Teaching at the End of Empire

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> The school never forgot the day when big Bob Fraser "answered back" in class. Before the words were well out of his lips, the master, with a single stride, was in front of him, and laying two swift, stinging cuts from the rawhide over big Bob's back, commanded, "Hold out your hand!" in a voice so terrible, and with eyes of such blazing light, that before Bob was aware, he shot out his hand and stood waiting the blow. Never, in all its history, did the school receive such a thrill as the next few moments brought; for while Bob stood waiting, the master's words fell clear-cut upon the dead silence: "No, Robert, you are too big to thrash. You are a man. No man should strike you—and I apologize." And then big Bob forgot his wonted sheepishness and spoke out with a man's voice, "I am sorry I spoke back, sir." And then all the girls began to cry and wipe their eyes with their aprons, while the master and Bob shook hands silently. From that day and hour Bob Fraser would have slain any one offering to make trouble for the master. Archibald Munro's rule was firmly established.

The passage is from Ralph Connor's "The Spelling Match," but my quotation is from *The Canada Book of Prose and Verse, Book One*, a school primer edited by Lorne Pierce and Dora Whitefield for Ryerson Press in Toronto, and authorized in 1927 for school use in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland. The date is significant; for at the historical moment that big Bob Fraser is made once again to stand up tall in his colonial school-house—the subject-to-be-educated at the outpost or end of the British Empire—so too does the nation, having taken its blow from global war, now insist upon its own arrival in adulthood, its own coherent individuality, its power to regulate at the level of affect, its power to speak in a voice of its own. Authority calls; the subject answers; and in the process what begins as an oppositional practice—big Bob "answering back"—returns as the completed formation of a subject position in which the condition of adult male individuality is undivided and undying loyalty to the "master's" authority, unending continuation of the master's rule. The interpellation of big Bob Fraser is

thus an allegory not only of nation-making within the apparatus of colonial control, but also of the formation of the identified colonial subject: a subject, I want to argue, which has been fashioned *in the first instance* as the effect of colonialist education as it circulates and regulates the valency of literary meaning.

This claim, of course, is by no means a new one. Ever since Althusser identified education itself as a primary state apparatus for producing the work of ideology, an enormous amount of archaeological research has come forward on the front-line role that literary education—especially English Studies—has played in the manufacture of hierarchical social relations. D. J. Palmer and Chris Baldick, for example, have shown that in Britain, English studies was first instituted in women's and working men's colleges as a "soft" or "civilizing" object of study, and so has its national roots in gender and class control. In the British colonial context, Gauri Viswanathan's recent study of British literary education in India has shown that English Studies as a formal discipline actually *began* in India—that "English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country" (3)—and more importantly, that it did so as a technology for the manufacture of consent to colonial domination.

These findings, needless to say, constitute a remarkable disturbance in the discipline, but it is one that most teachers of postcolonial national literatures will have encountered immediately, and this at the thematic level of the texts they discuss in the classroom. For one of the most insistent arguments made by postcolonial writing—and in this context George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* or Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* are just two of what are literally hundreds of examples—is that colonialist literary learning is at the primal scene of colonialist cultural control, and that a pedagogy of the book plays a necessary and material role in the strategic production of willing subjects of Empire.

Given this wide range of critical studies that expose the embeddedness of English studies within British colonialism, however, and the repeated gesture to the scene of literary learning that takes place in postcolonial writing, I find it surprising that relatively little work has as yet come forward on the specific strategies that might underpin a *post*colonial literary pedagogy, an oppositional or counter-colonialist pedagogy for literary teaching itself. I need to be precise here, for of course a great deal of sociological analysis has followed on from Paulo Freire's work on pedagogical resistance; there have been all *sorts* of studies on the purchase of educational institutions on literary pedagogy; and a spectacular controversy has erupted over the politics of canon and *content* within various English Studies curricula. But what I mean here is that except for some scattered articles on postcolonialism and the classroom—Gayatri Spivak's article on "The Making of Americans," for example, or Arun Mukherjee's important piece on "Ideology in the Classroom"—and outside of an engagement with postcolonialism as a pedagogical vector within a general cultural theory, surprisingly little seems to have been written about the front-line exigencies of postcolonial literary teaching at the level of immediate classroom engagement.[1] My project in this paper is to present an argument about *one* reason why this might be so.

