

## Postcolonial Criticism at the Crossroads Subjective Questionings of an Old-Timer

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AS ONE OF THE OLD GUARD and a co-organizer of the 1988 conference jointly planned by the Universities of Aachen and Liège, I have been asked to bridge the critical gap between the two occasions and their different themes, to evoke major developments in our discipline and, in Geoffrey Davis's favourite expression, to present 'the state of the game.' The 'game' here recalls Stephen Slemon's similar metaphor in his essay "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism" and his vision of contesting teams invading the postcolonial field.<sup>1</sup> I was never good at any sport, and to present in a short time a synthesis of our practices seems rather daunting. "The whole point [of the intellectual's task]," says Edward Said, "is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant."<sup>2</sup> I hope not to be the latter and can only insist that my reflections on the topic are inevitably subjective and leave out many of its complexities; that they travel from past to present but stop to interrogate the future which belongs to the young and what they will make of it. This is the subject of a number of workshops and of the concluding panel of the conference.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Slemon, "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism," in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. Chris Tiffin & Alan Lawson (London: Routledge, 1994): 15–16.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, "Representation of the Intellectual," in *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994): 10.

The theme of the 1988 conference was “Crisis and Conflict in the New Literatures in English,” “Conflict” becoming “Creativity” in the published proceedings. The emphasis on crisis, which did not then refer to critical methodologies but to the state of the world and its representation in the literatures dealt with,<sup>3</sup> implied both an investigation of the political and the social, *and* an aesthetic judgement on the originality of postcolonial literatures. Significantly, in his review of the proceedings, Russell McDougall pointed out that “the critical highlights of [the] published volumes [were] the statements by the writers,”<sup>4</sup> an opinion I shall have the opportunity to come back to.

The theme of *this* conference indicates an inevitable shift towards the theoretical and the cultural. But to understand the present-day division within the field between postcolonial theory and more traditional criticism, their partial overlapping and possible fusion, it may not be superfluous to throw a brief backward glance towards the pre-1988 period, not in a spirit of nostalgic reminiscence, but because early approaches influenced later orientations in postcolonial studies.

As an academic discipline, the field emerged under the impulse of one man’s vision, Professor A.N. Jeffares,<sup>5</sup> who organized a first conference

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<sup>3</sup> See *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English*, ed. Geoffrey V. Davis & Hena Maes-Jelinek (Cross/Cultures 1; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1990) and *Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English. Canada. Cross/Cultures 2*, ed. Geoffrey V. Davis (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Russell McDougall, “Crisis, Creativity, Conflict,” *CRNLE* 2 (1990): 127.

<sup>5</sup> This has been contested by Tim Watson in “Is the ‘Post’ in Postcolonial the US in American Studies? The US Beginnings of Commonwealth Studies,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 31.1–2 (January–April 2000): 51–72. Watson argues that the development of “Commonwealth” studies paralleled, and was helped by, the growth of American studies in the USA before the 1964 Leeds conference. He emphasizes the “central place of the US in the foundation of Commonwealth Literary Studies” (54). Admittedly, the late recognition of American literature in English departments everywhere helped establish Commonwealth studies by eroding the centrality of English literature. Also, there were indeed courses in Australian, Canadian, white South African literatures given by pioneer scholars in two or three American universities prior to the Leeds conference, and there was a section on British Commonwealth Literature at the 1959 MLA convention. On this subject, see essays by Robert T. Robertson and A.L. McLeod in *A Shaping of Connections. Commonwealth Literature Studies – Then and Now*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen & Anna Rutherford (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo, 1989). But Robertson points out that “American Commonwealth Scholars [...] were swamped first by Black Studies, then women’s

in 1964 at the University of Leeds. The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) arose out of that conference, which also set a pattern for subsequent conferences, then unusual in Arts departments, by bringing together writers and critics. Among the writers were Chinua Achebe, George Lamming and R.K. Narayan. It was followed by the creation of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, so competently edited for years by Arthur Ravenscroft. Jeffares has since been reproached for his anglocentric, metropolitan viewpoint and for his liberal humanism. But one should keep in mind that he used his authority as an internationally known academic and critic to draw attention to writers whose genius and originality he was among the first to recognize and who later became well-known figures. For at the time, ‘Commonwealth literature’ really did not exist, either in English departments or for a wider readership. And when it did, like the various cultures in which it originated, it was often appreciated for its exoticism, as Derek Walcott pointed out in his Nobel lecture with reference to the Caribbean.

