentable, while knowledge, belonging to one 'phrase regime', cannot possibly serve as the basis for ethics, which belongs to another. Finally, there is the malign influence of Foucault, for whom truth is simply the ubiquitous will to power within language, discourse or representation.

Norris attributes this relativization of truth to what he calls the 'linguistic turn', the uncritical acceptance and wholesale adoption of the Saussurian linguistic paradigm for the human sciences. Not only has this led to the bracketing out of the referential aspect of language, it has also led to a confusion of ontological with epistemological problems 'or questions about the limits of human understanding with questions about the status or the very existence of real-world objects and events'. (p177) While Norris is happy to acknowledge the limits of knowledge – and even that it is to some extent

discourse specific – he nevertheless maintains that it is wrong to conclude from this that reality itself is no more than our ideas of it.

It is important for Norris to retrieve reality and truth from the corrosive theories of postmodernism because he wishes to argue that moral action depends on a knowledge of real-world events. Through the writings of Lyotard, particularly his reading of the Kantian sublime, postmodernism has driven a wedge between epistemology and ethics. The result, according to Norris, is a supine acquiescence in the political status quo. For him, truth as consensus means allowing the chicaneries of politicians to go unchallenged. Nowhere was this more the case than during the Gulf War when hardly a protest was heard from the intellectual community. Norris is determined to re-establish the links between knowledge and action, but to do this he has to demonstrate first, that there is a reality independent of our ideas of it; second, that we can know the truth of that reality; and third, that our knowledge of that reality can and must serve as a basis for our actions in the world. Norris concedes that there are and will be occasions where our knowledge is insufficient to enable us to act, in which case we either employ 'alternative (probabilistic) standards of truth and falsehood' (p124) or allow ourselves to be guided by our beliefs, so long as we determine beforehand those which are caused and those which are rationally held.

The question arises as to how successful Norris is in all this. The answer is: not very, because despite all the bombardment from his impressive intellectual artillery, postmodernism survives almost unscathed. Part of the problem lies in Norris' dual characterization of postmodernism as an epistemology *and* as a system of ethics. While he acknowledges that the former is 'perfectly reasonable' (p177) and that it has 'a certain diagnostic value', (p26) he finds the latter reprehensible. As a result he has to account for how the 'wrong' ethics follow, as he says it does (p27), from the 'right' epistemology. This is an invidious position, for he has to argue either that postmodern epistemology is faulty, or that it is not and that it is the ethics which are misconceived. The first option is the one he adopts but, because it leads him into a number of difficulties, he is forced to argue the second, which is no less problematic as it involves him in the assertion that ethics do not depend on epistemology which is the very opposite of what he is trying to establish. No wonder, then, that Norris occasionally resorts to scornful dismissals of his opponents' case – at least that does not tie him in logical knots.

'Logic' indeed figures as a problematic term in Norris' text. It represents a rigour and consistency of argument which he finds lacking in his opponents 'whose appeal to some preferential language game [means that they cannot] cope with the either/or logic of certain ... propositions'. (p178) However, Norris is willing to abandon logic when it proves damaging to his case: 'the absence of strictly *logical* grounds for predicting further events gives absolutely no reason for doubting our capacity to interpret [them].' (p44) Logic thus becomes a 'puzzle' (p63) and, as such, fails to distinguish between Norris' arguments and those of his opponents even though it is evoked to do precisely that.

The fate of logic is perhaps symptomatic of the biggest problem Norris faces, namely that postmodernist discourse has so thoroughly colonized terms like 'reason', 'reality' and 'truth' that he cannot really use them against Fish, Rorty and their ilk. What happens instead is that Norris inadvertently demonstrates the truth of a number of postmodernist positions in the very act of refuting them. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the following: 'certain statements of fact lead on inescapably to moral or evaluative judgements, at least in so far as the ... reader agrees with some shared (fairly basic) standards of truth, justice and ethical accountability.' (p183) Here Norris states his main point but he makes it dependent on the agreement of shared standards which instantly recalls Fish's notion of truth as consensus. Furthermore, in seeking to recover or recapture 'reason', 'reality' and 'truth' for the postmodernists Norris harks back, as he freely acknowledges, to the Kantian tradition of Enlightenment. This backward gesture, together with his attempt to restore what he sees as the rightful role of the intellectual, particularly evident in his discussion of Foucault and Chomsky, is essentially nostalgic and, as Baudrillard has pointed out, when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. In other words, Norris' critique is explained in Baudrillard's schema before it even takes place.