But before I do that I need briefly to acknowledge some of the *other* reasons why pedagogical models for postcolonial literary teaching are less than thick upon the academic ground. First, and simply: the field of postcolonialism is relatively new, and

thus it is one to which the publishing industry has not yet entirely offered its profit-taking embrace. Secondly, the question has been raised as to whether a genuinely postcolonial critical perspective can take place *within* the apparatus of English Studies: the place where "postcolonialism," whatever that is, *usually* gets taught. The moment in which we infiltrate Third World "knowledges" into Western literary education, Spivak argues, we become complicitous with the information-retrieval systems of imperialist custodianship, and thus we become complicitous in the founding of a "new orientalism" on the site of what we had hoped would function as an agent of resistance (see "Poststructuralism," "Making"). Thirdly, postcolonialism has all sorts of reasons to suspect that a practicable approach to literary teaching under the aegis of the Western liberal "humanities" is already an exercise in postcolonial self-defeat. Most important here is the argument, made by Barbara Harlow and many others, that like the prison system, the humanities are inescapably committed to the manufacture of responsible, culpable *individuals* whose position in a world economy is entirely a matter of their own self-fashioning—clearly a thesis incompatible with most of the arguments that take place within postcolonial political critique. And fourthly—perhaps most importantly—the whole enterprise of pedagogical research at present seems to be located very much at the "soft option" end of disciplinary engagement. Pedagogy, that is to say, is discursively in the feminine, in the "service" ranks of professional engagement, beneath the purview of intellectual advancement, and far from the rugged masculinity of the theoretical frontier. Who, then, actually *wants* to work on the immediate exigencies of postcolonial pedagogy, when postcolonialism as an institutionalized discipline circulates as a theatre for naked careerism and for professional self-emplacement?

My argument in this paper, however, is that *another* complexity underpins the general invisibility of a practical postcolonial literary pedagogy. And in order to unpack this structure, I want to offer three historical moments, three scenes of literary learning, which in my argument are meant to function paradigmatically as the three separate terms of a rhetorical syllogism.

The first of these scenes is again that Canadian school primer from 1927, *The Canada Book of Prose and Verse*. This is a work that places itself *against* the generation of imperial Readers which preceded it in the colonial curriculum—Readers such as *The Queen's Primers* and Nelson's *Royal Readers*, which hammer messages of imperial Duty home at every turn. And this Reader opposes those earlier imperial primers directly at the level of *content* by quite consciously foregrounding the work of about thirty avowedly *Canadian* writers. What comes across, unmistakably, is the idea that the Canadian landscape is indeed a fit subject for literary expression, and that Canadian writers can stand cheek-by-jowl with their British counterparts in every literary genre and at every literary theme. All "Commonwealth" national literatures have witnessed a similar kind of editorial intervention in literary curriculum: it marks a politics of repatriation at moments of administrative independence, and it practises an important interruption in that English literary monologue that has hitherto stood in for the complete apparatus of literary expression (see Odejide, for example). At the level of *content*, that is, this school Reader presents itself as a *post*colonialist document, and it does so quite consciously. In fact its acknowledgements page actually *lists* the Canadian authors whose work can be found in the volume.