To do research in, and teach, Commonwealth literature in the sixties and seventies was the exception rather the rule and did not go without some struggling to impose a subject which was looked upon condescendingly or criticized for its political implications. In the decades after World War II Europeans themselves (including the British) had enough to come to terms with in their own recent history. But the perception through literature, and its appeal to sensibility and emotion, of other earlier genocides, other trials like slavery, convictism or indentureship, the oppressions of colonialism in whatever form, all of which Europeans initiated but so far had hardly felt responsible for, this discovery and perception awakened among teachers and students a consciousness of, and commitment to, the meaning of other literatures in English. In addition to new aesthetic forms and the resources of the English language they were discovering, this was originally the

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studies, then Gay literature, neo-Marxist critiques and other fashions in the American academic whirligig.” Certainly, no American scholar had an influence equal to A.N. Jeffares’ or took similar initiatives, which fits in with the usual claim that the ‘founding father’ of postcolonial studies was Edward Said in 1978. See Jeffares’ answer to Watson, humorously titled “Elementary, My Dear Watson,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 31.4 (October 2000): 139–47. The point, however, is not who came first but who was really instrumental in spreading Commonwealth studies, including in the Commonwealth itself. It is interesting to note that Watson does not refer at all to the pioneering work done in European universities in the 1960s, mostly stimulated by Jeffares.

prime mover of Commonwealth studies. It may sound banal, even naïve, given the present elaborate state and complexity of post-colonial studies. Yet in the sixties and seventies this concern for meaning and value (in opposition to the rise of postmodernism) initiated the growth of Commonwealth studies and contributed to the radicalization of English departments.

Critical studies of local literatures were published in the 1960s, but it was not until the early 1970s that surveys appeared which offered a general introduction but dealt separately with each national area, thus inevitably pointing out their diversity rather than the sharing of a common culture, as the proceedings of the 1964 conference put it,<sup>6</sup> and showing that their authors *were* aware that colonial and postcolonial experiences and writings could not all be lumped together. From the very beginning, the field presented a duality which has since been the object of endless definitions, re-definitions and sometimes controversy: on the one hand, the assumption of a global area issued from British imperialism and the use of the English language (in whatever variety and overlooking other national languages); on the other, the exploration of national literatures without eluding the historical, cultural and social contexts in which they emerged (though not, of course, to the same extent as now) *because the subject itself required it*. Therefore, in spite of various degrees of their now criticized liberal humanism, these critics were already leaving behind the formerly assumed autonomy of art and the dichotomy between art and society typical of a liberal humanist and Leavisite approach, even though, as Helen Tiffin pointed out in 1981, “Our practice has been more impressive than our theory.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the duality between the global and the local in the early surveys was the germ of the endless debate between nationalism and/or versus internationalism, now being replaced by transnationality, but a subject more topical than ever.

Both in these surveys and the many essays that began to pour out and found a publishing outlet in new magazines, the major focus remained on the literary text and the impulse behind these journals was to reveal new writers and their cultures, admittedly to a largely Western readership – in-

<sup>6</sup> John Press, ed. *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Tiffin, “Commonwealth Literature: Comparison and Judgement,” in *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature: Essays of the 1981 EACLALS Conference*, ed. Dieter Riemenschneider (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1983): 19.

cluding, of course, Australia, Canada and New Zealand – and those institutions in the Commonwealth and elsewhere which could afford these publications, the poorer countries having great difficulty in securing them, a situation which persists today.

