Cultural Alterity and Colonial Discourse

Francis Barker et al., eds. *Europe and Its Others*. Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1984. Colchester: Univ. of Essex, 1985. 2 vols. £7.00.

One of the pervading myths of the 1890s held that the British Empire was decaying at the centre, stagnating in its own civilised decadence and lack of "originating vigor."[1] In the colonies, however, on the margins of civilisation where "society was still in the making," there coursed the energising currents of "life in the raw," the "timeless" struggles of "man" against the elements where existence as yet remained unpolluted by the enervations of wealth, leisure, property and decorum that had clogged the imperial system. For the New Imperialists, this myth kindled hope for imperial renewal, a belief that the Empire's vitality could be recuperated from the margins of culture and brought home again, restoring to it all it had lost, somehow, in the process of colonial acquisition. As Lord Curzon put it:

> I am one of those who hold that in this larger atmosphere, on the outskirts of Empire, where the machine is relatively impotent and the individual is strong, is to be found an ennobling and invigorating stimulus for our youth, saving them alike from the corroding ease and the morbid excitements of Western civilisation.[2]

And for those unable to embark on the imperial voyage out, there were narratives of adventure, "ripping yarns" from the pens of H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and later T.E. Lawrence and John Buchan, that enacted the "sick heart" myth of Empire and its process of renewal, and by doing so provided authority and legitimisation for the continued operations of the imperial enterprise.

Many of the more overt practices that further this superlatively Eurocentric world-view have now fallen out of fashion, but the myth continues to underlie social practices and discourses that inform the ways in which we recognise and conceptualise cultural difference. That industry which oversees the translation into English of literary works from South America and the Caribbean, for example, tends to favour "magic realist" or allegorical texts at the expense of those works written in a more realistic mode, and as a result it promulgates a distorted perspective within which distant cultures become purely exotic, sites of the bizarre or fantastic: not because of a profound sense of cultural uniqueness such as Alejo Carpentier wanted to articulate for the Caribbean, but by virtue of a unifying metropolitan gaze that transforms the "periphery" into a repository of a "universal" unconscious, a homogenous realm of wonders and marvels that lie latent in "the human condition" but have been buried by civilisation in its more advanced forms. The old patterns of imperial thinking continue, and they provide a matrix for self-referentiality in cross-cultural affairs that is not unrelated to present-day political struggle, such as that still being

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waged over possession of the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands.

The ideological process at work here is what Gayatri Spivak, in her essay on "The Rani of Sirmur," calls "othering," and it is the key concept in *Europe and Its Others*, the latest collection of essays from the University of Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature. This work, in two volumes, provides a range of articles, some of which have already appeared in other places, each dealing with a specific group of "others" constituted by the discursive practices and colonising missions of a dominant European or Western group: Chinese and Japanese immigrants in America; the "unterritorialized people" of Europe; South African blacks; Australian migrants; those colonised under the British Raj; and those subjects constructed under the rubric of "orientalism" (in Volume I); natives of North, South, and Meso America; Irish and Scottish peoples dispossessed by English colonialism; and victims of British racism at home (in Volume II). Several of these essays take up the construction of otherness not only in terms of race, but also in regard to women – victims, as the title of a recent issue of *Kunapipi* suggests, of "a double colonisation." Most of the pieces in this collection take a "case study" approach to this process and provide material, historically grounded, conditions upon which the Other is constituted in specific terms. But when read as a whole, these essays provide a thorough and fascinating account of "othering," the cognitive device by which "knowledge" of the Other is constructed, and the ideological process by which this knowledge is actuated in the control and surveillance of subject peoples.

