

Review (2000) of:

Silvia Albertazzi, *Lo sguardo dell'altro: Le letterature postcoloniali* ('The gaze of the other: Postcolonial literatures')

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A mid-twenty-first-century historian, looking back on the twentieth century and wishing to choose two works of literature to represent that century's second half - but as literature, not as best-sellers or *succès de scandale* - would, in all probability, single out Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*; 1967), and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). These two novels, acclaimed by readers and critics, and absorbed as influences by writers worldwide, brought their authors worldwide fame and, respectively, the Nobel and Booker Prizes. In addition, the future historian would surely remark that both are written in the magic-realist mode that mingles naturalistic and fantastic elements, and, above all, that both arise out of narrative traditions which are not those of the economically and politically hegemonic Western world, and accordingly refuse to obey the conventions of Euro-American realist fiction.

Cien años de soledad emerged from the previously unknown milieu of Colombian literature; *Midnight's Children*, though first published in Britain, would have been unthinkable without its author's first-hand knowledge of his native Indian subcontinent. The celebrated 'Latin American boom' and the comparable rise to prominence of 'Indo-Anglian' writing which followed in the wake of the two novels' respective success have been the most visible manifestations of what has come to be called 'postcolonial' literature - a phenomenon typically overlapping with the magic-realist genre.

Silvia Albertazzi is a lecturer at the University of Bologna and head of the 'Centro studi sulle letterature omeoglotte dei Paesi extraeuropei' (Centre for the study of the literatures in European languages of non-European countries) of the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures of that university's Faculty of Foreign Languages. Her new study is an ambitious endeavour to define, understand and promote the phenomenon of postcolonial writing; it is also the fruit of immense reading in the field. A contagious enthusiasm for the subject shines through her pages, and, indeed, she effectively suggests that this literature embodies humanity's best hopes and aspirations for the new millennium: 'Caduti i valori universali, i modelli assoluti della classe media intellettuale europea, crollati i centri, allo scrittore . non resta che cercare di esprimere, una volta di più, "un mondo nuovo in procinto di crearsi"' ('Now that universal values have collapsed along with the absolute models of the European

intellectual middle class, now that the centres have failed to hold, the writer's task . can only be to attempt to express, once more, "a new world about to be born"; p. 168: the embedded quotation is from Carlos Fuentes).

The attraction of postcolonial/magic-realist writing is undeniable: it offers the possibility of superseding many of the sterile oppositions that continue to plague metropolitan thinking on culture - of transcending the polarities of traditional/avant-garde, written/oral, high culture/low culture, even East/West and North/South. The fictions of García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Rushdie, Vikram Chandra or Anita Desai combine a highly readable narrative impetus with the experimental fusion of genres and registers; they are written texts which draw on the riches of oral storytelling traditions; they import elements from mass-cultural forms such as cinema or popular song; they couple intense local awareness with a wider global consciousness. On a theoretical level, magic realism can even be seen as offering a posthumous solution to the endless 'realism vs. modernism'/'Lukács vs. Brecht' controversies that bedevilled western Marxism in its latter years.

The discussion of so wide-ranging and diffuse a body of writing, however, inevitably poses a number of theoretical and practical problems, with which Albertazzi's study valiantly grapples. These problems relate, in particular, to the wider areas of geopolitics, language, genre and canon.

The geopolitical question is far from innocent. One may start by asking whether the term 'third world' is of any great use today: this term, coined for a two-superpower world that no longer exists, now raises the problem of where, if anywhere, the 'second world' lies; it also obscures such incontestable phenomena within the old 'developing world' as 'new industrial countries', uneven development or IT lift-off in countries such as India. Albertazzi, while invoking 'il Terzo Mondo' on occasion, in practice wisely prefers 'postcolonial' as her key defining term. Indeed, she does not confine the 'postcolonial' space to the developing countries, choosing, rather, to include Canadian and Australian writers (Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, Peter Carey) within its purview - drawing a distinction between 'colonie d'insediamento' (settler colonies) and 'colonie d'invasione' (invader colonies; p. 59), but including the literatures of both within the postcolonial orbit. This might appear controversial: diehard third-worldists could object on the grounds that Canada and Australia are developed, first-world countries. It can, however, be counter-argued that the literatures of the white settler colonies have traditionally been overshadowed by the 'major' literatures of Britain and the US (and, for Quebec, France); and, in the Canadian case, that today NAFTA threatens a de facto economic and cultural colonisation by the US.

