

COLOUR-CODED CRITIQUES

Helen Carr

Robert Young *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Routledge, London, 1990 £35.00 hbk., £10.99, pbk.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*, Routledge, London, 1990 £37.50 hbk. £10.99 pbk.

White Mythologies and *The Pink Guitar* have more in common than colour-coded titles. Both these books, like much of contemporary literary theory, are attempts to resist and deconstruct the master narratives of the west. While Robert Young focuses on imperialism and racism, Rachel Blau DuPlessis is concerned with questions of gender. Yet these emphases are the least of the differences between them. *The Pink Guitar* is not only criticism, though it is illuminating on a range of modernist and postmodernist writers: it is also a creative work in its own right, a collection of essays which explore, sometimes in prose, sometimes in poetry, the problem of writing for women – how they are written about, and how they can write. *White Mythologies* doesn't mention a single work of British or American fiction or poetry: it concentrates on history – not on the problem of what counts as history, which E.H. Carr explored, nor on the rhetoric of historians, which Hayden White analysed, but on theories of history, or rather of 'History'. DuPlessis' writing is tentative, exploratory, sometimes autobiographical: the problem of writing for women is of necessity her problem too. Young writes – though with admirable clarity – in the authoritative language of abstract theory.

The title of Robert Young's book is taken from an essay by Jacques Derrida, on the metaphors that entrap western metaphysics, and the book could be described as a defence of Derridean poststructuralism, which Young feels has been much maligned by British critics. What has disappeared, Young argues, in the translation of the ideas like Derrida's from their French origins to their Anglo-American versions, is their central confrontation with the ethnocentrism that legitimated Western colonialism and racism. 'If so-called "so-called poststructuralism"', he writes, 'is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence'. In other words, post-structuralism, with its critique of traditional Western certainties – Reason, Man, Progress – is not, as its critics aver, a product of left-wing despair at the failure of European class-based revolutionary hopes, but was born from a new perception of the west that came about as its empires crumbled. Poststructuralism is not an effete nihilism, with its only message the loss of absolute meaning, but a political critique which

argues that western meanings have worked to oppress non-Europeans, women, the working-class, and other disvalued groups, and indeed still do so. To expose this process at work in language and philosophy is an urgent task.

For Young, the analysis of racist language and of what's come to be called 'colonial discourse' is not just a virtuous extra, to be tagged on, the way well-meaning English departments add third-year options in 'Commonwealth Literature'. Such an analysis is central to an understanding of the myths by which the west has interpreted itself and the world. Deconstruction aims 'to decolonize the forms of European thought'. Young is particularly intent on deconstructing Hegelian, and therefore Marxist, history, whose Eurocentric view, he argues, may not have caused but which 'simulates the project' of colonialism. He emphasizes the nineteenth century's entwined growth of racism and historicism (the white man 'foremost in the files of time'), and follows the vicissitudes of post-war theories of history in works by Sartre, Althusser, Foucault, Jameson, Said, Bhabha and Spivak, giving readable and plausible interpretations of what are in some cases dense and rebarbative texts. He writes particularly interestingly of the influence of Bachelard's history of science on Althusser and Foucault, and on Homi Bhabha's work on the 'ambivalence' and paranoia of colonialist discourse. In spite of his denial that this is a teleological 'history', he traces a development away from western introspection to vantage points at the margins: from western theorists, to those with western training but non-western origins, from western texts, to non-western texts in which colonialism is inscribed, from ideas of unitary development, to multiform, discontinuous change.

Poststructuralism has not always presented itself as what Young calls a 'politico-ethical' project, and this book is a welcome development. Yet this seems to me a book in transition, a mind looking for a body. It has a political urgency, yet is locked in abstraction. There's a haziness from the start in Young's use of the word 'history', which is introduced in scare-quotes as a blunt weapon employed in beating poststructuralists' heads. History in this sense is never defined. Young says disparagingly of Eagleton and Lentricchia that they assume we all know what 'History' is, but although he talks of 'history' as a conflictual concept for which there be no univocal meaning, he himself doesn't attempt to define or explain the different ways in which the word is used. In his own usage the word slips from implying (what he wants to attack) a meaningful progress in mankind's affairs, to written accounts of the past, to particular interpretations of the past, to the past itself. This lack of precision causes great difficulties for him, because he actually wants to recuperate a concept of the historical, but hasn't left himself a language in which to do so. He totally rejects a single or exclusively western view of history, or one which sees some ultimate purpose behind events, or the easy ascription of cause and effect, and is even dubious about what he calls 'narrativity'. Yet he has himself a very strong sense of how he interprets the past of the west, as he admits in his preface, though his view seems best summed up in the chilling comment elsewhere that the Holocaust was not an aberration, but colonialism brought home. The plea

which he makes for attention to singularity, particularity, and differentiation is one which, in some uses of the phrase, could be called a return to history. It is only in the very last sentence that he names what's needed as the 'new logics of historical writing'. Perhaps it is this unresolved problem about the way he himself relates 'theory' and 'history' that makes it so difficult for him to deal himself with particularities, however much he believes they are necessary.

This impasse – the distrust of the grand narrative, yet a language which only deals with the grand sweep – is perhaps the central problem of contemporary theory. Young wants to expose the myth of totalities, but he continues to write in the abstract, totalising language which poststructuralism so often employs, countering the universals of Enlightenment thought with universalising critiques. Paradoxically, this is the bind he analyses so strikingly well in others: Marx's difficulty in escaping from Hegel, for example, or Edward Said's from ideas of the Same and Other. Though he wants to attack the notion of Europe as a 'sovereign self', in his account the west remains unitary, with no differentiation between, say, French, British or American colonialisms, or between colonised groups, or between the languages of appropriation and of administration. (He does distinguish between the French and German traditions in philosophy, very much in the former's favour.) In his desire to attack Hegelianism he seems to ignore the other, sometimes perhaps more influential, nineteenth-century historicisms which underwrote racism – 'scientific' cultural evolution for example, which also influenced Marx, and had considerable importance in the British and American contexts. Hegelianism is the focus of the poststructuralist attack because it was so important in France from the 1930s to the 1950s, but Hegel, racist though I agree he is, was only one chapter in the story of Eurocentrism. Perhaps this is another problem in translating French poststructuralism – an over-literal transfer of French terms and preoccupations to British or American contexts, as if there was indeed one west.