The system of knowledge that constitutes Others as subjects has little to do with practices or values intrinsic to them, with the political, religious, and social codes by which Others live. Rather, it is an exercise in self-reference, a projection outward of one's own systemic codes so that they come to inscribe on to the territory of the Other – necessarily read as discursively vacant, "uninscribed earth" (I, 133) – a set of values and meanings that can be recuperated by reference to one's own inherited markers of cultural recognition. Both Norah Carlin, in "Ireland and Natural Man in 1649," and Jacqueline Kaye, in "Islamic Imperialism and the Creation of Some Ideas of 'Europe,'" explain the way in which the Other is constructed as a "mirror image" of the Self, an image which, in the case of the "orient" or of indigenous peoples of the American continent, reflects back upon one's own past, before the march of civilisation masked "natural" human behaviour, before the moment of "history" began. The "truth" of the Other, as Oliver Richton argues in "Representation, the Despot and the Harem: Some Observations around an Academic Orientalist Painting by Lecompte-du-Nouÿ (1885)," is fabricated not through correspondence to any material referent but by reference to other discourses, those codes that form the history of one's own gaze. It is a "truth" based on convention, and in the case of the specific discourse Richton considers, it performs the work of "originating" the rising power of nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology and of concealing its historical and social relativity.

According to Lata Mani ("The Production of an Official Discourse of *Sati* in Early Nineteenth-Century Bengal") and Richard Terdiman

("Ideological Voyages: Concerning a Flaubertian Dis-orient-ation"), this construction of knowledge inscribes a "textual network" (I, 31) on to the territory of the Other and thus translates that space into something immediately familiar and knowable. This inscription denies Others any valency outside the parameters of this textualisation and in effect "fixes" them within the gaze of the percipient (see Edward Said's "Orientalism Reconsidered," I, 16). It also organises the material of otherness within the conceptual and operational modes of existence that regulate the cognitive patterns of the Self,[3] thus "fixing" the limits of its value and signification within a prefigured and harshly circumscribed range of possibilities and constituting the Other as an inevitable "lack" in relation to the One. The Other becomes defined by negation and exclusion ("non-whites," "non-men"), relegated to mute containment within textualisation. And thus the One, the engineer of this discourse, not only claims all power of representation, of speaking for the Other (see Michael Harbsmeier, "Early Travels to Europe: Some Remarks on the Magic of Writing," I, 72), but also arrogates to (him)self sole purchase on the possibility of organic wholeness.

In other words, this construction of knowledge operates not only to interpellate a subordinate subject position for the Other but also to constitute a self-identity, one which is inextricably bound up with the exercise of power. In Helga Geyer-Ryan's analysis of "Prefigurative Racism in Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*," the repression of sexuality in the image of women is shown to be constitutive of a male "cultural identity" (II, 115), and in Gayatri Spivak's article the question of "how Europe consolidated itself as a sovereign subject by defining its colonies as 'Others', even as it constituted them, for purposes of administration and the expansion of markets, into programmed near-images of that very sovereign self" (I, 128) is considered in relation to the construction of one human subject – the Rani of Sirmur – within the interested discourse of English colonialism. The point, as Lata Mani (following Foucault) explains, is that "knowledge is produced within the matrix of power and that power operates through the deployment of knowledge" (I, 123). The discursive interpellation of the Other becomes mediated by a gaze that constitutes itself, as José Rabassa puts it in "Allegories of the *Atlas*," as *Oculus Mundi*, the Eye of the World, and in its "totalizing global vision" Others are constructed as an "out there" (II, 11), to be conquered and appropriated. They become determined by an exercise of power and of self-constitution, "people whom nature has marked out as inferior, who are incapable of progress or development beyond a certain point" and "upon whom nature has placed an impassable difference" (I, 43) – people irremediably distanced from those in control of the production of discourse and the regulation of its meaning.