This is not to dismiss Norris' efforts, for a book such as this is long overdue – especially since Norris argues so lucidly against the lure of intellectual fashion and for the rigours of informed intellectual debate. But it is important to point out some of the difficulties involved in such an undertaking. As noted, the philosophical approach is not without its problems; when Norris is not being caught out by the conjurings of postmodernism he is still in danger of pulling the rug out from under his own feet. His use of Kant, for example, is inconsistent. Specifically, he says Lyotard is wrong to insist on the absolute incommensurability of the cognitive and ethical realms for, while Kant emphasized their separation, he was equally concerned to describe and analyze the complex relations between them. Norris then disregards his own advice by blithely stating that facts lead 'inescapably' to moral judgements. (p183) A further difficulty associated with Norris' reliance on Kantian categories is their inherently abstract character which does not help Norris to come to terms with the history he accuses his opponents of ignoring. Furthermore, the notion of transcendence, which underpins Kant's philosophy, and which Norris embraces, comes uncomfortably close to the kind of Western imperialist thinking which Norris criticizes in Rorty.

The philosophical approach is, then, fraught with pitfalls and Norris seems tacitly to admit this by his frequent appeals to common sense: 'there is a sense – an everyday, familiar, practical sense – in which we all know this perfectly well.' (p93) But common sense, *pace* Gramsci, is the ideological experience *par excellence*. Thus Norris, who wants to expose ideology, is in the embarrassing position of calling upon it at the very moment when his theories fail to penetrate it.

If a thinker like Norris is caught out by the baroque theorizings of

postmodernism, it is difficult to know how to proceed against it; it seems too knowing, too self-reflexive. However, it may be significant that at crucial points in his argument, Norris refers to journalists who, not being distracted by the siren calls of theory, simply get on with the job of reporting the facts that the propaganda machines don't mention. At such points the Gulf War forcefully re-enters Norris' narrative after having taken a back seat to arcane disputations. The lesson here seems to be that it is not to intellectuals that we should look for 'truth'. Norris wants them to take a lead in the struggle to change society, but he doesn't address the practicalities of how this may be achieved. In the meantime, I suggest we keep scanning the quality press and late night discussion programmes, pass on what we learn and carry on that struggle as best we can.

REREADING THE RAJ

Gail Ching-Liang Low

Gauri Vaswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Faber and Faber, London 1990; £20 cloth.
Svati Joshi (ed.), *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*, Trianka, New Delhi 1991; 280 rupees paper.
Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed.), *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1992; £12.95 cloth.

To be a postcolonial academic and engaged in English literary studies is to be caught in a painful contradiction which arises from different political agendas. On the one hand, we must necessarily site the formation(s) of English – both as narrative act and as pedagogic practice – within the history of violations and appropriations that characterize the colonial trajectory of power. On the other, where do those critiques leave us as teachers of English? Also, does drawing attention to strategic silences and gaps in the English text, deconstructing its claims to authenticity and universality amount to reinstating the canon (albeit) by default? Are teachers of English Literature implicated in a form of neo-colonialism by participating in an exclusive elite culture around English and rendering other non-Western, non-English cultural and popular forms marginal? To articulate the problem as a simple opposition of the indigenous versus the metropolitan is wilfully to ignore the real complexities and hybrid spaces of the postcolonial world. By focusing on the institutional history of English, the contradictory uses and abuses of English by a colonial administration and the Indian middle-class urban intelligentsia, and by directly confronting pedagogic and publishing practices, these three volumes refuse to smooth over the heterogeneous terrain of colonial and postcolonial cultural politics.

Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* focuses on the early history of British involvement in Indian education. She contends that English was introduced to consolidate colonial power; the administrative and political imperatives of British rule structured a transformation of the significance of literary education, enabling its 'humanistic ideals' to 'co-exist with and indeed even support education for social and political control'. Drawing on Said and Gramsci, she argues that these disciplinary goals may be discerned despite the political manoeuvring of different groups: the East India Company, the missionaries, the Parliament, the Orientalists and Anglicists. Missionary pressure to enlist English Literature in literacy training, evangelical outreach and modern education facilitated its cultural and moral mission. The British administration firstly appropriated the moral and religious uses of literature,

then under the guise of a liberal secular education, pedagogically reinscribed the centrality, legitimacy and value of British institutions, laws and government in place of universal Christian truths. The self-presentation of the Englishman through his cultural and moral artifacts also mystifies and de-actualizes military and commercial expansion. English Studies would erode support for the Indian priestly caste by attacking traditional forms of learning; by inculcating a Cartesian scepticism. The student was encouraged to value an empirical and individually realized truth against received forms of knowledge. As the demands of political economy displaced the language of morality, a class was needed to contribute to the imperialist economy and administration, and to serve us the agent of social change. Viswanathan's final chapter traces a gradual breakdown in literary pedagogy; the transition to British India further underlined the 'disjunction between the seemingly unlimited possibilities for self-elevation promised by literary training and the restrictive conditions of British rule under which "moral and intellectual" growth was actually promoted'.