But at the level of what Michael Apple calls "the hidden curriculum," *The Canada Book of Prose and Verse* is in contradiction with itself, and in a way that structurally undermines its conscious postcolonial cultural agenda. The text begins with a repetition of that greatest of colonialist tropes, the literary work as appropriative traveller, in Emily Dickinson's "There is no frigate like a book To take us leagues away"; and then sails on to articulate a remarkably coherent teleology of progressivist arrival through chapters on "Books and Reading," "Heroes and Adventure," "Enjoying Life," "The Out-of-Doors," "The School Theatre," "Home Life," "School Days," "Workers and Their Work," "The Young Citizen," and finally "The Spirit of the North," to arrive at last at an astonishingly clear articulation of monolithic nationality in Marjorie Pickthall's "Star of the North," the closing selection in the volume. Subtitled "A Hymn," Pickthall's poem reads as follows:

> Out of the dust God called new nations forth,
> The land and sea made ready at His voice;
> He broke the barriers of the North
> And bade our plains rejoice;
> He saw the untrodden prairie hold
> Empire of early gold.
> Star of the North,
> He bade thee shine
> And prove once more the dreams of men divine.
>
> Ask of the seas what our white frontiers dare,
> Ask of the skies where our young banners fly
> Like stars unloosened from the hair
> Of wild-winged victory.
> God's thunder only wakening thrills
> The ramparts of our hills.
> Star of the North,
> No foe shall stain,
> What France has loved, where Britain's dead have lain!
>
> Dark is the watch-fire, sheathed the ancient sword,
> But sons must follow where their sires have led,
> To the anointed end, O Lord,
> Where marched the mighty dead.
> Firm stands the red flag battle-blown,
> And we will guard our own,
> Our Canada,
> From snow to sea,
> One hope, one home, one shining destiny!

"One hope, one home"—everywhere in this Reader, the nation functions as a boundary text which denies ethnicity and the play of cultural difference. Indigeneity, when recognized, is relegated to the picturesque and the retreating past; and as for the

present state of the nation, it is figured agriculturally: Canada as the bread-basket of Empire, and thus readable as part of the machinery of economic, if not administrative, colonialism. The Reader, structurally, tells a growing-up story for *both* the nation and the child subject, and it makes that story monolithic, exclusionary, appropriative, and imperially contingent. Structurally, that is, *The Canada Book of Prose and Verse* calls down its own interruptive content, and what emerges here—as Homi Bhabha has argued in an article entitled "DissemiNation"—is that the "cultural construction of nationness" is made to function discursively, *within* colonialism, "as a form of social and textual affiliation" to the Imperium (292). The Canadian nation, that is, marks out a *topos*, a field for identification, which through the educational process is made to move *inward* into the student: an affect and an internalization of the Real. The figure of the emergent "nation," which begins as an interruptive marker in a discourse of empire, structurally figures itself as the site upon which the interpellated subject-to-be-educated in the colonial school-house becomes coterminous with the *book*—a narrative of formation, self-fashioning, and completion, whose condition of possibility is a continuing affiliation to the imperialist text.

And so the object-lesson of my first scene of learning is that postcolonial opposition, when pitched solely at the level of nationalist *content*, can actually function as a topic of colonialist *address*. In this instance at least, the *topos* of postcolonial nationalism becomes one of the ways in which an affiliation to colonialist narratives of containment is promulgated and internalized. And when a postcolonial textual critique actually *reads* this content-based postcolonialism against the grain of its own self-fashioning, it finds its oppositional claims nugatory, and its postcolonialism—as *pedagogy*—hopelessly compromised.

The second scene of learning—the second term in the general syllogism that structures this paper—takes place within Erna Brodber's important West Indian novel *Myal*, published in 1988. The novel opens with the figure of imperialism's docile body at the moment of learning—Ella O'Grady, aged 13, reciting by heart, and before the whole class, the entire text of Kipling's poem "Oh, where are you going to all you Big Steamers"—and then traces her progress into adulthood, where she has grown up to become the literary teacher in the same schoolroom at the book's end. This time her text is a child's tale about Percy the chick, Master Willie, Mr. Dan, and the other animals on Mr. Joe's farm—animals who have bolted for freedom only to discover that no one will care for them so deeply as Mr. Joe does, and so they come home. Ella has now learned to read this text as a *colonialist* fable—an allegory that robs its student readers of possible alternatives to imperialist management—and her work is to find a way of teaching the story against its grain. Her project is to make an oppositional teaching practice genuinely postcolonial, and for this, her way of teaching the text has to be culturally *effective*. If it is not, her students—subjects-to-be-educated into the ends of Empire—will remain not only economically but also cognitively enmeshed within colonialist representations, and the cycle of domination through the manufacture of consent will continue for yet another generation.