This process of construction, whereby subject/object relations are determined by power and fixed within its discursive practices, is well documented in the critiques of gender, class and race relations. But as several essays in *Europe and Its Others* point out, *colonial* discourse provides a point of intersection for patriarchal, bourgeois, and imperial discourses, a site within which they interact, reinforce and naturalise one another. Helen Carr, for example, in "Woman/Indian: 'The American' and his Others," examines the way in which asymetrical

power relations embedded in the difference between women and the dominant patriarchal male are transferred to race relations in colonial America. At the same time that the image of woman is conscripted into emblematic representation of the Land, non-Europeans are constituted within the discursive space in which women are contained, and in this way patriarchy provides colonial discourse with a mechanism by which it can legitimise its control of a foreign territory and its subordination of indigenous peoples. Gayatri Spivak provides another, rather different account of this process in her examination of how colonial discourse constructs the Rani of Sirmur as a subject. It is only through the overdetermination of the discourses of race, class, and gender, Spivak concludes, that the Rani is granted "historical" presence and comes to occupy a space within that which British imperialism constructs as reality. As a point of intersection, then, where the elision of terms between the specificities of gender, race, and class can operate through a Manichean system of recognition and control, colonial discourse becomes a site where the component parts of "a broad set of fluid associations shift and transform themselves to accommodate fluctuating power relations" (II, 50), where the several manoeuvres of the process of "othering" can be called selectively into play. It is a site in which conquest can be made to seem natural, a civilising mission, where the world beyond can always be recuperated and contained, always denied the possibility of surprise, and where dominant social orders can be invested with an inalienable, because discursively constructable, right to control.

This capacity of colonial power to shift terms, to elide the specificities of gender, class and race in the construction of strategies of control over volatile power relationships, provides colonial discourse with the distinctive marker by which it can be recognised: namely, the display of tropes. José Rabassa's essay, "Allegories of the *Atlas*," examines how such a display operates in the signifying system that comprises Mercator's *Atlas*. Ostensibly an objectification of the world as then known, Mercator's Map is seen to function in a specifically "literary" manner as a signifying tool, the allegorical figurations that gloss the margins of the maps working in tandem with the figurative power of geographical inscription to mark out a hierarchical arrangement of the world. Names become the sign of colonial penetration; and where the lack of knowledge about places produces an absence of (imposed) proper nouns, the narrative of a Judeo-Christian index functions to determine their value and position. Within the semantics of space that this narrative enacts, History reigns sovereign at the centre, naturalising particular national formations and institutionalising Eurocentric codes of recognition; while in the margins of discourse known only as *terra incognita*, strange beasts, demons, and monsters range prefiguratively, locating the territory of the "peripheral" within "sedimented symbolic associations" of the fantastic, of otherness. Such a system of difference necessarily "founds the constitution of a dominant referent . . . [by] according primacy to one term that it erects as a norm and cast[ing] the other into the negative, the monstrous,"[4] and it is here that the process of figuration, the display of troping, comes into play. The continents are represented

as women, ranging in dress from the fully clothed (Europe) and the partly dressed (Asia) to the barbarically naked (Africa and American), each of them subdued to the male principle and offering her treasures to him. As with deportment, so with names: the naked women are shown to lack "properness," and the uncivilised world waits only for the material "troping" of History, the turning and transformation of monstrous and naked states into ones that will, in time, become fully inscribed, habilitated in the fabric of European codes of recognition and modes of production.

But as Peter Hulme points out in "Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality and Mobility in Early Colonial Discourse," this display of tropes requires "massive efforts of discursive projection and psychotic disavowal" (II, 26), and it marks that "turn" where the discourse reveals itself to be "most visibly dealing with difficulties of various kinds or, in a word, exercising power." If figuration opens the ground of colonial discourse to the march of imperial progress, it also marks that area in which it is most vulnerable to attack: one that will come from a complex process of ambivalence and anxiety at work within "polytropic man," the imperial subject, himself. Hulme's example of this is the figurative topos of "magic technology," a strategy of colonial discourse that constructs a boundary between technology and ignorance and thus confirms the Eurocentric hierarchy that the imperial self wants to impose. The deployment of this mechanism in the writings of John Smith, leader of the founding colony in Virginia, effects the desired division, but it also signals a trope or "turning"-point within Smith's own discourse and thus betrays the presence of colonialist anxiety about its own technology, its own capacity to represent. "Polytropic man tropes out of anxiety," Hulme argues, and Helen Carr arrives at a very similar conclusion in her examination of the way in which the link between social and sexual control in Puritan New England results in the communal projection of images of sexual deviancy on to certain women (witches) as a trope of "all kinds of social anxieties" and fears about what lies beyond the settlement walls (II, 51).

