"THE SIMPLE ADVENTURES OF A MEMSAHIB" AND THE PRISONHOUSE OF LANGUAGE

Jennifer Lawn

"Here, you see, sir, all the chairs," stated the little baboo, waving his hand. "I must tell you, sir, that some are off teak and some off shisham wood. Thee shisham are the superior."

"You mean, baboo," said young Browne, seriously, "that the shisham are the less inferior. That's a better way of putting it, baboo."

"Perhaps so, sir. Yessir, doubtless you are right, sir. The less inferior — the more grammatical!" (64)

THIS EXCHANGE BETWEEN George Browne and a furniture-selling "baboo" in Sara Jeannette Duncan's novel *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* introduces the premise of this paper, that the normative, systematic principles of language provide a model for other social practices. The extract illustrates several systems: that of cross-cultural interaction implied in the forms of address ("sir" and "baboo"); the specific sub-language of bartering; and even the correct "grammar" of wood types. Within a few brief words, categories of status, buying power, and quality are established. I propose to explore the workings of such social "languages" in *Simple Adventures*, particularly in relation to issues of power raised by the colonial setting of Duncan's text.

The concept of "cultural grammar" is a sociological extension of the linguistic principles developed by the early structuralist theorists Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf. Saussure first articulated the theory of language as a self-enclosed system, with language use being determined by convention rather than by any natural relationship between sign and referent. Members of a speech community are, however, "naturalized" to their native tongue and speak it unconsciously, forgetting its arbitrary nature. Saussure distinguished *langue*, the the sum of all linguistic rules, from *parole*, the individual utterance enabled by *langue*. *Langue* is always present yet never knowable in its entirety, and although it changes through time, it remains beyond the modifying power of any one individual.

Sapir and Whorf are, of course, best known for their "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," the concept that "the structure of a human being's language influences the manner in which he understands reality and behaves with respect to it" (J. B. Carroll, qtd. in Robins 99-100). In consequence, language itself is the product of a social contract, for we "organize [nature] into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community" (Whorf, qtd. in Knutson 67). Furthermore, if a language articulates an entire cultural universe, then "translation can literally involve the erasure of a shared mode of functioning in the world, and . . . the loss of a language can mean the destruction of an entire cosmos" (Knutson 67).

Subsequent critical discussion has differentiated a "strong" and a "weak" form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, labelled, respectively, "linguistic determinism" and "linguistic relativity." The former espouses the idea that

> every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are cul-
> turally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only com-
> municates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and
> phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.
> (Whorf, qtd. in Robins 102)

Whorf's sometimes vague writings also embraced the concept of linguistic relativity, which holds that the structures of language influence cognition and thought processes to a certin extent, without determining them entirely. In either form, the hypothesis views language as a social institution of extraordinary power, circumscribing potentiality by providing some terms, and not others, for describing the world. Sapir's observation that "human beings do not live in the objective world alone . . . but are very much at the mercy of [language]" (qtd. in Hawkes 31) has found more extreme expression in post-structuralist theory. J. Hillis Miller, for example, asserts that "language is not an instrument or tool in man's hands, a submissive means of thinking. Language rather thinks man and his 'world'" (282).

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied the Saussurean linguistic model to cultural phenomena, such as kinship relations, myths, and even cooking practices. In the cross-cultural context provided by anthropology, the customs of one culture become denaturalized against the background of another, just as in *Simple Adventures* the institutions of the colonizing British system appear alien in the territory of India. Duncan's text thus foregrounds or "defamiliarizes" cultural systems at various levels. At the broadest level, the novel opposes West and East. Within western culture, there occurs a split between English and Anglo-Indian.[1] Further subdivisions emerge: "Calcutta" has its own class system or "tagography" (137), its own rules of fashion, interior decoration, housing location, visiting etiquette, religious habits, recreational pastimes. Viewed from this angle, *Simple Adventures* traces the ways in which one "gradually [comes] within the operation

of custom" (96). The agency of this clause is significant: it is custom which "operates" upon the individual. "Calcutta" itself, referring not to the geographical location but rather to the complex Anglo-Indian social network in that city, is personified as a woman whose decree is absolute:

> Calcutta, in social matters, is a law unto herself, inscrutable, unevadable. She asks no opinion and permits no suggestion. She proclaims that it shall be thus, thus it is, and however odd and inconvenient the custom may be, it lies within the province of no woman — the men need not be thought of — to change it, or even to discover by what historic whim it came to be. (104)

Calcutta thus acts as a *langue* which "speaks" its inhabitants. Those wilful or alienated individuals who do not conform are "ungrammatical," stepping outside the categories imposed by society.