Effectively, then, Albertazzi defines postcolonial writing as comprising all texts in European languages (generally English, French, Spanish or Portuguese) that do not originate in Europe or the United States. This does, however, leave a question-mark hanging over the exact definition of centre-versus-periphery. Where, for instance, should one place a novel like Mircea Eliade's *Maitreyi* (1933), the ironic narrative of a failed 'East-West' amour in Calcutta, written in Romanian and, therefore, a case of the 'Orient' viewed through a peripheral, rather than a hegemonic, European prism? The case of another 'minor' European literature, that of Portugal, is also problematic. Albertazzi discusses José Saramago's *A Jangada de Pedra* (*The Stone Raft*; 1986) as an instance of European writing influenced or contaminated by postcolonial magic realism (pp. 165-166); however, other works of Portugal's Nobel laureate, notably the superb *Memorial do Convento* (*Baltasar and Blimunda*; 1982), can actually be taken as consummate instances of magic realism rivalling García Márquez - whose own *Del amor y otros demonios* (*Of Love and Other Demons*; 1994), seems, indeed, to bear the marks of *Memorial do Convento*, as both focus on the Inquisition and the resistance of a magically gifted woman. Portugal was of course itself a colonial power for 400 years, but, conversely, its history in the twentieth century was scarred by phenomena - dictatorship, isolation, mass illiteracy - that parallel the experience of many Latin American countries. Saramago's writings and his non-literary campaigns, too, powerfully exhibit those characteristics of solidarity and commitment that Albertazzi sees as typifying postcolonial writers. A term such as 'peripheral literatures' could, perhaps, be proposed as a possible alternative to the lexicon of postcolonialism.

Another factor in the definition of the postcolonial is language. This, too, is controversial. The writers discussed by Albertazzi almost invariably write in European, not local languages. There are good practical reasons for this - the need or desire for a wider audience, the lingua franca role of English or French as a mediator between a multitude of competing (and often mutually incomprehensible) autochthonous tongues. Some, however, continue to object to the 'imperialist' use of alien languages: Albertazzi cites the arguments of Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a noted champion of the view that African writers should publish in African languages (p. 108). Rabindranath Tagore, still India's only Nobel-winning writer, wrote - friend of Yeats though he was - in Bengali, not English, and today Amitav Ghosh, who has thus far published in English, is on record as saying he will eventually shift to writing directly in, again, Bengali. Against the hardline position, however, it may be contended - and this is the line pursued by Albertazzi - that the postcolonial writer who creates in a European language typically modifies the nature of that language: 'Nelle mani dell'autore postcoloniale la lingua del dominatore acquista una vitalità che spesso è assente dall'uso europeo' ('In the hands of the postcolonial writer the language of the

dominator takes on a vitality that is often absent from European usage'; p. 107). As she rightly stresses, in postcolonial hands the metropolitan language is refashioned, enriched with localisms but also expanded by the resurrection of terms and constructions considered archaic or precious in Europe. In particular, such reinvigoration of English by its second-language practitioners stands in stark contrast to what Albertazzi denounces as 'l'esperantizzazione dell'inglese' ('the reduction of English to Esperanto status'; p. 106), at the hands of both native and non-native speakers.

