

Introduction. What the postcolonial means to us: European literature(s) and postcolonialism

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'Postcolonialism' and 'postcolonial' are fashionable terms in literary studies these days. Henk Wesseling, in his 'Editorial' in the *European Review* (12(3): 267–271, 2004), with regard to another fashionable term, 'empire,' warned that the same word may mean different things to different people. So too it is with 'postcolonial' and 'postcolonialism'.

To begin with, there is the matter of orthography. I have used unhyphenated 'postcolonial' and 'postcolonialism.' In fact, the hyphenated forms are the older and more conventional. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin use them in their 1989 *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*,¹ still a landmark publication in the field, as does John Thieme in his 1996 *Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*.² Both restrict the use of 'post-colonial' to 'writing by those peoples formerly colonized by Britain' (Ref. 1, p. 1) and 'the anglophone literatures of countries other than Britain and the United States' (Ref. 2, p. 1). Both spurn chronology, reaching back to the 19th and early 20th centuries for examples of 'post-colonial' literature. Ashcroft *et al.* and Thieme thoroughly differ, though, as to the term's precise charge. Ashcroft *et al.* see 'post-colonialism' as covering 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day,' and this because they find there to be 'a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression' (Ref. 1, p. 2). Thieme finds this use of the term problematic, because of its association with 'writing and other forms of cultural production which display an oppositional attitude towards colonialism, which are to a greater or lesser degree anti-colonial in orientation' (Ref. 2, p. 1–2). He feels that this 'discriminates between those [writers] that contest colonialism and those that exist in a complicitous relationship with it' (Ref. 2, p. 2). He prefers to view the term 'post-colonial' as 'describing a continuum of experience, in

which colonialism is perceived as an agency of disturbance, unsettling both the pre-existing “Aboriginal” or “Native” discourses of the cultures it penetrates and the English (or European) discourses it brings with it’ (Ref. 2, p. 2). This is the difference, then, between a ‘committed’ and a supposedly ‘neutral’ post-colonialism.

Elleke Boehmer, in her 1995 *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*,³ sets up both chronological and ideological dividing lines, independent of a writer’s place of origin. Chronologically, the division is between ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’. Ideologically, it is between ‘colonialist’ and ‘postcolonial’. The dichotomy colonial/post-colonial is simply a matter of dates: roughly speaking, before and after empire, with the ‘post-colonial’ as simply ‘another period term designating the post-Second World War Era’ (Ref. 3, p. 3). Within ‘colonial’ literature, however, Boehmer discerns an ideologically committed branch of ‘colonialist’ literature. She takes ‘colonial literature, which is the more general term, ... to mean writing concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times.’ ‘Colonialist literature,’ however, ‘was that [literature] which was specifically concerned with colonial expansion’ (Ref. 3, pp. 2–3). ‘Postcolonial literature,’ ‘rather than simply being the writing which “came after” empire [i.e. “post-colonial” literature] ... is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship ... it is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives’ (Ref. 3, p. 3). Just as ‘colonialist literature,’ then, is the ideologically committed part of ‘colonial literature,’ so ‘postcolonial literature’ fulfils the same role within ‘post-colonial literature’. Nothing categorically excluded a colonial ‘creole’ or ‘indigene’ from producing colonialist literature, though of course this, as Boehmer posits, in practice ‘on the whole was a literature written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them’ (Ref. 3, p. 3). So too, nothing emphatically excludes a post-colonial white English male from breaking ranks and joining the postcolonial camp, though, in practice again, ‘postcolonial’ in Boehmer’s definition is mostly ‘a way of bracketing together the literatures written in those countries which were once colonies of Britain’ (Ref. 3, p. 4).

Boehmer’s inflection of ‘postcolonialism’ brings her close to Edward Said’s ‘resistance culture’ in his 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*.⁴ This is not to be wondered at, as Boehmer’s view of the role literature plays in the relationships between Europe and its colonies, colonizers and colonized, reads as if directly descending from Michel Foucault’s ideas on textuality, representation and power – ideas Said likewise acknowledges as having initially shaped the thinking that led to his own 1978 *Orientalism*,⁵ a book that itself greatly contributed to the explosive growth of ‘postcolonial’ studies. By the same token, Boehmer’s use of ‘postcolonial’ also takes her close to the border enabling the metaphorical spread

of the term into fields such as women's and minority studies, and hence to the work of such other highly influential theorists of postcolonialism as Gayatri Spivak⁶⁻⁸ and Homi Bhabha.⁹ Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, however, range far beyond the Anglophone literature to which Boehmer, along with Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, as well as Thieme, largely limit themselves. In fact, if anything marks recent developments in the field of postcolonial studies, it is its internationalization, theorization, and radicalization. This is definitely where the action is, the 'cutting edge' of the field.