By the time we organized the 1988 conference things had changed considerably, though not to the same extent as between then and now. The appearance of literary theory and its multiple outgrowths in English studies has left no one immune from it, even the most recalcitrant, if only in the largely shared belief that all writings are underpinned by ideology as defined by Terry Eagleton (under the influence of Michel Foucault), who sees it as a spectrum of cultural factors that shape our mental picture of lived experience, “modes of feeling, valuing and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power.”<sup>8</sup> This clearly applies, whether consciously or not, to all literature, creative or critical. Most of us, I suppose, are convinced that it is true of some aspects of nineteenth-century fiction, for instance. But to what extent do the maintenance, reproduction or securing of power now apply to postcolonial writing? George Steiner makes a distinction between literary texts and criticism but even he agrees that “literate commentary” is an ideological process, “a reflection of power-relations within a culture and society.”<sup>9</sup>

Eagleton goes further when he concludes that

It is most useful to see ‘literature’ as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called ‘discursive practices’, and if anything is to be an object of study, it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes rather obscurely labelled ‘literature’.<sup>10</sup>

While not all postcolonial theorists have followed him all the way, I need hardly recall that Foucault’s notion of “discursive practices,” allied to “deconstruction” whose beginnings in 1966 coincided with the advent and growth of postcolonial criticism, the conviction that all discourses are partial, ideological constructs proved ideal instruments to pull apart the pretensions of metropolitan cultural imperialism and denounce its power-

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983): 15.

<sup>9</sup> George Steiner, “Viewpoint: A new meaning of meaning,” *Times Literary Supplement* (8 November 1985): 1262.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 205.

motivated partialities. However, such “counter-discourse,” if I may use a now hackneyed term, was simultaneously put forward by more traditional critics.

The publication in 1978 of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, strongly influenced by Foucault, makes him in the eyes of many the founder of post-colonial studies, as he is if one thinks of postcolonial studies as ideological theory. However, in his book on *Post-Colonial Theory*, Bart Moore-Gilbert demonstrates with full supporting references that quite a few of his commentaries, as well as Gayatri Spivak’s and Homi Bhabha’s, were anticipated by commentators, especially writers, far less influential in academic circles.<sup>11</sup> It may be an illustration of Eagleton’s emphasis on power-relations that the “holy trinity,” as they are often called after Robert Young, benefitted from the backing of rich and prestigious American universities and publishing houses. Whether said tongue-in-cheek or seriously (some are indeed serious, to judge by recent introductions to postcolonial theory), this canonization of critics, possibly unintentional torch-bearers of a new orthodoxy, is another ironical twist in a field whose alleged purpose was originally to dismantle canonization itself. Also, though I do believe, like Said, that some writers and critics are better than others, I give a start whenever I hear the expression ‘postcolonial canon’, which (if one keeps in mind the actual meaning of canon) necessarily involves choice, and the exclusion of writers who do not meet expected standards or modes of writing. I can’t help seeing this as an incorrigible tendency among academics to categorize and give permanence to value-judgements which, according to their own theories, are bound to be passing manifestations of taste and of evolving cultural contexts.

It is not my intention to criticize theory as such, even less its initiators or exponents. There is no denying the groundbreaking work of Said in *Orientalism* and his masterly demonstration that Western representations of the East are textual constructs serving a political purpose; of Bhabha’s analysis of the interaction between colonizer and colonized and his notions of hybridity and mimicry; of Spivak’s insistence on difference and

<sup>11</sup> See Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices* (London: Verso, 1997). I have also indicated that some of Said’s comments in *Culture and Imperialism* were anticipated by twenty five years by Wilson Harris, though Said ignores him completely in all his writings. See Hena Maes-Jelinek, “Another Future for Post-Colonial Studies? Wilson Harris’s Post-Colonial Philosophy and the ‘Savage Mind’,” *Wasafiri* 24 (Autumn 1996): 3–8.

the silence of the subaltern. I am only expressing doubt about the way theory is frequently used, making imaginative literature fit into it rather than using it as a helpful instrument. Often practised as an end in itself, it has undermined the predominance of literature as the major cultural carrier of significance, thus concurring with the shift towards cultural studies and the gradual marginalization of the literary text.<sup>12</sup> While the multiplication of theoretical positions and the controversies they arouse can be seen as a sign of intellectual dynamism, it may at least be partly responsible for the present-day critical turn in postcolonial studies.