D EALING WITH WHOLE species more than with individuals, *Simple Adventures* celebrates "the great British average" (129). The narrator, Mrs. Perth Macintyre, refers on several occasions to the ordinariness of the Brownes. She warns the reader "under no circumstances to expect anything extraordinary from Helen" (26), and declares that George is "undoubtedly . . . very like other young men in Calcutta" (49). Altogether, "they were not remarkable people, these Brownes" (290). The characters' typicality focuses the reader's attention on the mechanism of the various systems which operate upon them; the text is a primer in cultural linguistics, a whimsical guide-book illustrating the subject-verb-object of Anglo-Indian society.

The customs associated with marriage provide a good example of a cultural system. The "syntax" of conventional western marriage consists of intimate acquaintance, engagement, and wedding. Any rearrangement of these elements — as in India, where engagement may precede acquaintance — is deemed unorthodox, "ungrammatical" in a British context. Likewise, any omission of one or more of the elements is socially distressing: hence Mrs. Perth Macintyre's defensiveness and embarrassment that her niece has failed to become engaged, despite innumerable opportunities for acquaintance (305). The marriage "sentence" also has a paradigmatic aspect: just as the subject of a linguistic sentence must be a noun phrase, the acquaintance must take place between a man and a woman. Since *langue* rather than *parole* takes precedence in *Simple Adventures*, it is not strictly important as to which individual is chosen from the axis of selection. The narrator comments, "I will go so far as to say that if Helen had not been there — if she had spent the summer with an aunt in Hampshire, as was at one time contemplated — one of the other Misses Peachey might have inspired this chronicle" (4-6). It is ungrammatical for "intimate acquaintance" to take place between a married

woman and an unattached man: hence Helen's concern, "in the interests of the normal and the orthodox," to encourage engagement between Jimmy Forbes and Josephine Lovitt and so break up a relation (between Jenny Lovitt and Jimmy) that was "too delicately adjusted to come under any commonly recognized description" (221, 219).

The marriage sentence of George and Helen proceeds perfectly grammatically, despite the slight blip of an unusual adverbial: the wedding takes place in India rather than England, but nonetheless Canbury sends hearty wishes for the future Brownes "as if they had behaved properly in every respect" (11). Helen and George, being natives of British culture, regard the whole marriage process as entirely natural. They fall in love "according to approved analytical methods," having "arrived at a point where they considered themselves indispensable to each other in the most natural, simple, and unimpeded manner" (4).

The Brownes naturally view their case of marriage as special, and Mrs. Perth Macintyre would risk a "good deal" of criticism from Helen to suggest otherwise (6). No doubt George, too, would be offended were he informed that his decision to marry was prompted, not by love, but by auspicious material prospects and the biological urge to mate. The narrator, however, implies the influence of such pragmatic and socially unmentionable factors by likening marriage to the wholly unromantic system of trade. On board ship Helen felt "that she ought properly to be in an air-tight box in the hold, corded and labelled and expected to give no further trouble. She realized, at moments, that she was being 'shipped' to young Browne" (28). Sexual slang frequently identifies women as goods; even in the nineteenth century Anglo-Indian women who returned Home without husbands or fiancés were known as "Returned Empties" (*Simple Adventures*, 305n). Although the issue invites feminist analysis,[2] men are also stamped and priced in the Anglo-Indian marriage market: " 'Three hundred a year dead or alive' " was at one time "distinctly the most important quotation in the matrimonial market for India" (132-33).