Colonial discourse becomes vulnerable, then, in the recognition that this anxiety or ambivalence stems from a deep-seated contradiction in the process by which the Other is constructed, a contradiction which opens colonial discourse to the possibility of fissure or rupture from within. For the construction of Otherness requires a dual inscription: it must derive and organise the significatory matrix that is imposed upon the Other from terms made available from its own archive and systemic codes, and yet it must also articulate that Other as unalterably different from the Self that it seeks to constitute. In other words, it must deny radical difference in order to affirm it, and as Homi K. Bhabha, in his essay "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817" explains, such a process of double inscription means that Otherness must always be constructed out of both repetition and displacement, must always be an effect of ambivalence in authority. Because of this, the possibility of resistance need not be looked for only within specifically oppositional acts, but can also be seen at work in the effects of ambivalence produced within dominating discourses as they

articulate the signs of cultural difference. Bhabha's specific example of this process has to do with the colonial authority of the British Raj, which required not only modes of cultural discrimination between English and Indian in order to rule (an articulation of difference) but also a contradictory assumption of social collectivity and identity whereby dominant blocs rationalised their right to rule on the basis of their representative or synecdocal relation to society as a whole. The recognition of such a pattern gives new valency to social practices, and the one that Bhabha considers specifically in this essay is that of hybridisation or colonial mimicry. Here, the repetition and displacement of imposed social norms brings about an important change in perspective, one that "enables a form of subversion." It is a subversion located within the cultural practices of the colonised subject, one that turns upon the uncertainty that is constitutive of the colonial gaze, and by seizing on this ambivalence, hybridisation "turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" (I, 97).

And it is just this kind of invervention that most of the essays presented in *Europe and Its Others* attempt to effect. Their stance, as Spivak makes clear (I, 147), is not so much oppositional to the discourse of otherness, the reversal of its binary operations (such as that between coloniser and colonised), as it is deconstructive of it. Such a stance requires both the unweaving of the discursive figurations that have been interlaced and deployed within the shifting exigencies of power relations, and specific deconstructive displacements of those codes and processes that appear in many guises as the mechanisms of dominating discourses. The essays in this volume succeed admirably in carrying out this important critical work, and as they do so they underscore the belief that the activity of "literery studies" remains blind to its own ideological investment when its discursive practices ignore the ways in which forms of subjection have become naturalised within the world we inhabit, and the ways in which those forms continue to be deployed in the legitimisation of new modes of subjugation, new impositions of imperial, patriarchal, and hierarchical will.

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[1] This analysis of the "sick heart" myth of Empire, and its governing metaphor, is taken from David Trotter's "Modernism and Empire: reading *The Waste Land*," *Critical Quarterly*, 28, Nos. 1 and 2 (Summer 1986), 143-53.

[2] Cited in Trotter, pp. 145-46.

[3] For a detailed examination of the process by which colonised peoples become trapped in the coloniser's system, see Marta E. Sanchez, "Caliban: The New Latin-American Protagonist of *The Tempest*," *Diacrtics*, 6, No. 1 (Spring 1974), 56-61.

[2] The quotation is from Monique Plaza's " Phallomorphic Power' and the Psychology of 'Women,'" cited in David Punter, "Politics, Pedagogy, Work: Reflections on the 'Project' of the Last Six Years," in Francis Barker et al., *The Politics of Theory* (Colchester: Univ. of Essex, 1983), p. 88.