I will only briefly point out a few directions. One major objection to so-called ‘high theory’ comes from Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory*,<sup>13</sup> who criticizes its Euro-American origin and methodology, its privileging of the Western canon and its lack of any real relevance to Third-World culture, its liberation movements and its reality. On the other hand, while subscribing to the continuous need for colonial discourse analysis, Benita Parry nevertheless deplores an excessive emphasis on textuality and its neglect of actual revolutionary movements. In an issue of *Essays and Studies* entitled *Post-Colonial Criticism and Theory*, edited with Laura Chrisman, these two critics reiterate their commitment “to ground the analysis of aesthetic culture in the historical, social and political realities of its production.”<sup>14</sup> They advocate a materialist approach instead of a predominantly textual one.

As you know, Homi Bhabha claims that the theoretical and the activist both practise “forms of discourse,” and he goes so far as to say that “history is *happening* (his emphasis) within the pages of theory.”<sup>15</sup> The view that “the event of theory” is an historical occurrence is very close indeed to Paul de Man’s writing that “Things happen in the world [...] and they always happen in linguistic terms,” and even that “death [becomes] a dis-

<sup>12</sup> Reacting against this marginalization, David Punter concentrates on “the relation between the post-colonial and the literary” and gives pride of place to the literary. Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000): 5.

<sup>13</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Laura Chrisman & Benita Parry, ed. *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism* (Essays and Studies 1999; Cambridge: The English Association, 2000): vii.

<sup>15</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory,” in *The Location of Culture*, ed. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994): 21 & 25.

placed name for a linguistic predicament."<sup>16</sup> One wonders what the real victims of history would think of this.

If one takes these statements seriously, the question arises whether one shouldn't feel responsible for words in the same way as one feels, or should feel, responsible for people. When the contributors to Parry's book assert, however relevantly, that "the realities of the world and the domain of discourse seem impossible to separate,"<sup>17</sup> the emphasis remains on what is called "discourse analysis." Whether theory or criticism, the object of analysis and the methodology, if not exactly similar, are still enclosed within a field – mostly ignored in the real world – that Robert Fraser dubbed "theocolonialism," a satirical double-entendre in a witty *Wasafiri* essay on "The Death of Theory: A Report from the Web."<sup>18</sup>

In the interaction between theory and cultural studies, however, one must stress the concrete basis and social involvement in the dynamic and eclectic work of someone like Stuart Hall, who explained that even as a young man, he understood that culture was "something [...] deeply subjective and personal" and at the same moment "a structure you live." "I could never understand," he says, "why people thought these structural questions were not connected with the psychic – with emotions and identifications and feelings."<sup>19</sup>

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Meanwhile, what, for want of a better word, I can only call 'traditional' criticism did not stand still but also evolved new areas of investigation, freeing itself of the paternalism and prejudices of liberalism, but still focusing on literature as the major signifier, even though, as John Thieme points out, "writers are in danger of becoming the new subalterns of post-

<sup>16</sup> Both quotations (from de Man's *Resistance to Theory and Rhetoric* respectively) occur in Stanley Corngold, Letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* (August 26–September 1 1988): 931.

<sup>17</sup> Ato Quayson, in Chrisman & Parry, *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*: 91.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Fraser, "The Death of Theory: A Report from the Web," *Wasafiri* 30 (Autumn 1999): 9–14.

<sup>19</sup> "The formation of a diasporic intellectual: an interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen," in *Stuart Hall, Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996): 488.

colonial studies."<sup>20</sup> Combining as it does subjective value-judgements, as aesthetic responses always are, with the rigorous text analysis or *explication* that brings to light the constellations of meanings literary texts generate,<sup>21</sup> literary criticism has, I think, abstained from self-justification. But there is no denying that in the former colonies, before and after independence, literature itself played a considerable part in stimulating struggles for political freedom and in defining cultural identity. Twenty or fifteen years ago, Commonwealth literatures were still seen as considerably widening the field of English studies, and we can see from the proceedings of the 1988 conference that literature still played a major role as an incentive to commitment.