Young's book is at one level itself a territorial battle, a foray to seize the high moral ground in literary theory from the Marxist tradition, or rather from particular Marxist literary critics. At moments one swerves vertiginously from world issues to lit. crit. skirmishes. He is replying, of course, to equally, or rather more pugnacious opponents, but this left-wing internecine warfare is depressingly reminiscent of the Seventies. Young is genuinely, and I think rightly, appalled at the self-absorbed Eurocentricism of so much recent theory, and I share his fear of the tyranny of rigid systems, but the adversarial stance makes for insult rather than insight. The problem about the 'impersonal' voice is that emotion seeps in unanalysed. He attacks branches – leaves – but ignores the roots and the trunk. It is not that I think his criticisms of Marx are unjustified (although he speaks of it as amorphously as he does 'history') but that if he wants to analyse colonialism he needs to look further. The attitudes that legitimated colonialism predate the nineteenth century. It is a mark of the pervasiveness of the nineteenth-century belief in racial hierarchy that even those most aware of other oppressions, like Marx and JS Mill, were blind to

that, but though Young is right to see the implicit racism in some Marxist and liberal humanist texts, (it's there in some postmodernist texts) there are much more explicit formulations that need to be addressed. I agree with his criticisms of Fredric Jameson, but I wish he had deconstructed Norman Stone instead. In many ways this is a brilliant, important and timely book, and a great deal subtler than many of his opponents', but ultimately, I find it disappointingly narrow. He makes no mention of the very relevant rethinking in the discipline of history itself about totalising views of historical development, nor postmodern anthropology's critique of colonialist discourse within its own texts, nor even of the political debate on the left about the 'end of history'. Nor does he look at any of the interrogations of history in postcolonialist fiction: in fact, apart from a few references in the Spivak chapter and one mention of *The Odyssey*, he ignores fiction, plays, films, music, videos, television, poetry, paintings, advertisements, newspapers, religion, all of the cultural and symbolic forms – except high theory – through which we shape the metaphors by which we understand the world.

In *The Pink Guitar* there is no such line drawn. Poetry, fiction, works of art, criticism, theory all appear as different kinds of attempts to make and unmake meanings. Rachel Blau DuPlessis's book continually asks rather than answers questions, hazards provisional phrasings which she continually reworks. She draws on a wide range of current theory, and is, in her own way, a rigorous thinker, but she is concerned with practice, hers and other's. In broad terms her theoretical position is not that different from Robert Young's. Although he doesn't deal directly with feminism, he makes it clear that he sees colonialism, sexism, racism and class-divisions as interrelated oppressions. So does she, though as her subtitle suggests (to say nothing of the colour of her guitar) feminist issues are central. But they differ entirely in their relationship to their texts. After his preface, Robert Young never uses the first person singular: he doesn't problematise the position from which he writes, only talks theoretically of the impossibility of theorists' writing from the outside. DuPlessis, like many feminists, wants to reject traditional academic writing with its tone of Olympian impersonality, as if there were one right way of looking at the world, most often the white male bourgeois way. She doesn't want to write, as she says of Pound, 'Never wanting to say: This is how I see it./Always wanting to say: This is how it is.' Instead, she chooses to 'challenge the sustaining fiction of objectivity, fiction, and neutrality in critical studies'. That is not to say that 'I' is a word she can use unproblematically, but that these essays 'are articulated in a voice that does not seek authority of tone or stasis of position but rather seeks to express the struggle in which it is immersed'.

Women, she argues are '(ambiguously) nonhegemonic', part of 'the dominant system of meanings and practices' in some ways, not in others, according to race, class, sexual preference 'clicking in, clicking out'. What's sometimes called the 'female aesthetic' is not really different from the ways other nonhegemonic groups attempt change and subvert the dominant forms; she sees *négritude*, and 'creolization' as similar strategies. These essays have

been written over the last ten years, but the book's title is also that of the last essay, written specially for this collection, in which she brings together the themes of the book. 'The Pink Guitar' is a feminist version, less certain, more troubled and untidy, of Wallace Stevens' image of the modernist artist as the man with a blue guitar ('Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar'). But 'the pink guitar' is also a reference to Man Ray's reworking of Ingres' mandolin player (whose long, nude, sinuous back is foregrounded in *The Turkish Bath*) into his photograph of the woman's back on which he superimposed violin sound holes. The woman (actually Kiki of Montparnasse, aka Alice Prin) becomes herself the *Violin d'Ingres*, 'made sonorous with cultural meanings'. How, DuPlessis asks, can a woman 'play' the women whom [she has] been culturally given', when she finds 'the languages, the words, the drives, the genres, the keyboards, the frets, the strings, the holes, the sounding boards, the stops, the sonorities have been filled with representations that depend, in their deepest satisfactions, on gender and sexual trajectories that make claims upon [her]'. Women writers write of and about women in a language and culture suffused with their representations, where culturally women have meaning as instruments rather than as players, images rather than artists. A woman writer, as she says, is a 'marked marker'. She 'need not be circumscribed or limited by gender. But she will be affected'.

DuPlessis sees the modernist writers, like women, as '(ambiguously) nonhegemonic'. Yet for all their radicalism as writers and as reinterpreters of culture, they held on to conventional metaphors and narratives of gender and race, a contradiction she explores most fully in HD's struggle not to be reduced to Ezra Pound's muse. She herself wants to make use of the modernist techniques of rupture, word-play, heteroglossia, collage, the kind of writing Julia Kristeva describes as 'feminine'. How feminism changes avant-garde language is by its 'urgent and continuous confrontations with the political and representational'. It reintroduces *telos*, not in the sense of a necessary, but of a desired end, the end of cultural change.

This is one of the most pleasurable works of criticism I have read for years. These essays fuse disparate voices, colloquial, poetic, theoretical, autobiographical. They intercut DuPlessis' own words with those of other writers and poets. They draw together aspects of being usually sundered in criticism, without imposing systems or closure. Like DuPlessis I have a deep distrust of the apparently objective authoritative voice; she is talking of my problems as well as hers; modernist writing played a central part in forming my consciousness as it did hers: so (to problematise my own response) it is not surprising I am drawn to this book. My enthusiasm can't be taken as that non-existent thing, an impersonal judgement. It mustn't be forgotten either, that she has in this context the advantage of writing as one of the (ambiguously) oppressed: Robert Young has the problem of writing as a member, however unwilling, of the oppressing group. Again Robert Young is only one of quite a number of contemporary male critics (Terry Eagleton, one of his targets, is another, especially in his latest book) who seem to find themselves too alienated

by traditional ways of writing about imaginative works to speak of them any more at all: the cause or cure of this crisis is not something I have yet divined, but it is a terrible impoverishment if one is trying to understand a culture. Feminists have on the contrary employed the rereading of such texts as one of their central strategies. Perhaps most importantly, DuPlessis is writing out of over twenty years (more, for she explicitly mentions Woolf as a model) of feminist concern with these problems: the critique of colonialist discourse has received up till now much less attention, so Young is still a pioneer in what is surely, as he says, the most important role of western criticism today, understanding our past and present blindness to our oppressive relation to the rest of the world. They have both written powerful books, but I think DuPlessis is right to believe that a detached and abstract critique is not enough. As she says, the capacity of language 'to represent "transparently" can no longer be credited, but [its] connotive, denotive, and textual powers must be engaged'.