Simple Adventures similarly dehumanizes many other social groups. For example, the Government treats functionaries of Empire as goods, as George cynically notes:

> The valuation of society is done by Government. Most people arrive here invoiced at so much, the amount usually rises as they stay, but they're always kept carefully ticketed and published, and Calcutta accepts or rejects them, religiously and gratefully, at their market rates. (106)

Other less striking examples occur. Pellington, Scott & Co. deal in "rice and coolies chiefly" (2). The narrator metonymically describes the women of the Viceregal Drawing-Room as "shimmering trains" (121) or "grey bengaline and gold embroidery and a cream crêpe de Chine and pearls" (145). Batcham is a "large red globe-trotter," suggesting a breed of dog (197); other animal images occur, such

as the likeness of both the Indian bearers and Mrs. Macdonald's "menfriends" to flies (262, 31). Thus systems — including that of the animal world — "cross-infect" each other, and deflating analogies defamiliarize cultural givens.

II

The English are a sensitive people, and yet when they go to foreign countries there is a strange lack of awareness about them.

— JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

Post-colonial texts, according to the authors of *The Em-cultural*, and political forces intersect in the text, simultaneously both reflecting and *pire Writes Back*, are necessarily cross-cultural because they "negotiate a gap between 'worlds'" (39). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin establish a model in which post-colonial culture — defined widely as "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2) — "writes back" against the imperial centre by replacing metropolitan "English" with local "english." This "remoulding" of language proceeds through "abrogation" and "appropriation," defined thus:

> Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words. . . . Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience. (38)

Although Ashcroft *et alia* do not specifically address the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, they do reject the "essentialist" idea that "words somehow embody the culture from which they derive" (52). They reason that the essentialist view prevents any possibility of the changes in linguistic practice which have occurred in post-colonial literatures. Yet it is precisely the case that language use, if it embodies culture, will alter in accordance with cultural change; all language systems contain rules for such change, such as compounding, metaphoric extension, or new morphemic combinations. The authors go on to espouse the view that untranslated words in post-colonial texts "have an important function in inscribing difference" (53). They argue that language variance is metonymic of cultural difference: thus social, creating a "space," a "psychological abyss" between cultures (54, 63). This insight does not disprove the idea that "words embody culture."

An application of the model proposed in *The Empire Writes Back* illuminates several aspects of *Simple Adventures*. For example, Ashcroft *et alia* oppose the glossing of non-English words, for it implies a simple, one-to-one transference of meaning and negates the culturally-specific resonances of a word. It also "gives the

translated word, and thus the 'receptor' culture, the higher status" (66). The reductive nature of glossing is apparent in Duncan's text.[3] To translate "Raj" as "government" (227), for example, obliterates any connotations of domination or cultural imposition. Furthermore, the term "government" will evoke different images according to the nationality of the reader: Whitehall, Parliament Hill, and the White House vary markedly from each other, and all are inappropriate as equivalents of the Raj.

Duncan's novel resists the classification, established in *The Empire Writes Back*, between "colonial" and "metropolitan" texts. *Simple Adventures* is written by a Canadian but set in India, focusing upon British citizens in temporary exile.[4] The orientation of the text — the ethnicity of both the author and the projected audience — influences how we "situate" the work in a post-colonial context. Canada is a minority, "marginal" culture in relation to Britain, but a representative of the metropolitan culture in relation to India. Thus the occurrence of Hindustani words in *Simple Adventures* will have a different "message," for example, than the use of Parsi terms in the short stories of Rohinton Mistry.

Duncan's anglo-indians pepper their conversation with Hindustani terms. We may immediately dispense with the possibility that they do so to avoid the ethnographic pitfall of representing one culture in the language of another and thus "creat[ing] the reality of the Other in the guise of describing it" (Ashcroft 59). According to Mrs. Perth Macintyre, the memsahib has no concern for accuracy: "she gathers together her own vocabulary, gathers it from the east and the west, and the north and the south, from Bengal and Bombay, from Madras and the Punjab, a preposition from Persia, a conjunction from Cashmere, a noun from the Nilgherries" (227-28). Helen, the neophyte memsahib, eventually discovers that it is more "desirable" to speak like a memsahib than a native (232).