Myal tells the story of how Ella succeeds, and it does so through a narrative that might in itself encode a theory of postcolonial or counter-hegemonic teaching within the compromised apparatus of an imperialist English studies. To get started, Ella has to have learned how to read oppositionally; she has to have acquired the formal and

theoretical skills that underlie the practice of textual critique. But to *teach* against colonialist hegemony, Ella needs to accept her provisional and possibly compromised status as a worker who struggles against the imperium from *within*—that is, she needs to address colonial power from within the school-house, because if *she* doesn't teach this text and try, as she says, "to correct images from the inside" (110), somebody else will teach this story, and will likely do so without her oppositional clarity. And to *reach* her students with this oppositional energy, Ella needs communal support at the level of local, anti-colonialist resistance—in this case a group of characters who have taken on the animal names of the children's story (Mr. Dan, Master Willie, and so on), as *ironic* internalizations and as code names, and who maintain a coherent, subterranean telepathic conversation between themselves, one that the text suggests has been going on, in the guise of colonialism's allegory of control, for centuries.

Myal's postcolonial lesson, then, is that anti-colonialist textual critique *needs* culturally specific and local knowledges, and needs to function from *within* the ideological machineries for colonialist control. For if literary education itself actually is the "end" or aim of Empire—the place where ideology works to secure dependency and affiliation, and thus economic control—the project of an oppositional pedagogical postcolonialism is to stay at this end of Empire, but to try to reverse the temporal and positional vector in the preposition. Teaching *at* the end of Empire: Ella *at* this end has to transfigure "at" into an active prepositional marker and find ways to teach "at" or *against* the end of Empire—an "end" that is interpellative and ideological, and an "at" that needs to be grounded immediately in a space of subaltern agency, a space of oppositional action and of cultural self-knowledge.

My third scene of learning is an anecdotal one, but before adducing its lesson I want to say something about the ramifications for teaching that inhere from the first two. The lesson of *The Canada Book of Prose and Verse* suggests that an inculcation of local and nationalist knowledges goes nowhere as a postcolonial pedagogy unless it enters into specific negotiations with the practices and methods of an anti- or counter-colonialist theoretical critique. The telos of Brodber's *Myal*, however, suggests that a postcolonial textual critique *only* takes ground when embedded in local knowledges, subterranean voices: those "authentic," expressivist voices of Otherness to which the imperialist interloper never has pure access. To teach the lesson of the first requires critical theory: that is, it requires a negative hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of suspicion, *against* the voices of authority, against the embodiments of nationhood, against expressivist theories of full cultural *presence*, and against the textual possibility of literary identification. To teach the lesson of the second, however, requires anthropology: it requires a positive hermeneutics, a recognition of cultural authenticity in the vocalizations of the Other, and a reading for cultural presence, for local and oppositional knowledges, within the structure of postcolonial textual expression.

Needless to say, these two currents within postcolonialism are profoundly at odds with one another at the level of *theory*, and so, characteristically, my third scene of learning is a compromised one: it is myself, teaching "Commonwealth" literature to third-year students in a full-year course in the Department of English at the University of Alberta in Canada. "Commonwealth" literature, says Timothy Brennan, is a "fictional entity created by scholars in the provinces and depending on the imaginary coherence of tea time" (xiii). It is politically outdated, grounded in an ethos of global