WRITING FOR RE-VISION

Sharon Monteith

Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1992 hbk 91pp £11.95.

Vron Ware *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* Verso, London, 1992 pbk 282pp £11.95.

'There must be some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them' (Toni Morrison 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature' p5).¹

Toni Morrison's project is described on the dust cover as 'a daring perspective'. This set me wondering. What is the phrase intended to convey? Daring to interrogate the American literary canon? Surely not. Daring for an African-American creative writer to provide a critical perspective on a white American literary tradition? Or daring to critique in terms of a Manichean allegory the antithetical relationships between white writers and their depictions of black-ness? It is most probably the latter. Morrison defines the Africanist presence in America as 'one of the most furtively radical impinging forces on the country's literature' (p5). Hers is a study of 'American-Africanism', of blackness in a denotative and connotative sense and the ways in which blackness has pervaded and particularised the literary imaginations of white writers in America.

The project itself may not appear either 'daring' or new; Leslie Fiedler, in seeking to 'open up' the canon, does in (his now canonical) *Love and Death in the American Novel* consider blackness if not whiteness in the literary imagination. But in doing so he becomes trapped within the very paradigms that he seeks to examine. Fiedler states that 'It is indeed to be expected that our first eminent Southern writer [Poe] discover that the proper subject for American gothic is the black man, from whose shadow we have not yet emerged' (p397).² Morrison agrees that 'No early American writer is more important to the concept of American-Africanism than Poe' (p32) but she is aware, in a way that Fiedler was not in 1960, of a literary critical vocabulary saturated with racialised colour-coding. Fiedler's critical apparatus did not then encompass a conscious effort to examine his own use of metaphorical language and consequently his work remains replete with 'dark/light' lexical collocations which are intrinsically his shorthand for the gothic propensity of American fiction. Morrison's essays might be usefully seen as beginning a deconstruction of a 'master-discourse' and it is this challenge to articulate and define ideologically problematized literary and linguistic connotations that motivates her thesis.

1. Toni Morrison 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review* Vol.38, Pt.2 1989.

2. Leslie Fiedler *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Penguin, London 1982.

The title itself prompts immediate recognition of the complexities inherent in the subject matter. It is not to be overlooked that the subtitle specifies whiteness whilst the essays investigate the ways in which the colour black is racialised in the imaginations of the white writers that Morrison selects. The title indicates it is whiteness and the literary imagination that are inextricably bound together in terms of the ideological controls they exert, 'Cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation's literature' (p39), by novels and readings of them produced by white writers and critics. Morrison is not, I believe, over-interpreting. Her close readings of a range of texts (by Poe, Twain, Cather, Faulkner and Hemingway) emphasise hermeneutic strategies and one of her strengths is the way in which (in three tightly constructed essays originally designed for teaching purposes) her analyses are grounded in her ability to summarise the concepts that have characterised the study of American literature and served to reinforce canonical readings. She is incisive in her rendering of the flight from the Old World to the New and she provides a shrewdly edifying reading of American Romance and the availability of the black population to enhance Romance writers' explorations of terror and 'the power of blackness'. This is no discourse of victimization though, nor is it monocular in its readjustment of critical perspective. Students of nineteenth and twentieth century American literature will find that Morrison's dialectic will lift their thinking metacritically and enhance their own readings of the texts on undergraduate syllabuses.

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* will be read by many of us who read her novels voraciously each time they appear on the shelves and who will hope to discover in it some clues as to her own creative work amidst her critical engagement with the writings of others. Morrison is aware of this interest in her writerly preoccupations but it is to her role as a reader who became a writer that she turns first in her introduction. The essays are prefaced by her detailing of a particular reading experience of a text she admires, Marie Cardinal's *The Words To Say It*. This is an endeavour to look back through her reading to cite an example of the creative/critical spur that prefigures these essays and observations: 'I include the thoughts I had while reading ... because they identify the stages of my interest, first, in the pervasive use of black images and people in expressive prose; second, in the shorthand, the taken-for-granted assumptions that lie in their usage; and finally, to the subject of this book ...' (px).

This readerly-writerly fusion of scholarly thought engenders one of the most salient questions Morrison asks of white readers, critics and creative writers: 'What does positing one's writerly self, in the wholly racialised society that is the United States, as unraced and all the others as raced entail?' (pxii).

This is something that has preoccupied Morrison for some time and can be traced back to a paper that she originally intended to entitle 'Canon Fodder'. In this paper, presented as The Tanner Lecture on Human Values in 1988, she addressed the incursion of so-called 'minority literatures' into the canon, examined canon-building as perpetuating ethnocentric critical strongholds and called for:

the examination and re-interpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth century works, for the 'unspeakable things unspoken'; for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure – the meaning of so much American literature. A search, in other words, for the ghost in the machine ... The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language – its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language. Such a penetration will entail the most careful study, one in which the impact of Afro-American presence in modernity becomes clear and is no longer a well-kept secret. (p11)³

3. Toni Morrison
op.cit.

This declaration indicates that Morrison is taking up her own call for such a penetrative study in *Playing in the Dark*. Here she opens up the discussion and focuses on the Africanist presence as the 'control-group' in a white American literary experiment and in the formation of a white American national culture. If white Americans are rational, free, democratic individualists, who is their opposite and what challenges their freedom that it be clung to so fiercely? If they are 'innocent Adams' where is their temptation? Morrison problematizes the binary oppositions operating within a nationalist socio-literary construct. She sees the Africanist presence as subliminally but carefully positioned as white America's metaphor for all that is 'not-American', and argues that a formulation that is based on contrast and confrontation with a black 'Other' paradoxically encodes that 'Other' as the key to American identity: 'Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny' (p52).

Though manoeuvred into diametrical opposition, Africanism, its blackness, is the undisclosed centre from which white America's cultural identity emanates. This theory is explored with the works of writers who deal explicitly with black/white relations in slavery (Twain and Cather for example) and explored with texts which may have been read as taking no account of 'American Africanism' at all: 'It is possible, for example, to read Henry James scholarship exhaustively and never arrive at a nodding mention, much less a satisfactory treatment, of the black woman who lubricates the turn of the plot and becomes the agency of moral choice and meaning in *What Maisie Knew*' (p13).