Hindustani, being the "tongue in which orders are given in Calcutta" (81), aids domestic and state administration in *Simple Adventures*. British administrators assert power by learning only those terms absolutely necessary for maintaining control — and learning them badly, at that. Even gentle Helen complains that she "[hasn't] the Hindustani to be disagreeable in" (97). Language misuse thus becomes a figure for cultural imposition. The authoritative colonizing power may pronounce decrees which have no correspondence to established native custom; similarly, in Mrs. Perth Macintyre's depiction the memsahib

> makes her own rules, and all the natives she knows are governed by them — nothing from a grammatical point of view could be more satisfactory than that. Her constructions in the language are such as she pleases to place upon it; thus it is impossible that she should make mistakes. (228)

The memsahib narcissistically congratulates herself when her order is obeyed: "the usually admirable result is misleading to the memsahib, who naturally ascribes it to the grace and force and clearness of her directions. Whereas it is really the discernment of Kali Bagh that is to be commended" (229). The Indians have thus accommodated far more than have the Anglo-Indians. Even the mallie has a perfect understanding with English flowers, which is "remarkable, for they spoke a different language" (165).

As for the sahib, he is "pleased to use much the same forms of speech as are common to the memsahib" (229). The "heathen mind" may manipulate, but it is the sahib, with his power of dismissal, who has the last word: "He has subdued their language, as it were, to such uses as he thinks fit to put it, and if they do not choose to acquire it in this form, so much the more inconvenient for them. He can always get another kitmutgar" (230). Thus the sahib learns only the familiar forms of address, for he has no intention of speaking to a native as an equal. He has a "vague theory that one ought not to say *tum* to a Rajah, but he doesn't want to talk to Rajahs — he didn't come out for *that*" (230). To wield authority, the colonizing power must never meet the colonized culture halfway; it is "the essence of the imperialist vision" that one world-view, one language — English — should reign supreme (see Knutson 79).

Despite George's warning to his wife, it is not true that "Anglo-India sanctions Hindustani for grim convenience only, declining to be amused by it in any way whatever" (233). Drawing-room conversation "scintillates" with Hindustanisms (231-32), and the narrator does not doubt that the native language even "creeps into the parlance of Her Excellency" (231). Such terms not only provide local colour for the novel, but also indicate that the Anglo-Indians themselves seek to "inscribe difference" against the metropolitan centre. They have developed a distinct lifestyle which resists some of the Mother Country's norms. After all, there are no sanctions against Sunday tennis in Calcutta. Furthermore, the use of Hindustani gives Anglo-Indians a measure of identification with the new territory they inhabit: not a desire for "indigenization," for they will forget the language when they "sail away from the Apollo Bunder" (232), but rather an indication of partial adaptation, the illusion of success in "translating" from one culture to another.

The Anglo-Indian abuse of Hindustani exposes the profound irony of the opening sentence of chapter twenty, with its mock formality: "for the furtherance of a good understanding between the sahibs and the Aryans who obey them and minister unto them, the Raj has ordained language examinations" (227). *Simple Adventures* in fact opposes the view implicit in linguistic relativism, that learning another language enables conciliation between alien world-views.[5] Batcham, a broad target for satire in the text, believes that language provides the only barrier to intercultural rapport: "'It's the terrible disadvantage of not knowing the language!' responded Mr. Batcham, in a tone which suggested that the language ought to be supplied to

Members of Parliament" (183). Mrs. Perth Macintyre's delicate comment on the collusion between Mr. Banerjee and Ambica Nath Mitter parodies Batcham's simplistic view: "Considering how discreetly Mr. Banerjee explained [Batcham's difficulty], the sympathetic perception shown by Ambica Nath Mitter was extra-ordinary. It might possibly be explained by the fact that they both spoke Hindu-stani" (185). In fact, Banerjee and Mitter "speak the same language" in more than one sense, both being tuned to the same profit-making wavelength.