In setting out to limit herself to the discursive forms and representations of the colonizer, Viswanathan remains silent on the response of the colonized to cultural hegemony and the effectiveness of the ideological programme. Svati Joshi's *Rethinking English* addresses these silences by situating the question of English in the specific historical and local processes of conflict, differentiation, affiliation and resistance. Joshi's volume has a more difficult political agenda to negotiate because it seeks to foreground heterogeneity on all sides of the political divide in its critique of the reproduction of social power. As Joshi argues in her introduction, the debates which simply rehearse cultural purity or derivation obscure the more 'fundamental questions about differential social formations', and the 'distribution of economic and political power'. Because the book (together with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *The Lie of the Land*) grew out of a Delhi University conference and addresses an Indian audience among others, the volume's critical project is keenly aware of the dangers of a naïve nativist position in the context of contemporary Indian cultural politics. Joshi points out that the anti-imperial rhetoric which polarizes an essentialist traditional India against the West parallels the rhetoric of a militant, and reactionary communal politics and only serves to suppress class, caste, gender, regional and religious differences.

Dum Dum Sangari, Susi Tharu and Aijaz Ahmad's essays are pieces to look out for. Sangari's 'Relating Histories: Definitions of Literacy, Literature, Gender in Nineteenth-Century Calcutta and England' presents a nuanced exploration of the mobile cultural and differential categories of Sanskrit, English, Hindu women and English women as they are defined not only by colonial rules but also by newly emerging indigenous elites in the process of securing cultural authority and identity. By addressing the social history and cultural texts of both India and Britain, she contends that 'the colonial states and cultural formations established under the aegis of imperialism ... produce specifiable

ideological configurations which loop and spread across "national" boundaries.' Tharu argues that the emergence of modern national Indian literatures is tied to the rise of English literary studies in India. While the Anglicist programmes privileged the use of English, they also contained a commitment to the development of Indian literatures and languages as 'suitable vehicles for the communication of useful knowledges and of western science'. This led to a programme of translation from both classical Indian as well as European languages, a policy of encouraging new writing and a 'selective *marginalization* and *delegitimation* of existing literatures and literary practices'. A 'carefully invented tradition was being drawn on to legitimate and endorse modernization'; in (re)forming the national languages and literatures in the image of English, the literary production, aesthetic and pedagogic practices of the latter have also informed the former. Ahmad's essay is a plea for a more historical materialist reading of theory, criticism and pedagogy in literary studies and a more interdisciplinary approach to texts. Ahmad charts the broad historical formation of theory as it feeds into the concept of Orientalism, colonial discourse and 'Third World' writing and maintains that institutionalization of 'Third World Writing', which results from the pressures and conflicts in the metropolitan academy, is profoundly debilitating when imported uncritically into India. He poses a timely reminder that Indian literature is not a 'theoretically coherent category'. The colonial production of English as a 'centralizing language' which sustains colonial national and administrative unity renders state bureaucracy and the nation equivalent; in contemporary India the inability to depart from this model has meant the effective marginalization of vast segments of the population who have no knowledge of the language. The historical movement which consolidated Western European countries as nation-states constituted their national literatures; in the case of India, the differences must not be ignored: 'the principle of [Indian] unity was civilizational and historical for many centuries before it became to be contained in national form ... [the principle of unity lies in] ... histories of "literary" movements and even compositional forms which have criss-crossed geographical boundaries and linguistic differences.' Ahmad argues for Indian literary studies to shed its exclusive aesthetic preoccupation with print literature; it should be sited within a 'far more integrated discipline of historical and cultural studies' and contain the equal measure of rigorous scholarship demanded by English studies at home.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *The Lie of the Land* complements Joshi's *Rethinking English* in that it situates the broader questions of pedagogy within the contemporary and more concrete context of school and university programmes, course design, publishing, British Council work, the classroom situation and strategies of teaching and reading. Rajan picks up the national language debate by reading English in post-independence India as a site of ideological contestation (together with Hindi, it is the official national language and the language of law and state administration) between opposing advocates of alternative national languages which have distinct regional and communal

dimensions. While India's other languages and literatures are a growth area, English is still the language of the elite indigenous middle-class intelligentsia. No simple solution to language exists for the contemporary writer desirous of appealing to the masses; s/he encounters the problems of literacy long before that of language. Furthermore, unless an oral tradition can be resurrected, the 'very sensibility and politics of Indian literature' will be defined within the frame of the cultural and literary expectations of that small reading public. Addressing the Indian classroom, Ania Loomba argues that an 'alternative pedagogy must explicitly address the ways in which particular criticisms are institutionalized' and isolates 'a bleak downward spiral' not alien to the British scene: 'the perception that literary study is useless in market terms is related to the insistence on the value that is "above" mere practical life; hence again moral or cultural worth is today articulated from a position of devaluation.' Rukun Advani provides a publisher's perspective (Oxford University Press) on 'the world of literary studies' as a 'marketplace with its own political culture and economy'; Suvir Kaul's critique of Jonathan Culler, Paul de Man and Homi Bhabha is a call for genuine resistance to theory that sets up a critical dialectic rather than a simple homage. Tejaswini Niranjana's useful essay on African and Caribbean writing and Gayatri Spivak's on staging collisions between cross-cultural and 'inter-literary' readings suggest alternative enterprises under the umbrella of postcolonial 'English'. Together, these volumes not only open up an important debate on the history, function and practice of English studies in India but engage in a dialogue which breaks the asymmetry of cultural hegemony.