It is more nearly true to say that the American Countess in James' novel is an agency of moral choice and meaning since all the characters work peripherally at the edges of Maisie's consciousness to demonstrate what she comes to 'know'. But Morrison's charge is clear, the black woman who 'literally struck the child more as an animal than as a 'real' lady: she might have been a clever frizzled poodle in a frill or a dreadful human monkey in a spangled petticoat' (p156) has been resisted by critics in their readings of James' novel.⁴

4. Henry James *What Maisie Knew*, Penguin, London 1985.

Morrison's reading of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* works as an example of how Africanism may imbue even the structuring of a text. In tracing the points at which Harry Morgan's 'nigger' crew member enters the text, she convincingly draws out the awkwardness of action and dialogue that she argues are a result of the mechanics required to confine and constrain his position within the text. Morrison's investigations do not always lead to foreclosure where the Africanist presence remains fettered or unexamined by the author except by trope. She is quite clear in her statements that she does not seek to debunk texts or to devalue them. Morrison is also aware that as an African-American creative writer she could be seen to have a vested professional interest in providing re-workings of texts in this way, but again her argument is precise. She is concerned with the precariousness of language, with the struggle to work within the linguistic minefield that is her own tool for creativity: 'My vulnerability would lie in romanticising blackness rather than demonizing it; villifying whiteness rather than reifying it' (pxi) and she acknowledges that to free her own writing from racialised linguistic nuance is a difficult process – in Morrison's *Sula* the sun rises 'like a hot white bitch' (p73) for example.⁵ However Morrison is setting new agendas. Her essays are short but refreshingly clear and her endeavour to propose ways to enhance our readings of literature is coupled with a call for critical attention to a variety of topics around the study of Africanism within American studies.

5. Toni Morrison *Sula* (1973), Picador, London 1985.

'I feel that what I have written is, in a sense, provisional; I cover a lot of ground but at the end I am only just ready to start talking about theoretical questions and political strategies that follow on from my initial argument' (Vron Ware in *Beyond the Pale* pxiv)

Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale: White*

Women, Racism and History has also been described as 'a daring book' (p96), perhaps because of the sheer volume of material that she seeks to re-vision and assess.⁶ The observation above is an honest one – this is not a text situated within clear theoretical parameters but the debates and critiques that it contains are provocative and insightful. Ware's is an interdisciplinary study that sets out to analyse white femininity in terms of historical constructions of it and to review the development of women's movements against a backdrop of slavery, abolition and imperialism with their attendant racist discourses. In drawing on a range of historical and contemporary materials (historical documents and pamphlets, biographies and autobiographies, literature, contemporary advertisements and party political broadcasts), Ware intends to 'remind myself as much as the reader that I am talking about ideologies that surround and influence us now'. (pxiv) This is particularly pertinent when considering connections between the two texts under review here. Both writers discuss slavery as integral to any understanding of black/white relations, as historical fact but also as a psychological fettering that remains in the minds of both black

6. Jenny Bourne review of *Beyond the Pale* in *Race and Class* Vol.34 No.2 Oct–Dec 1992.

and white as an indelible legacy. For Ware, slavery and the contentious period of abolition exemplify the ubiquitous racial metaphors that have hampered the development of anti-racist feminisms, just as for Morrison, in her critical work as well as her fiction, slavery informs not only the American cultural consciousness but also the literary imaginations of the writers she discusses.

Ware's text unites with a body of work that seeks to re-vision and re-evaluate historical and literary narratives and ideologies. This work has been produced almost exclusively by black feminist critics who have sought to provide a comprehensive framework for black feminist thought and who have made ongoing requests for anti-racist feminist critical approaches such as Barbara Smith's: 'I want to encourage in white women, as a first step, a sane accountability to all the women who write and live on this soil' and Audre Lorde's 'Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power'.⁷

Ware is attempting to write consciously and not obliquely of gender and race and, by addressing the ideological tensions that influence her as a white woman, to be 'accountable'.

Interrogations of whiteness are relatively new and are frequently seen as emanating from the, also relatively new, stable of cultural studies. Critical interrogations of self and culture, most notably Richard Dyer's ground-breaking study 'White', have unlocked a creative cavern, a 'white hole' of narratives that recognise colour as an indisputably politicised category and whiteness as a 'characteristic cultural/historical construction achieved through white domination' (p46).⁸ bell hooks cites Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale* as an example of this movement towards establishing agendas for definition where there have been none: 'When I thought about her work, and in reading her first chapter, I was thinking about how the feminist movement would have been different if from the beginning white women had a more progressive understanding of race as it relates to the construction of their own idea of their place in the world' (p3).⁹

bell hooks has been examining issues of race and gender for more than a decade now and in her most recent collection of essays *Black Looks* she claims that 'it is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery' (p176).¹⁰ In reinforcing the connections between white women's racism and patriarchal imperialist discourses, Ware is herself also writing toward personal and political recovery.

The acknowledgement of an anti-racist feminist impetus behind Ware's work contrasts markedly with Kathryn Tidrick's review of it for *London Review of Books*. Her opening comment seems unfair, depicting Ware's as a 'study of the difficulty white feminists have had in being fair to brown races which appear to oppress their women' (p26).¹¹ Tidrick's language does not seek to reflect the tenor of a text whose author recognises that: 'Throughout the book I have repeatedly had to address the difficulties involved in finding a language that would express the links between race and gender without prioritising, without oversimplifying' (pxiv).

A programme of study that considers white women's relations and reactions to

7. Barbara Smith 'Toward A Black Feminist Criticism' in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia B. Scott and B. Smith (eds) *All The Women Are White, All The Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave*, The Feminist Press, New York, 1982 and Audre Lorde 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' in C. McEwan and S. O'Sullivan (eds) *Out The Other Side: Contemporary Lesbian Writing*, Virago Press, London 1988.

8. Richard Dyer 'White' *Screen* Vol.29, No.4 1988.

9. Richard King, Sharon Monteith, Nahem Yousaf 'Interview with bell hooks' *Over Here* Vol.11, No.1 1991.

10. bell hooks *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Turnaround, London 1992.

11. Kathryn Tidrick, 'The Instructive Story of William Beveridge's Mother' *London Review of Books*, 11 June 1992.

colonialism, imperialism, racism and slavery is itself a challenge to dominant language codes. Other studies, like Jane Miller's chapter 'Imperial Seductions' in *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (1990), have wrestled with similar difficulties over a lexicon loaded with connotations that may impede the very articulation of new ideas. Perhaps the difference between Tidrick's review and Ware's book is the way in which Ware sees interrogation of the linguistic and ideological baggage that encodes our reactions as a crucial part of the process of her text's production. Morrison would agree: 'in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting and definitive'. (*Playing in the Dark* p13).