Dᴇsᴘɪᴛᴇ ᴍᴀɴʏ sᴜᴄʜ laughable misunderstandings in *Simple Adventures*, the text does not suggest that translation between cultural systems is altogether impossible. Helen herself masters a new "language" in the course of her memsahib apprenticeship. She learns the techniques of bartering and command-ing, becomes an initiate into the secrets of "social astronomy" (125), and even discovers the hierarchy of recreational pursuits ("tennis was certainly going out — everybody went in for golf now — links all over the place" 110-11). By the end of the novel Helen speaks memsahibese as if to the manner born, naturalized to the language so that she no longer notices its absurdities. She has even acquired the accompanying body language, having "fallen into a way of crossing her knees in a low chair that would horrify her Aunt Plovtree, and a whole set of little feminine Anglo-Indian poses have come to her naturally" (308). If anything, Helen has "acclimatised too soon" (247). As a result "she is growing dull to India":

> She sees no more the supple savagery of the Pathan in the market-place, the bowed reverence of the Mussulman praying in the sunset, the early morning mists lifting among the domes and palms of the city. She has acquired for the Aryan inhabitant a certain strong irritation, and she believes him to be nasty in all his ways ... She is a memsahib like another.   (310)

Helen's fortunes demonstrate that it is reasonably easy to transfer from one cultural system ("gentlewoman") to another parallel system still founded on a British world-view ("memsahib"). *Simple Adventures* is less sanguine about the possibilities of successfully transplanting British institutions into the soil of a wholly different culture. The wedding cake "certainly had not carried well: it was a travelled wreck" (37). The abortive effort to recreate the snug, homely atmos-phere of a log fire with the kerosene stove illustrates "the foolishness of a sahib who tried to plant his hearth-stone in India" (155). Mrs. Week's attempts to transfer a set of religious beliefs reap no fruits other than the tentative question, "'*eggi bat,* would the memsahib please to tell them why she put those shiny black hooks in her hair?'" (240). These images present ludicrous aspects of the imperial endeavour itself.

23

Even within British culture, broadly defined, the class system inhibits social interaction. In chapter fourteen, geographical boundaries map out both cultural and social division. Like linguistic relations, social demarcations are arbitrary, but those caught within the hierarchy regard them as "natural" and do not question them. Edward Said notes the alienation which results:

> this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary. I use the word "arbitrary" here because imaginative geography of the "our land — barbarian land" variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours."
>
> (54)

A window separates Helen from her bustee neighbours: through it East and West may gaze at each other but never touch (162-63). The Brownes regard their boisterous, casual jockey neighbours even more wistfully. Because the members of the jockey household are white, their social estrangement seems less necessary: "[jockeys] belonged to the class Calcutta knows collectively, as a sub-social element, that nevertheless has its indeterminate value, being white, or nearly so, as a rule" (161).

Mrs. Perth Macintyre smiles at the type of the arrogant Royal Engineer: "we may even share his pardonable incredulity as to whether before his advent India was at all" (294). From a structuralist viewpoint, however, the Royal Engineer is not far off the mark. A major factor inhibiting any meaningful encounter between systems is the necessity to understand new experiences in terms of pre-existing categories. India is particularly prone to such preconceptions, as Sayter notes: "India is the only country in the world where people can be properly applied to for their impressions before they leave the ship" (140). Mrs. Peachey is captive within such a cultural "prisonhouse." She dimly realises "it was not likely that a little Bengali could be baited with a Bath bun," but nonetheless allows herself to "picture Helen leading in gentle triumph a train of Rajahs to the bosom of the Church — a train of nice Rajahs, clean and savoury" (12; 13-14). Batcham is the object of more severe criticism, in his self-serving determination to see only what he wishes to see:

> It was interesting to watch Mr. Batcham in the process of forming an opinion of Anglo-Indian society; that is, of making his observations match the rags and tags of ideas about us which he had gathered together from various popular sources before coming out. (193)

A more subtle illustration of the way in which established epistemological frameworks determine what is "culturally marked" occurs on the Brownes' honeymoon, in which they could "wander for miles in any direction over a country that seemed

as empty as if it had just been made" (42). The Brownes, with their English cultural blinkers, presumably regard cities, monuments, and neatly fenced farms as signs of an "established" country. Yet this criticism is by no means limited to the Anglo-Indians. We inevitably approach any text, whether literary or otherwise, with a mixture of knowledge, expectations, and preconceptions, just as Helen and other characters approach the "text" of India. India is necessarily "always-already-read" in Fredric Jameson's sense:

> We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or — if the text is brand-new — through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (9)

III

> How little more than illustrations the men and women have been,
> as one looks back, pictures in a magic lantern, shadows on a wall!
>
> —*Simple Adventures* 129

Systems have many sinister aspects. They can, for example, become mere impersonal mechanisms and subsume the individual completely. Indeed, Lord Cromer, England's representative in occupied Egypt from 1882 to 1907, imagined the apparatus of colonialism in such terms. Said comments:

> Cromer envisions a seat of power in the West, and radiating out from it towards the East a great embracing machine, sustaining the central authority yet commanded by it. What the machine's branches feed into it in the East — human material, material wealth, knowledge, what have you — is processed by the machine, then converted into more power. (44)

The same image of machinery is not obsolete today, for it turns up without evident irony in Geoffrey Moorhouse's recent history, *India Britannica* (1983). It also occurs in *Simple Adventures*, referring specifically to the central imperial authority:

> We tell our superior officers, until at last the Queen Empress herself is told; and the Queen-Empress is quite as incapable of further procedure as Mrs. Browne; indeed, much more so, for she is compelled to listen to the voice of her parliamentary wrangling-machine upon the matter, which obeys the turning of a handle, and is a very fine piece of mechanism indeed, but not absolutely reliable when it delivers ready-made opinions upon Aryan problems. (86)

This passage reduces human agency, so that even the Queen Empress herself must bow to a system which, like *langue*, is beyond modification by any one individual. Duncan never allows the novel's tone to darken, however. She has Mrs. Perth

Macintyre step back from such overt political criticism by identifying it as mere hearsay, a second-hand report of a casual comment ("At least I am quite sure that is my husband's idea, and I have often heard young Browne say the same thing" 86).

The danger of this mechanistic view is the very same feature which makes it so seductive for the bureaucrat: the fact that critics of any "wrangling machine" are unable to attribute blame for poor decisions to any one person. Incidents in *Simple Adventures*, however, suggest that canons of taste — both linguistic and cultural — do not emerge in such an inscrutable, impersonal manner. Members of a dominant group, or even particularly influential individuals such as Her Excellency, have the power of legitimation and redefinition. Returning to the passage which opened this paper, for example, it is young Browne who "corrects" the baboo's language usage. The term "baboo" itself is not neutral, for the former term of respect was "often used with a slight savour of disparagement" among Anglo-Indians (*Hobson-Jobson*).

Systems create hierarchies. The Anglo-Indians elaborately codified their own "social astronomy" in the Warrant of Precedence, "which was designed as an infallible guide to hierarchy in India, indispensable to the proper arrangement of [a] ceremony, conference or even of a mere dinner party" (Moorhouse 131). Even ostensibly "innocent" systems, such as modes of transport in Calcutta (119ff), are expressions of "power cultural," which establishes "orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values" (Said 12). To borrow the terminology of one of Janet Frame's characters, such norms can be "tippykill": typicality can "kill" the rebellious or marginalized individual who does not match any pre-fabricated mold. Duncan, however, depicts very few characters who stand opposed to social custom. The text is, after all, a prose version of the comedy of manners, in which serious emotional and interpersonal conflicts would jar. Mrs. Perth Macintyre does touch upon the way in which systems create "insiders" and "outsiders," but with a characteristic wry humour that excludes pathos. For example, in describing the Viceregal Reception she includes the detail of the "Mohammedan lady of enormous proportions" in crimson satin, who incites polite derisive convulsions from the inner circle, the ladies of the Private Entrée (123, 124). On board ship, even Miss Stitch, M.D., scorns the "foreign" woman who is "'about four annas in the rupee'" (32). And in a thoughtful mode, the narrator remarks upon the "cramping" alienation which Helen experiences in her own neighbourhood: "I mention the local isolation of these young people because it is typical of Calcutta, where nobody by any chance ever leans over anybody else's garden gate" (164).