We may now ask the question: do literature and literary criticism, as one of the areas within postcolonial studies, escape the condition of crisis which is said to affect the postcolonial field? That we have reached a turning-point and possibly a dead-end is suggested in quite a number of essays: "W(h)ither Post-Colonial Studies?";<sup>22</sup> "Postcolonialism and its Discontents";<sup>23</sup> *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*;<sup>24</sup> "Post-Colonial Futures: Things Fall Apart?";<sup>25</sup> "After Post-Colonialism?";<sup>26</sup> "What Comes After Post?";<sup>27</sup> "Waiting on the end of the world,"<sup>28</sup> and so on.

<sup>20</sup> John Thieme, ed. *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (London: Arnold, 1996): 6.

<sup>21</sup> On this subject, see Steiner, "Viewpoint: A new meaning of meaning," 1262.

<sup>22</sup> Vilashini Cooppan, "W(h)ither Post-Colonial Studies? Towards the Transnational Study of Race and Nation," in Chrisman & Parry, ed. *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*, 1–35.

<sup>23</sup> Graham Huggan, "Postcolonialism and its Discontents," *Transition* 62 (1993): 130–35.

<sup>24</sup> Iain Chambers & Lidia Curti, ed. *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, 185–203.

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Walder, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English. History, Language, Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998): 189–209.

<sup>27</sup> Doireann MacDermott, "What Comes After Post? Some Considerations on the Future of Post-Colonial Literature with Special Reference to India," in *Imagination and the Creative Impulse in the New Literatures in English*, ed. M.–T. Bindella and G.V. Davis (Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1993): 33–40.

<sup>28</sup> Iain Chambers, "Waiting on the end of the world," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues and Critical Studies*, ed. David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996): 201–211.

The crisis and the interrogations about it can, of course, be seen as part of the wider conjuncture of English studies and the humanities. If that is the case, postcolonial criticism and theory, in their development and speedy abandon of one orthodoxy after another, may have reached the state of disorientation prevalent in other traditional cultural areas, for which, originally, they provided a positive, meaningful alternative. This meaningfulness is one reason why I always objected to considering postcolonialism as a subset of postmodernism – Western in origin – in spite of similar, predominantly formal, features in the two trends, for I am convinced that they are inspired by very different worldviews or ‘ideologies’. However pessimistic and even crisis-ridden postcolonialism may sometimes be or appear to be, it is not permeated by ‘the sense of an ending’ that was a major factor in the origin of postmodernism and of poststructuralism, the death of God but also the demise of man and, one must assume, of the human spirit in the rejection of humanism and of all foundational referent.<sup>29</sup>

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For some time now the crisis in the humanities has been an object of analysis and suggested remedies. Rather surprisingly, Eagleton, who, in *Literary Theory*, had argued against the prominence of literature in comparison to other discourses, declared in his inaugural lecture as Wharton Professor in Oxford in 1992 that “literature [now in his eyes a remedy to the cultural crisis] is important [...] because it is held to incarnate, in peculiarly graphic and sensuous form, the fundamental, universal language of humanity [...] literature provides our most intimate, subtly affective acquaintance with that tongue.” He also talks of the “human [as] a singular essence,”<sup>30</sup> a word indicating, I suppose, a reversal of approach.

<sup>29</sup> This implies a distinction between “spirit” and what is seen as mere intellectual or imaginative construct. Since I wrote this essay in 2000, it seems that postmodernism also died. See “Postmodernism is dead, finally killed off after years of sickness as a result of mortal injuries sustained on 11th September 2001”; Julian Baggini, “Death of an Idea,” *Prospect* (September 2002): 10. The author argues that objective reality can no longer be denied.

<sup>30</sup> Terry Eagleton, “The Crisis of Contemporary Culture,” An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 27 November 1992 (Oxford, Clarendon, 1993): 5.