Ware is in fact attempting to track moments of self-conscious feminist endeavour through the historical episodes she examines. These are neither linear nor progressive but temporal and transient points at which white American and British women realise that race and class intersect with any championing of feminist causes. In this she may be seen as celebrating white feminist individuals at the expense of the larger socio-historical milieu. Tidrick believes so with some justification, citing Ware's fascination with Annette Ackroyd, a social reformer who worked in Calcutta from the 1870s and whose story is told by Ware in the third of her five interconnected essays. It is certainly also the case that Catherine Impey's life and work may dominate the reader's thoughts after reading the book. The text is even dedicated to 'Katie Impey who deserved more and better' Ware believes, since she was a British activist, an anti-lynching campaigner who worked closely with Ida B. Wells and the founder and editor of the journal *Anti-Caste*. She was also a woman who 'blotted her copybook' with white campaigners like Isabella Mayo and Frances Willard when she apparently proposed marriage to a Ceylonese male. Her story is carefully reconstructed by Ware, and Mayo's accusation that Impey's behaviour would have caused a lynching in the American South is contextualised, in order to illuminate the extent to which these radical women were trapped within the paradigms of patriarchal and racist hierarchies.

Individuals are granted space in this text but Ware is careful not to over-analyze them as representative, seeking rather to bring to the fore the complexities of their situations. With Ackroyd for example Ware explains:

Her story raises uncomfortable questions that are just as relevant to feminism today as they were in Victorian times: for example, what does it mean when a white feminist aligns herself on her own terms with black women against black men? The legacies of the same colonial period continue to haunt the way women might answer this question now, echoing similar patterns of alliance, opposition or conflict in response to certain situations. (p148).

Individual stories of Impey, Ackroyd, Wells and Ellen Richardson (the latter a Quaker abolitionist from Newcastle who is 'credited' with having secured the

legal freedom from slavery of Frederick Douglass) keep this reader's interest but the interpolation of these within the project as a whole is problematic. A weakness of the text lies in its structuring – the three historical essays are framed by two much more eclectic chapters. All are interesting but none quite interact or enmesh as Ware intends. The wide net Ware has cast gathers in a host of topics from bids for suffrage and Civil Rights, slavery as a subject for literature, an analysis of a magazine feature on the 'Body Shop' that replicates colonial discourse to analyses of television and film productions of *Jewel in the Crown* and *A Passage to India*. Despite incorporating headings within the essays to facilitate reading, the reader inevitably has to make quite complex connections across the text. Arguably it is the province of the reader to make these connections since Ware is clear in her developing argument that an awareness of historical agendas inform current feminist struggles and practices and white women's responses to racism. Her opening and concluding essays do summarise this approach, but a selected bibliography would aid the reader in situating this important study within a context of thought and debate, particularly since Ware, like Morrison, calls for continued research in the area.

Beyond the Pale is an innovatively conceived and intricately worked and researched study. The title is significant as an over-arching metaphor to be unravelled through the process of reading. The phrase 'beyond the Pale' is indicative of the boundaries that societies erect in attempts to justify oppressive practices. Its intertextual relation to Kipling's short story, a story of 'transgressive' love across racial boundaries, symbolises perhaps what Ware wishes to convey about the few white women who actively stepped metaphorically and politically beyond the Pale, usually to be seduced back into a border country of compromise lured by the possibility of participation in white patriarchal power-structures. Ware's text is eminently readable despite its breadth of study. It addresses topics that white feminists are only recently beginning to acknowledge as relevant to women's movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In that sense, it is a big book.

Morrison's 'playing' with darkness and Ware's effort to move 'beyond the Pale' contribute to a growing catalogue of works that engage creatively and interrogatively with the politics of 'race'. bell hooks' essay 'Writing from the Darkness' begins: 'I remember childhood as a time in anguish, as a dark time – not darkness in any sense that is stark, bleak or empty but as a rich space of knowledge, struggle and awakening.' (p71)¹²

Gradually white writers are joining black writers in this space of knowledge. Ware and Morrison engage personally with their projects, discovering a sense of place as critics. Ware's study might never have come about had she not been castigated by a black feminist journalist on *Spare Rib* a decade earlier, for writing an article with the 'politics of nothingness' where: 'my main error had been the way I criticized other women for their failure to deal with racism without making any attempt to confess ritualistically my own personal racism'. (p28)

Her honesty about this contextualises her struggle to decolonize the

12. bell hooks
'Writing From the
Darkness' *Tri Quarterly*
Vol.75, 1989.

13. Robert B. Stepto
'Intimate Things in
Place: A Conversation
with Toni Morrison',
*The Massachusetts
Review*, Vol.18, 1977.

normative vagueness surrounding words like 'white' and 'women' in writing *Beyond the Pale*. Similarly, Morrison when questioned by Robert B. Stepto in 1976 on the geographical locations of her novels, admitted 'I know I never felt like an American or an Ohioan or even a Lorainite' (p473).¹³ *Playing in the Dark* uncovers the spuriousness of terms like 'American': 'American means white and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen' (p47). Both writers are moving the discussion around 'political correctness' and politicised word-play into an arena of serious study of the cultural power and significance of the ideological clusters that envelop words like 'black' and 'white', and 'American' and 'feminism'. Their studies should not be seen as daring but as challenging.

IMAGINING EMPIRE: FROM *MANSFIELD PARK* TO ANTIGUA

Benita Parry

Edward W. Said: *Culture and Imperialism*
Chatto and Windus, London 1993 £20.00

I

'[C]onventional narrative is ... central to imperialism's appropriative and dominative attitudes. Narrative itself is the representation of power, and its teleology is associated with the global role of the West.' (p330) *Culture and Imperialism*, which chronicles the role of cultural texts in reproducing ascendancy and generating resistance, can be read as a chapter in the intellectual autobiography of a prominent literary scholar who, because of circumstance and disposition, has brought his considerable scholarship to the study of imperialism. Elaborated in voices both embattled and reconciliatory, with the imprecations of an unsmiling public man protesting imperialism's wrongs in counterpoint to the academic's detached view of the long encounter as a joint venture of unequal partners, the book mixes elliptical reflection with sustained analysis and theory with polemic. It inscribes a counter-discourse to the received disposal of representational authority, and stages the disparate ways in which critics are now thinking through imperialism's enduring legacies.

