

FROM FIRST TO NEXT

First families

JUST BACK from a conference in England on post-colonial literature (read “Commonwealth,” read “New English Literatures”), I am aware once again of the Commonwealth as a kind of political long poem. It begins; and then it begins again, rewriting itself beyond the control of the originating premises, reaching for its next stage, always a next stage, of conceptual understanding. First there was Empire. Then came the decentralization that accompanies and serves notions of national identity. Then came region, gender, class, ethnicity, race, creed, desire: the signs of greater individuality, perhaps, or the terms of a new internationalism, a different empire. Always someone seeks to invoke closure on the reality, to define. Always the definitions fail finally to satisfy. (What does “Ethnicity” imply, basically, and how has it come to continue to mean the margins of power when it began by meaning the centre of an alternative authority? Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, in *The New Diversity* [Penguin], persuasively demonstrate how the terms of a new pluralism in Australia — terms that are as relevant in Canada or New Zealand — are turning into a new orthodoxy of critical enclosure.) Always the idea “always” comes into dispute, shaping the space for other sets of connections.

The idea of *Empire* is a centred one, a version of authority (whether narrowly political or broadly cultural) that gives power to a single system (belief, code, structure, language) through assertions of norm and value. The idea of *Commonwealth* is inherently radical: resistant to lines of normative authority, though in practice it perennially constructs new norms and behaves (variously) as though they were always true and everywhere applicable. For example, when the European Empire began no longer to be the sole arbiter of Culture, what replaced it, in the “Commonwealth”? In the *settler* societies (Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand) it was an idea of self, perpetuated through the twentieth century (in this sense, perhaps, the century indeed “belongs to Canada,” in Laurier’s always-misquoted words), perpetuated as a model for other societies, self seeking to shape the world in its own image, to justify its own existence by designing others to confirm itself. Yet among the *settled* — the colonized — societies, the settlers’ designs

were as foreign as those of the old Empire. Here self declared itself again, sometimes so resistantly that no truths were acceptable from beyond the borders of local tradition. In a way, Empire reversed itself. Denial became the servant of expression and another watchword of control. But connections still exist, if not identities, always. One challenge is to see the shape of connections, and of still other connections, as they're in the process of happening; for seeing them as absolutes and only when they've become history is already to be circumscribed.

Second thoughts

A Shaping of Connections (a Festschrift for Norman Jeffares, released by Dangaroo Press at the twenty-fifth anniversary conference of the Commonwealth Literature and Language Association Studies, at the University of Kent, in August 1989) does more than simply chart the history of the association and of the changes that have taken place in conceptions of "Commonwealth." By turns anecdotal, analytical, and theoretical, the book brings together essays by several of the foremost commentators on the subject, both old and young, essays which (both severally and together) describe one of the contexts within which current Commonwealth literary connections are being made. Not the only one — American cultural and theoretical models are currently being applied to Commonwealth literatures, re-writing and redefining, according to binary United States norms, many of the plural paradigms that the "Commonwealth" has already given rise to. Such pluralities are evident in the comparative methodologies of Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock's *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English* (Methuen); in the intertextual readings of Andrew Taylor's effective *Reading Australian Poetry* (Univ. of Queensland); in the multiple categories of discourse that organize Laurie Hergenhan's instructively revisionist *The Penguin New History of Australia*. Another book from Dangaroo Press — *After Europe*, edited by Helen Tiffin and Stephen Slemon — adds to this picture. Emphasizing variety, it assembles a series of theoretical essays that might place contexts themselves in a literary/political perspective. "Orality," "periphery," "creolization," and "subject": these are the terms that come in for reflective analysis here. Even more valuable, especially as a challenge to misleading political binarism, is yet another recent work, one by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, significantly titled *The Empire Writes Back* (Routledge). Subtitled "Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures," this book resists the term "Commonwealth" intentionally, finding it a politically overcharged category, and probes and applies "post-colonial" instead. The authors recognize that their term has been used elsewhere for a variety of reasons, and that it, too, is not neutral. But they make a case, by means of this framing device, for the many paradigms and multiple processes by which — within "Commonwealth" literatures — language, text, and theory have all altered and, by altering, have resisted the canonical empire of "English" and "English studies" and freed what

they subversively call “english” to address experience with alternative priorities of value.