Some postcolonial theorists are also beginning to re-introduce literature among the plural factors they examine. Ania Loomba, for one, insists that “literary texts are crucial to the formation of colonial discourses [...] because they work imaginatively and upon people as individuals.”<sup>31</sup> A few recent essays have been concerned with “re-figuring the postcolonial.”<sup>32</sup> It is the topic of several papers on the programme of this conference, whose abstracts do suggest that their authors are keen on renewal and on finding a way out of the present impasse. An original attempt in that direction is a book by Ato Quayson entitled *Postcolonialism. Theory, Practice, or Process?*, an erudite, clearly argued and perceptive venture. His project reconciles several methodologies: discourse analysis, engaging with social reality and literary criticism, though, as a Marxist critic, his main emphasis is on the sociocultural import of literature, and he points out that while starting from the literary, he does not want to prioritize it.<sup>33</sup> He highlights “Process” as a form of interdisciplinary *Postcolonizing*, which may imply the rejection of a fixed ideology, though, for all his enlightened practice, it may also suggest an end in itself and carry unconscious ironical overtones.

This prompts two remarks, apparently unrelated, but at bottom inseparable in the practice of criticism:

As Quayson rightly argues, postcolonialism is an epistemological marker,<sup>34</sup> which should not only analyse issues relating to the former colonized but also new realities reproducing colonial conditions within the Western world. But why is it that in spite of an increasing interdisciplinarity and attention to the sociocultural in postcolonial studies, it doesn’t seem able to address an audience other than academic and in terms other than Western rationalism? As opposed to this, writers from the Commonwealth have met with an undeniable success among the public at large. Whatever one may think of the Booker Prize, it was awarded to more writers from the Commonwealth than to British novelists since its creation

<sup>31</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New Critical Idiom; London: Routledge, 1998): 74.

<sup>32</sup> See Christian Moraru, “Re-figuring the Postcolonial,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 28.4 (October 1997): 171–85.

<sup>33</sup> Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000): 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?*, 11.

in 1969.<sup>35</sup> Isn't it simply because the theorists' intellectual approaches fail to take sufficiently into account the complexities of the human psyche that affect both public and private life and are the privileged subject of the imaginary and the literary? Hence the lack of impact of those studies outside the academic world.

My other point bears on the terminology we use and the encoding of certain meanings to the exclusion of others, thus creating a new orthodoxy. In spite of repeated assertions that binarisms of all kinds must be discarded, some words and the notions they represent remain anathema. I shall start by being eurocentric and mention 'eurocentrism', which in any form of criticism is still the unredeemable monster.<sup>36</sup> If I may quote myself, I once commented that, from the outside, "Europe is often seen as a fixed, non-differentiated entity [...] which it never was. It has always been and remains [...] a mosaic of potentially conflicting nationalist regions inhabited by peoples of different cultures, who speak different languages [...] and at one time or another were colonized lastingly or temporarily."<sup>37</sup> One example is the Oriental conquest which still affects Yugoslavia today. These comments were received coldly, though my purpose, then as now, was not to exculpate Europeans of their colonial sins but, rather, to place imperialism in a wider context and to imply that will-to-power, ambition, the proneness to exploit others are not the prerogative of one type of human being, not aimed at aliens only, but are human features everywhere, yet hardly taken into account in comparative discourse analysis. Moreover, accusations of eurocentrism are not without obvious contradictions. For example, in order to emphasize the importance of Said's, Bhabha's and Spivak's work in the development of postcolonial theory, Hans Bertens contrasts it, "with all due respect,"<sup>38</sup> with the pioneering work of writers like Edward Brathwaite, Wilson Harris,

<sup>35</sup> See Luke Strongman, *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> To be fair, Ato Quayson is one of the few postcolonial critics who does not demonize Europe.

<sup>37</sup> Hena Maes-Jelinek, "Teaching Past the Post," in *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post-)Colonial, and the (Post-)Feminist* (Postmodern Studies 8; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1994), 144–45. This paper was read at a conference at Queen's University (Kingston, Canada) in 1992.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001): 203.

Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. However, the major difference between these writers' approach to postcolonialism and those of the theorists is that the former are inspired by world-views developed from *their own native culture and from the experience of their colonized people*. This may be true to some extent of the theories of Said, Bhabha and Spivak, but these are largely inspired by European thinkers – Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Antonio Gramsci.