On the matter of genre, Albertazzi wishes to distinguish postcolonial/magic-realist fiction from both realism and postmodernism. She makes repeated reference to something called 'Western realism' or 'bourgeois realism' ('la tradizione borghese europea' - 'the European bourgeois tradition'; p. 33), from which postcolonial texts diverge by their open and unashamed use of the fantastic, the allegorical and the miraculous, their recourse to pastiche and intertextuality, and their hybridation of narrative registers - a case in point being Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), which mingles conventional realism with historical fiction, science fiction, mystery fiction and ghost story. It is actually dubious whether 'Western realism' exists as a unproblematic, homogeneous genre: the text usually considered the first European novel, *Don Quixote*, is highly and self-consciously parodic and metafictional, while the works of Scott, Dickens and Balzac all contain marked non-realist elements. Nonetheless, Western realist novels most certainly do exist aplenty, and it is crystal-clear that a novel like Ghosh's is not telling the same kind of story as *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *Middlemarch* or *The Great Gatsby*. Albertazzi further insists (pp. 151-159) on distinguishing between postcolonial and postmodernist, arguing forcibly that while European and US postmodernist fictions (Umberto Eco, John Barth) share certain characteristics (self-reflectiveness, pastiche) with a Chandra or a García Márquez, what is absent from the Euro-American texts is the element of dialogue with oral and popular traditions. Certainly, if Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) both rewrite and relativise history through self-reflective fiction, the linear, rationalist course of Barth's narrative implies completely different thought-processes from the intricate spirals of Chandra's story-telling, with its entwining, circular and Chinese-box elements rooted in the Indian epic tradition.

Definition inevitably shades into evaluation, and the very success of numerous postcolonial writers raises the question of their possible insertion into a canon. The notion of canon is today impugned by the extreme relativists who reject all aesthetic evaluation, while metropolitan feminist and minority critics question the validity of the traditional Western canon. Albertazzi crosses swords with that canon's most eloquent defender, Harold Bloom, considering his defence of the traditional standpoint (*The Western*

Canon, 1994; London, Macmillan, 1995) to be excessively 'eurocentric' (p. 118) and hence inimical to a proper appreciation of postcolonial writing. To be fair, Borges and Neruda are actually among the twenty-six chosen canonic writers whom Bloom discusses in detail, and the reading-list at the end of his book includes two pages' worth of postcolonial or non-metropolitan texts, totalling 91 volumes (Bloom, pp. 559-560). The question might usefully be posed in different terms: pace the relativists, the very fact of mentioning one writer or text more than another, or choosing particular texts on which to centre a debate, effectively creates some kind of canon. In practice, a postcolonial canon already exists; Albertazzi's own index cites Rushdie 27 times, more than any other name, and a canon could be constructed from her book centring on Rushdie, Chandra, Carey, García Márquez and others. The most interesting question may well be whether and how the existing postcolonial examples will stimulate new writers to create a canon of twenty-first-century 'world writing' that will somehow be other in spirit - more open, more ecumenical - than the Western canon of earlier centuries.

Here Albertazzi's perspective is essentially optimistic. She believes the postcolonial vision is already 'contaminating' metropolitan writers for the better - 'lo scrittore occidentale riscopre il gusto della narrazione, del racconto tradizionale' ('Western writers are rediscovering the pleasure of narration, of the traditional tale'; p. 167) - and looks forward to the emergence of a true 'world literature' for the new millennium: 'Oggi come mai prima, la letteratura non appare più limitata da confini geografici o intellettuali' ('Today as never before, literature seems no longer to be limited by geographical or intellectual confines'; p. 168).

This study goes a long way towards laying the theoretical and critical bases for such a planetary flowering. A useful and practical next step could now be to establish precisely how the 'new literatures' may be influencing and changing reading patterns worldwide. It would be interesting to know just who, in the West and in the emerging world, is reading these books, and how; whether they are inciting readers to become writers themselves; what role information technology is playing in their diffusion; and whether postcolonial writing, with its oral and popular roots, may yet prove a vital weapon in a possible fightback of the written word in the coming century - as already heralded by the Internet - against the global dictatorship of the audiovisual, so characteristic of the century that has closed.