Altering the canon is not the sole prerogative of creative writing, of course, nor of theory, and a whole series of new anthologies on the market is trying both to challenge received norms of judgment and to capitalize on the desire — prevalent in a variety of quarters — for alternative hierarchies of value. “Standard” anthologies, such as the omnibus volumes of freshman surveys, have in recent years been expanding (on revision, usually) to include a requisite handful of black, Canadian, or women’s texts. “Special subject” anthologies — such as Lynne Spender’s *Her Selection* and Debra Adelaide’s *A Bright and Fiery Troop* (both Penguin, and both explicitly feminist) — deliberately set out to redefine the canon so that their subject is no longer “special” but now the “norm” against which other material is to be measured.

There are even some ongoing series, such as the recent five-volume set from Macmillan (London) — medieval to twentieth century — edited respectively by Michael Alexander and Felicity Riddy (the most innovative of the five), Gordon Campbell, Ian McGowan, Brian Martin, and Neil McEwan. There are some conventionalities here; the books neither question the usual temporal categories of English Department curricula nor (except in the case of Alexander and Riddy) do they include much in the way of writing by women. Yet they do (by excerpting repeatedly from novels and plays) question some conventions about genre and raise theoretically interesting questions about the art of the fragment and the validity of “wholeness.” So far this series is about English, not “english,” which describes rather than defines its use (though some would argue that these verbs are too close to distinguish, in this context). For retaining “national boundaries” around literature, which constitutes one alternative to the temporal boundaries of “literary periods,” only sometimes works to make “Commonwealth” texts, say, central in their own right, a process of “writing back”; sometimes it remains a strategic way of keeping them at a margin. But with various anthologies now out and underway, some useful alternatives to the resistantly canonical survey are becoming accessible, and that in itself is a substantial step in rethinking the inter-related questions of bias and value.

Third World

For people tend to value that which they have already learned to value: rhyme and order, or freedom from rhyme or order; the speaking voice or the artifice of metaphor; the “*Great Men*” of custom and history or some version of “Other.” Apropos of this question, *The New Diversity* quotes the Australian novelist Robert Drewe on the limits of one of his own characters: “Cullen is committed to the proposition which Manning Clark [the historian] characterises as Australian: that there should be ‘no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy

wrong, not anything but a commonplace prosperity in broad and simple daylight.' Unfortunately the real world, the Third World . . . rejects this proposition. . . ." That is to say, it rejects the confident centrism that implicitly (even if not explicitly) denies alternatives to the status quo. But even the "Third World" is a mental construct — and "in the real world" it is neither monolithic nor uniform. Asked to define itself, moreover, "it" (no longer unitary) no longer uses the language that reconfirms the "First" (or is it "Second") World's versions of norm, tradition, or colony. It does something "other," often to retrieve self from a historical margin.

There are many versions of "otherness," most having to do with extrapolations of the self. All impinge on language. Michel de Certeau's *Heterologies* (Univ. of Minnesota) reflects on pluralities of discourse; Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* (Methuen) finds otherness at home in England, in connections between style and class; Govind Narain Sharma's *Literature and Commitment* (Tsar) assembles papers on "major" Commonwealth writers, in the process demonstrating some of the political ruptures that impel writers into creative (*because* political) stylistic ventures.

Mirko Jurak's *Cross-Cultural Studies* (Univ. of Ljubljana), the proceedings of a 1988 symposium, in Slovenia, in part on Commonwealth writers, asserts the growing interest in such writings in Europe; Dieter Riemenschneider's *Critical Approaches to the New Literatures in English* (Die Blaue Eule), at once less descriptive and more theoretical, surveys the limits of Marxist, Nationalist, and Post-Colonial approaches to Commonwealth writing, substituting the "Frankfurt strategy" in their place. The Frankfurt strategy turns out to be a *series* of binary oppositions (British *vs.* colonial, settler *vs.* native, minority *vs.* majority, etc.) which minimizes gender and class differences within these categories, though it does demonstrate how binary categories structure the "other," the alternative in each pair, in the very process of defining the subject for discussion. One more book from Europe, Jean-Pierre Durix's *The Writer Written* (Greenwood), probes by contrast the plural possibilities within a single (though complex) subject — the image of the artist in Commonwealth texts; surprisingly, but instructively, Durix finds numerous parallels between "Old" and "New" Commonwealth; he nonetheless demonstrates how the artist-figures in the writings of Harris and Rushdie, say, both result from and manage "bolder syntheses" of language than is characteristic of the leading novelists of the settler societies.