spatialization and monolithic nationhood, and embedded in a pedagogy of nativist recuperation (see also Bhabha, Interview). But whatever its inception, this "Commonwealth" space of categorical compromise is the one place in my Department where postcolonialism of any kind takes place formally at the undergraduate level. And so I begin the course theoretically, with what I hope represents a politically vigilant, oppositional, and deconstructive assault on the ideological underpinnings to one of the great master texts of European colonialist control: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Later, however, the text before is us R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, and in complete violation of the kind of critical theory I began with—specifically, of the oppositional, deconstructive, anti-ethnographic critique advanced by exemplary theorists such as Trinh T. Minh-ha and James Clifford—I explain in positivist terms, however weakly, the principles of Hindu *advaita vendantin* metaphysics, and let the students think about the ways in which these principles might structure a reading of the text. What happens, pedagogically, I think, is instructive. The process of metaphysical, anthropological unpacking for reading *The Guide* produces a destabilizing effect in the students: they are troubled by their lack of knowledge, by the radical *otherness* of a non-Western organizing script; they find themselves a little more suspicious of Western cultural naturalization, of universalist generalizations, or the idea of purely recuperable meanings. What starts to emerge is a powerful motive for experiencing a sense of genuine cross-cultural respect. The deconstructive energetics of reading against *Robinson Crusoe*, however, taken in isolation at the beginning of this course, actually underscore what turns out to be a "feel good" exercise for the students: an exercise that lends them a sense of textual mastery and interpretive control. I end up worrying that what the students have really learned from their isolated exercise in anti-colonialist textual critique is a sense of superiority, and a renewed investment in the claims of global modernity over the semiotic excesses of the past.

It would be deeply uncritical to over-read this experiential encounter at two pedagogical moments within one university-level course, but the third term in my syllogism nevertheless suggests—and this is my thesis for this paper—that postcolonialism, whatever its engagement at the level of pure theoretical reading, *needs* to accommodate contradictory critical projects at the level of its undergraduate pedagogy. Two vast—and vastly different—kinds of critical projects mark the general field of postcolonial literary studies in its present moment: one positivist and anthropological, the other sceptical and deconstructive, one exemplified in Benita Parry's expressivist appeal for a reading of "an/other" knowledge on the part of the colonized, the other exemplified in Gayatri Spivak's deconstructive claim that "there is no space [within textual representation] from where the subaltern . . . subject can speak." In the theatre of critical publishing, where postcolonialism as a *theory* of reading is displayed most visibly as a contemporary cultural practice, there seems to be little attempt to negotiate between these mutually suspicious and usually hostile critical methods: in this space, postcolonialism resembles a post-Darwinian universe in which theoretical critique is an ascendent species, and knowledge-based research into other cultural systems is in the last throes of extinction. But in a postcolonial *pedagogical* practice—a space of teaching at the end of Empire, and thus a space of direct political engagement with the continuing ravages of neo-colonialism—there *must* be a space that allows the claims of *both* modalities of reading to take place. At the level of pedagogy, there can be no oppositional

critique without a grounding in the thick materiality of other knowledges, other systems of interpretation. And there can be no effective oppositional content without the anti-referential clarity of an anti-colonialist critique.

There are implications for such a thesis, and I want to end this paper by meditating on two of them. First, a pedagogy that embraces a significant order of contradiction or *difference* at the level of its foundational methodologies for textual reading has to give away the idea that a practicable postcolonialism can ever found itself on a pure and unproblematized notion of top-down political instruction at the level of its content. Here, as elsewhere, postcolonialism has to recognize the profound extent to which it is situated *within* the ambit of a continuing neo-colonialism, which means that it needs to accept that its politics are *interventionary* at best, never simply expressivist, and never fully arrived. Gayatri Spivak's claim that a pedagogy for Third World knowledges within an English Studies curriculum *necessarily* produces a "new orientalism" of cultural affect, Timothy Brennan's wholesale dismissal of a "Commonwealth" literary agenda because its roots run strikingly into a Eurocentric spatializing technology for proclaiming the "end of Empire"—these, I think, are critiques which can circulate as purist doctrines within the cultural institution of literary studies, and which can appeal in practice to a space *outside* the continuing circulation of neo-colonialist power, where the last flag at the last outpost of Empire really has been taken down. But as Ella O'Grady discovered, the untranscendable urgency of a postcolonial project is a redress of power at the level of its *local* oppressions, and for this its pedagogy needs to sustain its front-line interventionary work of "correct[ing] images from the inside." Peter Elbow's theory of a pedagogy that *embraces* contraries at the foundational level, W. J. T. Mitchell's avowal of a critical method of "dialectical pluralism," Gerald Graff's exhortation to teach the *conflicts* within literary learning: these approaches are sometimes read as blandly liberal ones within the discipline of literary studies, but I want to suggest that they may in fact be enormously useful to the description of a postcolonial pedagogy based on an *incoherent* and constantly renegotiated set of reading strategies. For if, in Gramscian terms, an oppositional or counter-hegemonic practice can be seen to *secure* a politics of oppression simply by *recognizing* that its dominant binaries remain in place, a processive pedagogy of thinking *through* methodological contradiction can also be redirected towards real social *change* at the level of the local. And it can *begin* that redirection by opening within English Studies itself—the *place* of colonialist management—a cognitive space in which the subject-to-be-educated reads the effects of ideology in *both* personal and political dimensions, and finds within that space, to use Ross Chamber's terms, something that functions as a "room for manoeuvre."