'Essentialism,' 'humanism,' sometimes with the 'liberal' dropped – arguably ambivalent terms – have come to stand for what hardly bears examination in spite of their also positive connotations.<sup>39</sup> Not all essentialism is necessarily dogmatic or totalizing. In a talk delivered at a conference on "The Power of the Word/La puissance du verbe" (Churchill College, Cambridge, 17–18 November 2000), Wole Soyinka made a similar point. He criticized what he called the 'fundamentalism of language' and the 'inquisitional fervour' imposed by political correctness. 'Universalism' certainly used to convey Europe's hegemonizing stance; but doesn't 'postcolonial' as an all-embracing term partake of a similar generalization, including, for instance, white Australians and Aborigines? And given the Marxist commitment in most theorizing, one could argue with Francis Fukuyama that "The left has traditionally been devoted to universal values and a belief in an undifferentiated human equality."<sup>40</sup> If, as structuralism already claimed, language does not reflect reality but produces it,<sup>41</sup> isn't it important to know what our terminology implies? 'Postmodernism', used uncritically by some to epitomize our present ineluctable condition in a globalized world, denounced by others, carries different value-judgements depending on usage, with the consequence that critical standards are not merely subjective but unstable.

My last example is the word 'theory' applied indiscriminately both to the academic discipline and the criticism of creative writers, although it refers to different practices. At a stimulating conference on "Theory and

<sup>39</sup> See also David Punter, who refers to "shaky and usually misunderstood terms like 'essentialism'," in *Postcolonial Imaginings*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "Don't Do it to Britannia," review of Tom Nairn's *After Britain, Prospect* (May 2000): 24.

<sup>41</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 108. Eagleton sees in this the seeds of a social and historical theory of meaning, 109. My own view is that the relation between language and reality is a two-way process.

Literary Creation,"<sup>42</sup> illuminating essays were read on the connection and unity of thought between the work of creative writers, among them Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Virginia Woolf, and the critical or philosophical assumptions informing their literary texts. The published volume makes an original contribution to a better understanding of the writers' work. One must concede, however, that the writers themselves do not look favourably on theory, not for a question of terminology but, more fundamentally, because of the contemporary implications of the word and its practice.

I need hardly recall Walcott's scathing criticism of the "dead fish" of French rationalism.<sup>43</sup> Harris's objections to theory's excessive rationalism are even more explicit. Unlike the poststructuralist view of discourse, his own is rooted in a deep immanent and unconscious reality or "unfathomable wholeness," or, in Jean-Pierre Durix's words, "an unreachable but essential *centre*, a *pivot* which gives shape and meaning to the shattered edifice of perception."<sup>44</sup> This makes him an essentialist, though in a different sense from its usual meaning in postcolonial theory. Soyinka, too, objects to theory and adheres to a form of essentialism, while Rushdie, though using alternately the words "Commonwealth" and "postcolonial," wrote that "Every time you examine the general theories of Commonwealth literature, they come apart in your hands."<sup>45</sup>

There is, it seems, an emerging movement towards the rehabilitation of literature as "cultural capital," "human self-enactment" and as the mode of expression which "makes sense of our lives" and voices the ethical.<sup>46</sup> A

<sup>42</sup> The conference took place in Dijon in 1999. The proceedings are edited by Jean-Pierre Durix, *Theory and Literary Creation / Théorie et création littéraire* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> Derek Walcott, "Caligula's Horse," *Kunapipi* 11.1 (1989): 141.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Pierre Durix, "An Introduction to Wilson Harris's Discursive Strategies," in *A Sense of Place: Essays in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. Britta Olinder (Göteborg: Gothenburg University Commonwealth Studies, 1984): 140.

<sup>45</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991): 65.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "Why Literature Matters," in *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*, ed. Rüdiger Ahrens & Laurenz Volkmann (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1996): 13-22; Rüdiger Ahrens, "Shifts of Aesthetic Discourses: National, Post-Colonial and Post-Structuralist Discourses," 49-63; Heinz Antor, "The Ethics of Criticism in the Age After Value," 66-85. There also seems to be renewed attention to ethical values in literature, as was clear in several papers de-

majority of papers at this conference also point towards the renewed importance of literature, and I would add to this Wilson Harris's call for a "literate imagination" which has little to do with intellectual literacy but is a capacity "to read the world"<sup>47</sup> imaginatively, enabling the subaltern not necessarily to speak (though I think s/he often does) but to act as illiterate Beti does, the female character in his novel *The Far Journey of Oudin*.