That said, the numerous books explicitly on *black* writing in the Commonwealth assert difference more than they admit to similarity. In the wake of Wole Soyinka's winning the Nobel Prize — and of the release of his *Mandela's Earth and other poems* (Random House), in part an adaptation of the traditional praise poem to contemporary political ends — it is no surprise to discover a spate of books on his work, from Obi Maduakor's *Wole Soyinka* (Garland) and Greta Coger's *Index of Subjects, Proverbs and Themes in the Writings of Wole Soyinka* (Greenwood)

to Ketu H. Katrak's illuminating account of Yoruba ritual action in the playwright's dramatic theory and practice, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy* (Greenwood). But other books are more instructive for their general principles. Vernon February's *And Bid Him Sing* (Kegan Paul) asserts (androcentrically, it seems) that "in demythologizing the white world, the black man often forged his own language, his own symbolism." (As though to demonstrate the parodic impulse of much re-writing, one of his chapters is entitled "From Peau Noire to Po' White.") Robert Fraser's *West African Poetry* (Cambridge) emphasizes the historical changes that took poetry in Africa from oral paradigms to written ones and back again; Isidore Okpewho's anthology, *The Heritage of African Poetry* (Longman), brings both oral and written verse together, using critical notes and thematic links (designed for the reader unfamiliar with Africa) to insist on this poetry's particular contextual frames. Chidi Amuta's *The Theory of African Literature* (Humanities Press International) seeks to move beyond the notion of "decolonization" (with its intrinsic Eurocentrism) for a system of criticism that espouses humanity and nobility. This is a desire that must be heard within the cultural frame of its own production, a principle that is taken up also in Syed Amanuddin's *Creativity and Reception* (Peter Lang), subtitled "Toward a Theory of Third World Criticism." Extending the range of colonial enquiry, Jack Yeager, in *The Vietnamese Novel in French* (Univ. Press of New England), asserts that the works he is describing are neither French nor Vietnamese but something different. While this position seems premised on closed categories of initial definition, the quest for "difference" is, of course, another version of the fascination with "other" which through history has led both to conflict and contact. Like the enquiries into the distinctiveness of any group literature, it is a recognition of some shifting parameters of power — seen in terms of race, nationality, gender, and language: political all.

Fourth estate

Hence the role of journals in highlighting Commonwealth literary theory can never be neutral. Chidi Amuta is clear that the class position of a critic is not irrelevant to the critical method, or to the critical judgments to which any method leads. The institutional source of journals and the readership of journals consequently both affect whatever messages such media project; and while sometimes they address issues because the issues have become timely, sometimes they address issues because they have merely become faddish. The recent appearance of special issues on "Commonwealth" theory has to be read in this context, for some are written as though there were no Commonwealth, no writers, and no criticism within the Commonwealth, with a history of its own.

Fredric Jameson's "Third World Literature and Cultural Criticism" issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1988) is, as expected, Marxist, arguing that neither formalism nor a concern for ethnicity is sufficiently progressive, because neither is

adequately dialectical. *Critical Exchange* (1986-87) comments on Theory and Strategy in the Third World; *Oxford Literary Review* (1987) addresses the Shapes of Colonialism; *Social Text* (1988) considers Colonial Discourse. *Discourse* (1986-87) focuses on gender, on “She, The Inappropriate/d Other,” referring to film and Gayatri Spivak, but fundamentally interpreting the image and experience of Third World women through a familiarity with American black literature. *College English* (1988) takes up the connection between rhetoric and identity — discussing Canada primarily for an American audience, though there is to found here a useful survey by Nan Johnson of the history of rhetoric in Canada — by examining the “cultural image” (national, dual, comparative, multicultural) that rhetorical use contrives to create. *Modern Fiction Studies* (1989) furthers this discussion by examining rhetorical structure as narrative (and vice versa): narrative becomes a critical method in some literatures, for a formally subversive purpose; collective publication becomes a subversive strategy for political minorities; “liberation” becomes a “theology”; testimonial narrative becomes a political act. So does publication. As Jenny Sharpe’s excellent article on English in India, in *MFS*, clearly demonstrates, the “english” language recurrently extends to alternative formulations, questioning received standards in the process of speaking different ones. Like the discontinuous long poem, perhaps, it resists conclusions in the process of beginning again.

Next?

Just forward into the future: What fifth business animates the process of change? What sixth sense guides writers and critics, creators and politicians, to choose one way of change rather than another? What political seventh heaven does critical theory determinedly place faith in and persistently, resolutely seek?

W.N.

THE DOUBLE HOOK

Gerry Turcotte

This is not a handmaid’s tale
of beautiful losers — or of rebel angels
halting the progress of love.
This is not a tale of man descending.
And though it tells of the descant into the maelstrom,
it is not about coming through slaughter
behind the beyond.
It is about the telling of lies.