If such a room actually *can* be opened at the site of neo-colonialist ideological production, then there will also be implications for the way in which we read the question of *agency* under power—which leads me to the second and last of my closing meditations for this paper. For if a postcolonial pedagogy reproduces English Studies as a site for *both* a power and its resistance, and if it *also* works locally to produce some genuine order of social change, then we must give away the idea that hegemony is absolute and infinitely capable of recuperating its oppositions. Homi Bhabha has claimed that colonial authority, under the necessary logic of its own ambivalence, is *always* partial, disjunctive, and fragmented, that it is open to textual analysis, and that

it can be disarticulated—and because this is so, he argues, "the subject of culture" needs to shift away from negative dialectics towards "an attention to the place and time of *enunciative* agency" ("Postcolonial Authority" 57, my emphasis). If such a shift is to take place, there would seem to be *two* primary locations towards which a pedagogical postcolonialism would need to direct its attention: the subject by or *for* whom the postcolonial text claims to speak—that is, the colonized—and the subject *to* whom the text is addressed within the circuit of postcolonial pedagogy: that is, the *student* subject within the discipline of organized literary studies. Seen in this way, the colonized is a subject who can always claim an aporetic and contingent self-knowledge and enunciative agency, even when the processes of imperial subordination seem never more totalizing and the possibilities for knowing resistance seem never more abject.[2] And the student can only be a subject whose disjunctive and contradictory emplacement at the ambivalent "end" of Empire is also a necessary place for this subaltern textual opposition, a necessary agent in the construction of anti-colonialist social change.

Both orders of agency, of course, remain architecturally ambivalent and difficult to address. But if postcolonial literary pedagogy does indeed need to give away methodological coherence in order to work strategically, it may well turn out to be that the *place* where critical theory needs to turn, in the postcolonial first instance, is again to the scene of classroom learning. For if literary learning is *there*, at the primal scene of colonialist management, then a dialectics of Empire and its oppositions would suggest that literary learning will *have* to remain at the foreground of a postcolonialism as the inescapable place for the articulation of its resistances. Unless, of course, the cognitive technologies of contemporary neo-colonialism somehow crumble under a radical relocation of the Self-and-Other dialectic that characterizes Western modernity. Unless the unimaginable happens politically, and the end of Empire actually arrives, at some future, utopian, and historical moment.

NOTES

[1]I gave an earlier version of this paper in March 1992 at the "Post-colonialism: Theory and Practice" conference, sponsored by the Comparative Literature program at the University of British Columbia, and organized by Eva-Marie Kroller. There I learned that Jim Greenlaw, a Ph.D. candidate in the Faculty of Education, is writing his dissertation on the pedagogy of postcolonial literatures. My thanks to participants at this conference for their helpful comments and suggestions.

[2]For a detailed examination of the question of a displaced agency for colonial subjects, see Bhabha's "Postcolonial Authority."

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