Looking back over the last thirty-five years, we can see that postcolonial studies have succeeded in imposing themselves far beyond early expectations. As Bruce King said in his latest survey, "everyone [now] wants to be a cultural *métis* or post-colonial."<sup>48</sup> Even President Chirac, of all nationalists, recently said about an exhibition of the primary arts ('primitive' is now banned) that "there is no longer any hierarchy between the arts as there isn't between peoples."<sup>49</sup> There may be some danger, however, in this fashionableness. Leopardi, the great Italian poet, wrote that "fashion is the mother of death,"<sup>50</sup> a saying we should perhaps keep in mind, given the transitoriness of most criticism – excepting the critical comments of writers, which seldom go out of fashion.

Although it should be clear where my own sympathies lie, I don't think there is only one way of stimulating consciousness, imagination and commitment. We hope that whatever your special interest – theory, cultural studies, criticism, the literary text, or a fusion of all these – you will find this conference rewarding.

At a conference on postcolonial studies a few years ago, Doireann McDermott asked the question:

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livered at a conference on the future of English Studies which took place at the University of Bamberg from 29 July to 4 August 2001. At a conference in Bangkok in August 2002, Gayatri Spivak also argued for a return to ethical values and to a close reading of the literary text. I owe this information to Bénédicte Ledent.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson Harris, "Literacy and the Imagination – A Talk," in *The Literate Imagination: Essays on the Novels of Wilson Harris*, ed. Michael Gilkes (London: Macmillan, 1989): 21.

<sup>48</sup> Bruce King, "New Centres of Consciousness: New, Post-colonial, and International English Literature," in *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*, ed. King (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996): 10.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted by Françoise Monier, "La revanche des primitifs," *Le Vif/L'Express* (21 April 2000): 87.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by George Steiner in "A new meaning of meaning."



Should our conferences open with an Act of Thanksgiving for the existence of authors? Not only do they provide us with our daily critical bread but also, when they attend our meetings, bring in a salutary breath of fresh air to our scholarly discussions. Academic literary critics, embroiled in current post-colonial theory are always in danger of falling into abstractions, whereas creative writers, contrary to popular opinion, tend to hang on closely to reality.<sup>51</sup>

We are very fortunate that a fair number of writers have agreed to participate in this conference and that we shall have the opportunity to have fruitful dialogues with them and to be inspired or exhilarated by their readings. I confess that such an opportunity was decisive in directing me towards postcolonial studies in the first place. As a conclusion, I shall be subjective once more and quote a brief passage from Wilson Harris's "The Literate Imagination," written more than ten years ago, but which still seems to me to sum up the substance of the postcolonial:

A truly creative [...] response to crisis and conflict and deprivation [...] may well come from the other side of a centralised or dominant civilisation, from extremities, from apparently irrelevant imaginations and resources. The complacencies of centralised ruling powers – where language tends sometimes to become a tool for hypocrisies and false clarities – begin to wear thin at the deep margins of being within a multi-levelled quest for the nature of value and spirit. That quest becomes more and more imperative within endangered environments and *species* and communities.<sup>52</sup>

PS: Since writing this address in 2000, I read an essay by Paul Sharrad, whose basic argument is substantially the same as mine, though formulated very differently.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Doireann MacDermott, "What Comes After Post? Some Considerations of the Future of Post-Colonial Literature with Special Reference to India," in *Imagination and the Creative Impulse in the New Literatures in English*, ed. M.–T. Bindella & G.V. Davis (Cross/Cultures 9; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1993): 33.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson Harris, "Literacy and the Imagination," 13.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Sharrad, "'Signs taken for Blunders': or No Question about Ambivalence or Authority in a Washbasket in Brittany, March 1988," in *Compr(om)ising Post/colonialism(s). Challenging Narratives and Practices*, ed. Greg Ratcliffe & Gerry Turcotte (Sydney: Dangaroo, 2001): 45–54.

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