Crucial to Said's compelling argument on culture as the invigorating counterpart to the institutional practices of colonialism, is the involvement of European literature in nourishing the imagination of empire and underwriting its ideology. Said remarks that while the novel as a 'quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form' incorporating 'an entire system of social reference', has for long been recognized as an artefact of bourgeois society, its affiliations with imperialism have yet to be studied. His principal concern when expanding the proposition that there exists a 'convergence between the patterns of narrative authority ... and a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism' (p82), is attributed with the English novel, which as 'a major intellectual voice' in British culture, is with elaborating and encoding the nation's sustained possession of far-flung space.

Because some of this book's material is already in circulation, it is possible to see how Said's writings since *Orientalism* have contributed to a climate in which critics are discovering empire as the hidden narrative of canonical fictions, hitherto analyzed as insulated moral critiques of domestic manners, customs and social relationships. Recent studies of *Jane Eyre* and *Daniel Deronda* have observed how these fictions associate the rhetoric and supremacist habits of

thinking engendered by colonialism, with the private sensibilities and deportment of protagonists, who bring the accents of empire to the re-enactment of class and gender oppressions in the metropolis.¹ In another register, the supposition that *The Waves* is a celebration of élite British culture, has been disputed by a reading that reveals it to be a story of the submerged mind of empire which critically displays imperialism's ideology and the corroborative function of romantic literature in its maintenance.²

In his discussion of *Mansfield Park*, Said designates the fiction as a pre-imperialist novel implicated in the rationale of imperialist expansion. Jane Austen's imagination is perceived as working through a mode of geographical and spatial classification, to map 'a hierarchy of spaces', within which it is assumed that the territorial control and exploitation of an overseas territory, is necessary to assure the stability, prosperity and harmony of the metropolitan centre – the relationship respectively figured by a plantation in Antigua and a country house in England. Said's interest is in attending to the ways that the ideas and experiences of empire are inscribed in narrative structure, and what is so rewarding about his reading of the 'geographic problematic' diffused through *Mansfield Park*, is that the foregrounding of the text's secular entanglements enhances appreciation of its inventions, intelligence and imaginative range.

At the same time, and perhaps because Said is not concerned with textual repressions and displacements, his version tends to attribute too coherent a rehearsal in the novels of imperialism's 'conceptual arsenal' – a depository which itself amassed a startling array of incompatible premises and fantasies. Another recent study of *Mansfield Park* independently discerns how Antigua underwrites Sir Thomas Bertram's social position at home, as well as observing the re-enactment of plantocratic relations at Mansfield Park. But where Said claims that Austen in construing a significant imbalance, offers the Caribbean no status imaginatively, geographically or economically other than that of a sugar-producer permanently subordinated to Mansfield Park, Moira Ferguson finds that Antigua functions as 'an anxiety-creating unknown venue' which satirizes Sir Thomas' authority. Again, where Said reads the concluding sections 'as the coronation of an arguably ... unnatural principle at the heart of a desired English order' (p104), Ferguson uncovers an ironic, understated critique of that order.³

It is apparent from his other discussions of fictions that Said elects to withhold attention from textual discontinuities and self-interrogations,⁴ and because this strategy is deployed by so practised and sophisticated a reader, it can be seen to work in the interest of producing a 'globalized description' of 'a largely unopposed and undeterred will to overseas domination' (p225), as this was elaborated across a range of texts. Thus while Said acknowledges that 'no one overarching principle governs the imperialist ensemble', and is aware of the 'antinomian discourses within any cultural formation', his concern is with the opposition to imperialism from sites outside its discursive system, rather than the fissures within its discourses. The consequence is a neglect of

1. Susan Meyer, 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*', in Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (eds), *Macropolitics of Nineteenth Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1991, pp159-83; and Katherine Bailey Lineham, 'Mixed Politics: The Critique of Imperialism in *Daniel Deronda*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol.34, No.3, Fall 1992, pp322-46.

2. Jane Marcus, 'Brittania Rules *The Waves*', in Karen Lawrence (ed.), *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth Century 'British' Literary Canons*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 1992, pp136-61.

3. Moira Ferguson, '*Mansfield Park*: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender', *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol.13 1991; Robert Young (ed.), *Neocolonialism*, pp118-39.

4. For discussion of Said's mode of reading imperialist texts, see my 'Overlapping Territories and Intertwined Histories:

self-generated critiques, however equivocal and compromised by contempt for the colonized, as well as the occlusion of the impermissible desire and inadmissible unease which could infiltrate even those texts exorbitantly inscribing an urge to power.

But whatever reservations I have with Said's notion of a 'consolidated vision', implying as it does a coherent and assured body of ideas and purposes, I find it an indispensable counter to those constructions which so privilege 'a rhetoric of anxiety',⁵ or of instability and undecidability, that the supremacist registers of imperialism's texts are muffled. What Said restores to the discussion is the force and determination of instrumental enunciations delivered from a base of entrenched political authority and insolent Eurocentrism. It was this which enabled Carlyle to pontificate on 'The Nigger Question' in an idiom that 'is not obscure or occult or esoteric' (p123), and prompted Ruskin to exhort the English to found colonies, 'seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on' (p124). And although Said does seriously underestimate metropolitan opposition to empire – an area which requires more study than it has yet received – his claim of 'consensus' can readily be sustained, not least by considering the writings of a putative anti-imperialist, J.A. Hobson, whose justification for a 'sane imperialism' was delivered within the same code as used by his adversaries.⁶

II

The explicit irritation which Said voices at '[C]ults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction ...' for giving intellectuals 'an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history' (p366-7), is implicit in the scant attention he pays to 'postcolonial theory'. This neglect, which is made all the more conspicuous by his ecumenical references to other cognate writing, is in line with the book's sometimes dizzying eclecticism, and will surely elicit spirited rejoinders from the many poststructuralist critics working in related areas. Meanwhile and from another corner, I must remark Said's disregard of the dissonance within imperialism's discourses, emanating not only from perplexity or uncertainty, but from a mismatch between the utilitarian advocacy of base material interests, and the virtuous appeal to superstructural values, the last undone both rhetorically and in practice.

That such disjunctions achieved their most complete articulation at the time of 'high imperialism' is not incidental, since the west's conquest of the earth was effected in post-Enlightenment bourgeois democratic societies which required both rational explanation and ethical justification for invading and occupying distant territories. What the new 'strategies of legitimation' brought to existing colonialist discourses, were the triumphalist aspirations of a modernizing project that was positivist, technocratic and rationalistic.⁷ The spatial extension of capitalist modes of production (Soja), was joined to claims of a secular mission to transform benighted peoples, uttered in extravagantly irrationalist

Edward Said's 'Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism', in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 1992, pp19-47.