Systematic categorisation tends to be restrictive and reductive. Again, the issue appears in *Simple Adventures* with a deft, humorous touch. The limitations of Mrs. Toote's trenchant distinction between the frivolous and the unfrivolous (112-14) become manifest with the next visitors: "Helen wondered in vain to which

of Mrs. Toote's two social orders [the Wodenhamers] belonged" (115). Duncan thus smiles at social practices which, even today, continue to oppress whole peoples. Said asks, "Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?" (45). Om Juneja, in a curt and damning review of Duncan's oeuvre, writes, "India in her fiction is an exotic commodity meant for the consumption of white masters. Sara Jeannette Duncan is a typical Anglo-Indian novelist who reinforces the stereotypes of a Memsahib" (114). Juneja fails to note that stereotypes are the very stuff of the comic mode and that *Simple Adventures* abounds with "fixed" characters, both Indian and Anglo-Indian. By the end of the novel even Helen's character becomes calcified: "this will sum up her impressions of India as completely years hence as it does to-day" (310).[6]

Yet comedy as much as any other genre must confront the constraining effects of stereotyping, particularly in a cross-cultural context. *Simple Adventures* does raise the question as to whether it is possible to escape restrictive categorisation, to stand outside one's native culture to the extent that it seems a "foreign language." In this respect linguistic determinism is self-contradictory for, as Robins notes, "if we [were] unable to organize our thinking beyond the limits set by our native language, we could [never] become aware of these limits" (101). Robins thus rejects linguistic determinism in favour of relativism:

> Adopting a physical metaphor, it would seem best to liken language not to a tram-line nor to an open road, as far as thought and categorization are concerned, but to sets of grooves or ruts, along which it is easier and more natural to direct one's thinking, but which with some effort can be overcome. (101)

The minds of most of the Anglo-Indians in *Simple Adventures* are firmly "grooved." Their cultural awareness is dismal. Mrs. Macdonald, for example, fails to realise that Hindustani sounds like English precisely because certain items did not exist in India until the advent of the colonisers ("It's awfully funny, how like English the language is in some words?" 231). A knowledge of one's own culture requires awareness of how social institutions *might otherwise be organised*. Anglo-Indian society, however, "inclined to be intellectually limp" (50), discourages inquisitive intellectual probing. Mrs. Macdonald assures Helen that she is "going the wrong way about it" in studying a Hindustani grammar to learn the language (230). Helen learns (the Anglo-Indian variety of) Hindustani by immersion, in the same way that she acquired her native language, and thus loses the comparative "objectivity" gained in a systematic approach. Once she has graduated to memsahibship, Helen "takes the easiest word and the shortest cut" (308-309), thereby following "the groove along which it is easier and more natural to direct one's thinking."

The Brownes initially think themselves above the petty social-laddering of Anglo-India (106, 129). As the acerbic Mrs. Perth Macintyre warns, however, this "tranquil" state is merely temporary, and the Brownes will lose their objectivity once they assimilate ("It is charming, this indifference, while it lasts, but it is not intended to endure" [106]). Sayter, like Mrs. Perth Macintyre, maintains a wry, ironic distance from Anglo-Indian culture, yet even his cynicism is a form of Anglo-Indian pose, available to those with sufficient social status. Sayter mocks, but does not fundamentally challenge, the foibles of Calcutta.

Mrs. Perth Macintyre credits herself with a superior, ironic stance, as one who still has "eyes to see" (129), claiming greater powers of observation than her fellow characters. Describing the scene in the Viceregal Drawing-Room, for example, she writes, "I have no doubt one wouldn't observe this to the same extent if one were amongst them" (124). The reader, however, must assess her reliability as a narrator. In some cases an additional layer of irony operates, in which the implied author and the reader snicker together behind Mrs. Perth Macintyre's back. For example, in the opening of chapter twenty-eight the joke is clearly on Mrs. Perth Macintyre, who sidles around the touchy issue of her niece's lingering state of singleness. The worthy narrator herself claims absolute fidelity to the facts of the fictional world. "It will be my fault if you find [Helen] dull," she writes, "I shall be in that case no faithful historian, but a traducer" (26). Conscientiously she cites her sources, explaining, for example, how she came to know the story of Mr. Batcham, Ambica Nath Mitter, and the six rupees (190). In the world of *Simple Adventures* however, any character's claim to truth is dubious. The reader doubts the accuracy of the gossip "coming straight from Jimmy Forbes" (216); servants' recommendations all have a "horrible mendacity" (74); Chua's law suit is a farce, with both parties bribing the witness (100); and the evidence which Batcham collects in pursuit of Truth is anything other than "unbiassed in every particular" (184). Mrs. Perth Macintyre herself does not escape from the snobbishness which she attributes to her fellow memsahibs. She spurns the Private Entrée ("everybody knows we wouldn't take it now" 124), but lets it slip that she is acquainted with the Viceregal couple: "can it be that circumstances — chiefly viceregal dinners — have thrown us more together?" (125).