At least partially instrumental in the radicalisation of postcolonialism has been Robert Young. In his influential *White Mythologies*,¹⁰ *Colonial Desire*,¹¹ *Torn Halves*¹² and especially *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*¹³ and *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*,¹⁴ he has consistently assumed an ideologically committed position, invariably informed by a thorough understanding of literary theory, particularly French, British, and American. This commitment also transpires from the editorial policy of *Interventions: An International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, which Young founded in 1998, and which has quickly established itself as the leading journal in the field. Young (in a personal statement to me) describes the journal's editorial policy as follows:

Interventions was founded in 1998 as a new specialist journal for postcolonial research, theory and politics, and aims to be both interdisciplinary and international in scope and reach. Postcolonial studies consists of three main components: postcolonial literatures, postcolonial criticism, and postcolonial literary and cultural theory. Its areas of enquiry range from current postcolonial literatures to the historical analysis of colonial writing and of writing under colonialism. Within this framework, *Interventions* therefore focuses on the following issues: the histories of imperialism and colonialism; the role of culture (academic, literary, and popular) in the operation of imperialism and in the formations of national resistance; liberation struggles, past and ongoing; the role of literature, culture and religion in the formation of nationalisms; the contemporary politics of identity, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality; the economics of colonialism and neo-colonialism; diaspora and migrancy in the past and the present; indigenous fourth-world cultures; the connections between colonialism and modernity, postcolonialism and postmodernism.

In *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*,¹³ Young pursues these radical aims to their logical conclusion. The book, according to its back page blurb:

Provides a wide-ranging analysis of postcolonial theory's emergence from anti-colonial movements in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, tracing the development of transnational third-world's 'counter-modernity' through the work of major figures of the freedom struggles, including Cabral, Connolly, Fanon, Gandhi, Guevara, Nkrumah, Mao, Mariátegui, and Senghor, and through the roles played by women activists.

Young argues that while postcolonial critique challenges established, Eurocentric knowledge in the cultural sphere, it must continue to work in the spirit of the anticolonial movements by further developing its radical political edge to enforce social justice on a global scale.

Young's *Postcolonialism* can be seen as at least partially an attempt to rebut critiques from third-world or non-western theoreticians, historians, and literary scholars that 'postcolonialism', while presenting itself as committed to the emancipation of the third world, or the non-western world, is in fact re-colonizing that world via the 'Trojan horse' of western theory.

Obviously, Young's 'postcolonialism' here has gone far beyond the field of literature pure and simple. It also far transcends the borders of the Anglophone world. In contrast, hyphenated 'post-colonialism' by now has largely come to assume the guise of the latest avatar in a historical series of terms starting with 'Commonwealth Literature,' proceeding over 'World Literature in English' and 'Literatures in English', to 'literatures in english'. This succession of terms over the last few decades indicates a gradually loosening hold of the literature of the colonial centre or 'motherland' over the literature(s) of the erstwhile colonial periphery/ies, with the lower-case 'e' for 'english' of the last term moving perhaps closest to the resistance charge of 'postcolonial.' Mostly, though, these terms cover the same repertoire of texts. It is this same repertoire that 'post-colonialism' also covers. In fact, in the way 'post-colonialism' continues effectively to confine itself to Anglophone literature, and tends to shy away from 'theory', it may even be said to constitute a recuperative strategy for refiguring the terms it replaces in the guise of modern terminology, while changing little, if anything, to the content covered or the approach followed.

Whether one opts for 'post-colonial' or 'postcolonial', then, will largely depend upon one's attitude toward the phenomenon of colonialism, or, to return to Wesseling's article previously referred to, 'empire'. 'Commonwealth Literature' and its descendants, including 'post-colonialism', obviously appeal to those that see Europe's expansion under modernity, and the attendant forms of colonialism and imperialism, as ultimately beneficial to the world, even if not wholly exempt from criticism. 'Postcolonial' presupposes a more radical critique of European expansion, and often of modernity itself, to the point of adopting the *Other's* point of view in a 'positioned reading'.

'Post-colonialism' as I have now defined it, 'naturally' situates itself outside Europe: it basically concentrates on the literary 'fall-out' of European, and even more basically 'British', colonialism in the (former) colonies. As such, it holds little promise for the study of 'European' literature properly speaking. 'Postcolonialism', on the contrary, opens up possibilities for turning the 'postcolonial gaze' upon Europe itself, and upon our own literary past and present. As such, 'postcolonialism' no longer remains something happening 'out there',

outside of Europe. Our continent, once the motor of (modern) colonialism, now becomes itself the subject of 'positioned' readings. Said has demonstrated how such an approach may lead to exciting re-interpretations of European classics, for instance recasting the rich English countryside of Jane Austen's novels as grafted upon the relentless degradation of West-Indian nature by monocultures. Others have done the same for English Jane Eyre's 'progress', in the eponymous Charlotte Brontë novel, as dependent upon the complete dispossession of her West-Indian counterpart Bertha Mason. More in general, such readings, not confined of course to 19th-century British literature, but critically applied across a wide range of European literatures, may lead to a re-examination of existing models of such literatures, to a re-contextualization of concrete texts, and to a re-canonization, of Europe's national literatures, but also perhaps to a more comprehensive 'European literature'. The present and following issues of *The European Review* offer a number of instances of various forms of 'postcolonial studies' applied to European subjects: a Dutch colonial author who revolted against his country's policies in Indonesia, contemporary Portuguese authors writing about their country's colonial past and postcolonial present, a West-Indian author advocating 'hybridity' *avant-la-lettre*, another West-Indian author (or is he? should he not rather be judged a 'European' author because of his literary affiliations, regardless of his 'origins'?) writing about the holocaust, two Francophone Antillean authors using and transforming European novelistic genres, South-African authors playing upon European conventions of literary landscaping, French authors 'creating' a literary 'Africa', an 'Indian' author creating the 'perfect European novel', third-world authors adopting, and adapting, the western genre of the detective.

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