5. For an elaboration of this position, see Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

6. J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, 1902, Unwin Hyman, London 1988, Introduction by J. Townshend.

7. See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Verso, London 1989, and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford 1989.

8. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1919*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1983, p234.

language, and calling on contemporary racial classifications to justify Europe's expropriation of the space of 'ignorant and decrepit peoples.'⁸

Whereas Said's interest is in expounding the continuities of the west's imperial enterprise, he does concede that high imperialism was a 'constitutively, radically different type of overseas domination from all earlier forms', in scale, scope, and organization of power (p220). Yet he wilfully overlooks the capitalist dynamics to the concerted expansion, noting the tendency to 'accumulation' in only the most abstract terms. Hence his writing appears indifferent to the new accents of an engorging rhetoric accompanying the massive land-grabbing, or to textual rehearsals of the world-map redrawn to designate the control of western capitalism. The contours and content of this redesigned chart are dramatically registered in the configurations of asymmetrical interdependence in *Heart of Darkness*, which also stages what Conrad named as imperialism's insatiable imagination of conquest in Marlow's sighting and recollection of Kurtz 'opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind.' To make these connections is not to suggest a mechanistic correspondence between material practices and representation, but rather to observe that the texts of high imperialism were enunciated in the language of inexorable ascendancy, and were marked by the ethos of capitalist aggrandizement.⁹

9. See Lord Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, (1922) Frank Cass, London 1965, where the mission to transport African people to a higher plane is without embarrassment subordinated to the needs of an expanding European economy being served by Africa.

It will be noted that I have followed Said in deploying colonialism, empire and imperialism as interchangeable terms, a usage by now so entrenched that to insist on their different provenances and past denotations could appear pedantic. But even if we choose to ignore Hannah Arendt's stricture that imperialism is neither empire-building nor conquest, its central political idea being expansion,¹⁰ it surely remains imperative that we differentiate between colonialism's or imperialism's or empire's distinctive incarnations, and direct attention to the changing languages of the variable discourses it deployed to dramatize metropolitan connections with the territories designated as peripheral. Said's definition of imperialism as 'the practice, the theory and the attitude of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory' enables a long view of the west's imperial dominance. It also promotes the neglect of the specific representations contrived at different moments to justify overseas rule both at home and abroad.

10. *Origins of Totalitarianism, Part 2: Imperialism*, Allen and Unwin, London 1951.

III

In designating imperialist narratives as linear and subsuming Said, who makes known his distaste for loud antagonisms and the polarized debates of both imperialists and anti-imperialists, urges the need for 'contrapuntal readings', cognisant of the intertwined histories and overlapping community of metropolitan and formerly colonized societies. By eschewing binary oppositions, he argues, such lateral strategies will enable interpretation of the discrepant experiences as interactive and embroiled. Now that notions of conflictual intimacy, complicity and vulnerable cultural borders have displaced

models of the colonial encounter as a confrontation between implacable adversaries, it is instructive to consider the extent to which hiatus and schism continue to haunt the discussion of imperialism. This tension between intimacy and estrangement is beautifully staged in a moment of Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), which invents a conversation about colonialism and neo-colonialism between an English civil servant and the western-educated Sudanese narrator: 'They were not angry; they said such things to each other as they laughed, a stone's throw from the Equator, with a bottomless historical chasm separating the two of them.' [Penguin, p60]

It could be argued that to conceptualize the relationship as mutual and symbiotic, restores agency to the colonized, wiping out the figuration of helpless victims controlled by all-powerful masters. But how then do we discuss coercion and oppression if we are under the obligation of reading imperialism contrapuntally? I am reminded here of how Christopher Miller negotiates the obstacles in the path of this utopian procedure:

Even though this is only a fantasy, Bakhtinian criticism shows how dialogue and polyvocality can be uncovered within apparent hegemonies, and this opens doors towards a better understanding of colonial and postcolonial literatures. Such a fantasy depends on a complete rewriting (or ignorance) of the material conditions of history: colonialism, the centralization of power in European capitals ... All of these are factors which vitiate dialogism within the substance of history.¹¹

11. Christopher Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, p27.

In Said's book, affirmations of co-operation and complicity, of 'sympathy and congruence', are repeatedly interrupted by assertions about the 'absolute boundaries', the hierarchical distinctions which imperialism preserved between the west and the native, about the strenuous denials of coevalness, the withholding of mutuality. The unresolvable contradiction in his stance becomes apparent when he concurs with those postcolonial scholars who have described colonial control as 'almost total' and 'in devastating, continuous conflict' with the colonized: 'To tell the narrative of how a continuity is established between Europe and its peripheral colonies is therefore impossible, whether from the European or the colonial side.' (p308)

This would seem to bring Said's position closer to the older ones occupied by Césaire and Fanon – writers whom Said cherishes as authors of liberation theory – who held that in the absence of reciprocity, civilizations were not placed in contact under colonialism, and castigated the west for creating a void around itself, extirpating the roots of diversity and reducing humanity to a monologue. Indeed against the grain of his optimistic practice of contrapuntal readings, Said in the last section makes this melancholy remark: 'history ... teaches us that domination breeds resistance, and that the violence inherent in the imperialist contest – for all its occasional profit and pleasure – is an impoverishment for both sides.' (p348)

I am, however, less interested in identifying inconsistencies in Said's rich and

convoluted argument, than in considering how these intersect with the contemporary discussion of imperialism as the begetter of global cross-culturation. Said's statement that all cultures are permeable and interdependent, is of course incontrovertible, as is his declaration that: 'The great imperialist experience of the past two hundred years is global and universal; it has implicated every corner of the globe, the colonizer and the colonized together.' (p313) But can we assume that the west's cultural transformation was of the same order as that generated through the critical reception of western modes amongst the colonized, and who went on to author recombinant formations? Mary Louise Pratt has asked what she calls the 'heretical' question: 'how does one speak of transculturation from the colonies to the metropolis?', knowing as we do that the 'fruits of empire ... were pervasive in shaping domestic society, culture and history'. What she offers by way of reply, namely that 'the periphery determines the metropolis' in the latter's 'obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself', suggests a somewhat attenuated notion of what transculturation might in this context mean.¹²

12. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992, p6.

If the postcolonial world has been the 'active agent of entering western discourse, mixing it, transforming it' (p260), then what of past ages during which Said also maintains, 'Imperialism consolidated the mixtures of cultures and identities on a global scale'? (p407) Said simultaneously advances the claim that most 'histories of European aesthetic modernism leave out the massive infusions of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland' (p292), and adduces evidence of 'an unrelenting Eurocentrism' at the heart of western culture during imperialism's long centuries, a lack of esteem that was compounded by denouncing, demonizing and pathologizing colonized societies.

