

Anti-canon theory – David Punter – Foreign body – the Post-colonial

¹ K. Gayathri M.A, English,

² K. Gowsalya M.A, English,

Nadar Saraswathi College of Arts and Science, Theni, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT:

David Punter wants to outline some of the limits against which critical theory is currently punishing. In doing so, he will necessarily be travelling again some of the terrain already dealt with in other chapters on psychoanalysis, for example, and on deconstruction. But his purpose is not so much to establish or describe a single unified critical position as to try to demonstrate something about instability, or a set of instabilities, that are increasingly coming to characterise some areas of critical activity.

Key word: Anti canon theory, Post colonial, Language.

INTRODUCTION:

They have, of course, their own counterweight. Books such as Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1995) attempt a triumphant reassertion of the monolithic grandeur of Western literature. But many would argue that this can, alternatively, be seen as a defensive reaction, as precisely part of the evidence for the supposition that recent developments in the theory of the subject are radically troubling the critical enterprise, and in particular brings to the foreground the crucial question of location that is to say, the position from which the critic speaks.

FOREIGN BODY:

But the roots of this destabilization, this erosion of the canonical, are mostly seen to lie further back and emblematically in the reading of Freud. An example would be this passage, from a famous essay by Freud to which he shall return: As he was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of small town in provided Italy which was unknown to him, He found his self in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women was to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and he hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring his way, I suddenly found him back in the same street, where his

presence was now beginning to excite attention. He hurried away once more, only to arrive by another detour at the same place yet a third time.

In from of course, one could say that what the reader sees here is a tiny story , a miniature, a vignette, quite simple on the face of it; but the more one looks at it, the more curious it becomes. They can begin with some simple question, in what sense, for example, was this town unknown to Freud, or to the 'He' who as it were, impersonate him? Its name, presumably, was known, or had been, to him-unless, of course, what is beginning recounted here is a dream. And this would immediately conjure up a further range of relevant questions: in what way could one possibly tell whether an experience recounted in a story is a dream? What this sentence appears to do however is immediately to reassert is control over the situation: what had been unknown becomes clear; doubts are resolved, albeit in a form that contributes further to the subject's discomfiture.

The narrator here, it would appear, has no wish to reset to a compass. Without enquiring his way, he writers: why not enquire the way? Perhaps to do so, while it might proffer the chance of safety, would also defect a desire of a deeper kind; a desire to be without or beyond bounders, a desire to explore without fixed maps. And here Freud's writings can seen at a further intersection: with the work, for, example, of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who in texts like *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) have explored issued that they refer to under the headings of 'deterritorialization' and 'deterritorialization'. One of the things they mean to denotes by these very complex terms is a radical instability of positioning; a sense that to observe the world it is necessary to move beyond simple opposition between the inner and outer and recognise instead that the location of the observe as now acknowledged in so many braches of physics determines the shape of the world, that the map has its origin at the point where inner and outer intersect.

A usual concept here might be the 'border guard': confront with the perhaps limitless possibilities of this type of reading, it becomes necessary for the reader to set up certain fixed points, certain 'monuments' from which to take ones bearings. But what a reading of this passage from Freud suggestion is that they as readers seem simulation to be in the position of wanting and not to take our bearings. They might look again at the phrase beginning to excite attention? The streets, they remember, are deserted. The attained, perhaps, of the 'painted women'; but perhaps also the attention of the reader, who is to be excited by this dangerous brush of the narrator with the forbidden.

THE POST- COLONIAL:

What is principally revealed here, then is the recurrent failure of the narrator to be 'at one' with him or herself. This is particularly pointed in the case of Freud, whose very theories of repression and the unconscious have helped us to become more alert to the question of the foreign body within texts and within ourselves. But in a more general sense they might point to way in which textual is always susceptible to the pressure of the 'foreign body', which continually destabilized claims to truth and experience and sets up

instead a textual territory in which something other than our 'self' is always already inside us we attempt to articulate.

And that concept of the foreign body, as he have said also to be considered in more material from as, for example, precisely the destabilised of the national canon by other forms writings that inhabit the language as a foreign body in its midst. This can, and will, be occur in any language, since linguistics communities are never pure or sealed, although it will be particularly evident in language which have attempted to impose themselves over wide swathes of the globe. What language, they might ask is the appropriate one which to tell the story- any story.

This has been a crucial feature of debates in the field of the post- colonial, notably in the exchanges between the African writers Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o about what language to use when recounting forgotten histories. Some language, presumably, has to be used; but perhaps in some cases there is no original language left in which to recount experience although there would surely be a contradiction here. In the popular film *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), a character remarks on the atrocious behaviour of the pirates, says that in their marauding they never leave anybody behind to tell the tale. 'How do you know?', another characters quite reasonably asks, in a phrase which comically and perhaps inadvertently strikes at the heart of the problem of how stories get recounted.

What lies behind this is a vast expansion of the which threatens the stability of any 'canon', and the impossibility that attends on the attempt to construe it. In the south African novelist (and recent Nobel prize-winner) J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999), for example, even the central (white) figure, disreputable and prejudiced though he is, remarks on the impossibility of English as a language in which to achieve communication in South Africa. In the novels of the Trinidadian India writer V.S. Naipaul – often accused of 'English impersonation' though he is – the inappropriateness of an 'English' education in India – because it claims to explain a range of experience it cannot really understand – is a frequent theme.

Robert J.C. Young, in his vast and imposing historical – critical work *Post colonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), quotes Jacques Derrida near the end, on his own Algerian experience as a 'Franco – Maghrebian':

*Certainly, everything that has, say, interested me for a long time – on account of writing, the trace, the deconstruction of phallogocentrism and 'the' Western metaphysics... all of that could not not proceed from the strange reference to an 'elsewhere' of which the place and the language were unknown and prohibited even to myself, as if I were trying to translate into the only language and the only French Western culture that I have at my disposal, the culture into which I was thrown at birth, a possibility that is inaccessible to myself.*²

Here we again have an emphasis on the 'unknown' and the unknowable; the impossibility of establishing a stable position for the self, even, and perhaps especially, the critical self. But here also we can sense various other subdisciplines reeling under the realization of these impossibilities; translation studies, for example, which until recently had worked on the supposition that accurate translation could be found, but which is now becoming increasingly aware that any translation, all translation, operates under a sign of radical insufficiency; that all translation, operates under a sign of radical insufficiency; that all translations, all linguistic acts, are, seen from one perspective, expressions of ideology, in the sense of an unconsciously imposed ordering of affairs and here also, in the passage from Derrida, an awareness that patriotism is simply an effect of accident, of what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger referred to as 'thrown-ness', the fundamental inexplicability of being, or finding oneself, in the world. It is in the light of this kind of thinking that critics are now re-examining the relations between what we might think of as different 'post-colonial territories', and principally the relationships between ideas and perception generated by post – colonial writers themselves and the 'high theory' associated with names such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, sometimes referred to as the 'policemen of the post-colonial'.

CONSLUTION:

While this may be unjust *vis-a-vis* these three inventive and perceptive critics, nevertheless it is further evidence of a growing critical awareness that the critic who attempts to assert rules or processed in terms of generations may always be risking him or herself standing on unsteady terrain. There is, of course, a great deal of discussion as to the meaning and scope of the term 'post-colonial'; what is now under inspection, however, is the very way in which these successive or competing definitions themselves reveal a desire for canonization, for the production of a 'safe' terrain that can be 'inspected' along traditional lines.

REFERENCE:

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