THE UNCERTAINTY SURROUNDING evidence within the fictional world also obtains in the broader textual system of reader, implied author, and narrator. The extensive use of free indirect discourse in *Simple Adventures* creates difficulties for the reader in ascribing value judgments to either the "unreliable" sources of character and narrator, or the "reliable" source of the implied author, who provides the yardstick for the text's norms. The following description of the

dâk wallah, for example, reveals "orientalist" proclivities but leaves doubt as to whether they stem from Mrs. Perth Macintyre, the Brownes, or Duncan herself: "On he went, jingling faint and fainter, bearing the news of the mountains down into the valleys, a pleasant primitive figure of the pleasant primitive East" (280). The sentiment is not far removed from the narrator's sardonic comment that the travelling public in India sees only "an idyllic existence which runs sweetly among them to the tinkle of the peg and the salaams of a loyal and affectionate subject race" (147). The implied author similarly teeters between self-undermining parody and alliance with suspiciously orientalist views in respect of the travel narrative convention. Mrs. Perth Macintyre scorns travel journals and their creators (168), yet *Simple Adventures* itself contains four chapters of travel narrative, not including Helen's sea voyage. Such ambivalent, finely-balanced irony, typical of Duncan's narrators, has prompted contradictory responses even within the bounds of authorial reading. On the one hand, Juneja accuses Duncan of complicity with the colonial power; on the other, Misao Dean regards narratorial irony as a subversive strategy enabling Duncan to "covertly criticize the assumptions of the ideological centre without betraying her own or her reader's allegiance to them" (20). The latter view is far more alive to the wry subtleties of *Simple Adventures.*

Irony even pervades the title of the novel. Helen's "adventures" are scarcely "simple," for they raise profound questions about the operation of society. East and West alike are beleaguered by systems, and all minds, not only that of the baboo, "run in grooves" (200). Duncan herself maintains a discomforting ironic poise by refusing to "take sides" with or against her characters, so that *Simple Adventures* only rarely employs full-blown satire, which demands a clear moral standard on the part of the implied author. The machinery of systems will, above all, continue to grind, as each generation passes its traditions to the next. The narrator's last gesture for Helen is to donate her drawing-room furniture, and the novel closes as Mrs. Perth Macintyre's "sentence" as a memsahib reaches its term.

NOTES

[1] I use the term "Anglo-Indian" as it occurs in *Simple Adventures,* to describe any Indian resident of English origin.

[2] See Luce Irigaray's punchy essay "When the Goods Get Together" for an exposition of the patriarchal market in women.

[3] It is not clear whether the footnoted glosses appearing in the text were inserted by Duncan herself or by a subsequent editor. Tausky gives few bibliographical details, commenting only that his 1986 edition "reproduces a copy of the first American edition" [xxi].

[4] See Misao Dean, 3-18, for a discussion of Duncan's ambivalent national and political affiliations. Dean argues that "[Duncan] wrote as a colonial both committed to and different from the empire that created her" (18).

[5] Ashcroft *et alia* note the "widely held assumption that alien world-views might come closer if their linguistic structures were somehow meshed" (68) without further comment. They regard "interlanguage" and "syntactic fusion" as strategies of appropriation in post-colonial writing.

[6] Arguably, Mrs. Perth Macintyre also changes over the course of the novel as she reflects on her society.

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