I want to suggest that the notion of transculturation should as a prerequisite privilege the ways in which one culture interacts with another as an agent of knowledge, and that the asymmetry of a relationship in which power was held by those who aggressively professed to be implementing a cultural mission, necessarily inhibited – although it did not altogether exclude¹³ – such traffic from periphery to centre, since recognition of the colonized as interlocutors was officially refused. Thus 'influences' evidenced in the borrowing and adaptation of designs and motifs, or the acquisition of carpets, shawls and jewellery for the adornment of houses and persons, as well as in the massive expropriation of sacred objects, art and ornaments shipped to western museums, require another conceptual category. This would take into account that such appropriations do not entail an engagement with the cognitive systems within which these styles were generated, or the network of social meanings within which the artefacts functioned. Similarly this more stringent notion of transculturation would also mean that effects such as constructions of 'Englishness' as an island race with ever-widening boundaries, would be distinguished from those processes where the colonial worlds are interpellated as inventors and bearers of lore and learning.

13. Raymond's Schwab's sanguine evaluation of the 'second Oriental renaissance' has been evoked to support the predication of the productive transactions between two worlds: 'Asia has entered Europe like an invisible interlocutor ... The second Renaissance challenged us, forcing us to revise the known.' *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and*

IV

The consummate form of cross-culturation cited by Said is liberation theory. Having located native opposition as coterminous with colonialism's invasions, defined the culture of resistance as possessed of 'a long tradition of integrity and power in its own right, not simply a belated reactive response to Western imperialism' (p268), and done full justice to nationalism as an indispensable mobilizing force in anti-colonial struggles, Said discerns in the 'enabling Utopianism and generosity' of liberationist tendencies, 'a theoretical alternative and a practical method for reconceiving human experience in non-imperialist terms' (p333). This radical break, which promised the possibility of a transformed social consciousness and a more pluralistic vision of the world, is attributed to the colonized's critical engagement with western thinking, which was then seized and deflected into a critique of the west authored by those it sought to exclude from dialogue. By drawing positively on the 'decentring doctrines of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche', Said declares, 'Fanon reads Western humanism by transporting the large hectoring bolus of the "Greco-Latin pedestal" bodily to the colonial wasteland, where "this artificial sentinel is turned into dust."' (pp322, 324)

In expressing an unstinted regard for the theorists and activists of the liberation movements, it is noticeable that Said makes only the most perfunctory references to Cesaire, Fanon and Cabral, Walter Rodney and C.L.R. James as *Marxists*. This is an intimation of a more pervasive silence in his writings, and it has for long seemed to me that he uses 'liberation theory' as a code word for a transnational socialist project to which – despite his often acknowledged debts to Gramsci, Western Marxism and Raymond Williams – he *cannot* commit his own work. It would not however be politic to press the affinity too far, and I want rather to consider the singular nature of Said's cultural materialism. Despite a disinclination to engage with the capitalist dynamic of late imperialism and its effects on cultural texts, his 'geographical inquiry into social experience' (p6), which perceives imperialism as a contest over territory and resources, grasps cultural activity as real practices inseparable from the processes of political economy. Such procedures eschew the dehistoricizing gesture of some contemporary criticism which in observing alliances, metonymic linkages and transpositions between all discourses of domination, occlude what was specific about imperialism's mutating historical project and its variable texts of ascendancy.

Said's optimistic observation of the exilic, marginal, migratory, hybrid counter-energies at work in many fields, is attentive to the chasm between 'the mobility, the intellectual liveliness ... the bravura performances' of writers and academics who commute between places, traditions and styles, and the misery, waste and horrors endured by forcibly displaced refugees, migrants and exiles. In giving his own virtuoso production of his unhoused and decentred consciousness, it is 'the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages'

the East, (1950)
Columbia University
Press, New York 1984.
But omitted is
Schwab's stringent
proviso, that this
renaissance 'had an
ephemeral career in
England ... The
conquerors felt
obligated to defend
their conquest, which
meant exalting their
own race and religion.'
(p43) All the same,
Indian thought was
studied by European
philosophers. India
was a potent element
in the Romantic
imagination, while its
metaphysics proved
attractive to
generations of
Europeans.

who are seen to be 'distilling then articulating the predicaments that disfigure modernity – mass deportation, imprisonment, population transfer, collective dispossession, and forced immigrations.' (p403) This effects an alliance between the free-wheeling cosmopolitanism of writers and intellectuals, and the coerced upheavals experienced by communities without prestige and privilege. All the same, I am uneasy about a configuration that represents the crossing of borders as the normative condition of postcoloniality, since this acts to underrate the continuing adherence to cognitive communities, sacred and secular, which need not be perceived as demanding an exclusive commitment or offering the fiction of a fixed and monolithic identity. And indeed Said's scenario gives no part to the class allegiances motivating struggles against both local and multinational oppressions, or to the solidarities of gender and religious faith.

It is now common knowledge that the nation is imagined, and that identity is a construct. But I have never known whether the words spoken by Derek's Walcott's Shabine, 'I had no nation now but the imagination', (*The Schooner 'Flight'*), testify to joy or sorrow, or both. Said recognizes that 'the loss and sadness' of departing from enclosures should be acknowledged and registered, but has no regrets about working through attachments, in order 'to transcend the restraints of imperial, or national or provincial limits.' (p407) Still I wonder whether the tension between detachment from the stability of place and closed community, and fidelity to 'a heartland of the mind', is not closer to the actual conditions of enforced or voluntary ethnic dispersals. The artist R. B. Kitaj has defined diaspora art as in pursuit of 'a homeless logic of the ethnic', being contradictorily both internationalist and particularist;¹⁴ and although Said has often quoted Hugo of St Victor on the perfect neutrality to be attained by extinguishing all affiliations, what circulates through the expressions of his own diasporic experience, is an ambivalence between living on the borderlines of cultures, communities and traditions, and the attachment to a particular history and its stories.

If the planned or inadvertent silences and elisions which I have observed in Said's writing can seem momentarily to deflect from its attention to 'the gravity of history', his stance as a radical dissenter from still entrenched systems of domination, is exemplary. For me it remains remarkable that by refusing to abandon now unfashionable narratives of human emancipation, and in retaining an affiliation to a politics of fulfilment, Said in this spacious book which inscribes its own urge to participate in social transformation, could seem to be a secret sharer in that socialist project which nourishes hope in the possibility of human agency effecting a transfigured secular future from which exploitation and coercion have been erased.

14. *First Diaspora Manifesto*, Thames and Hudson, London 1989.