

Introduction: English Without Shadows: Literature on a World Scale

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"English," the name given the literary tradition of a body of work produced in the dialect of the southeastern region of an island off the west coast of Europe, supplanted the "Classics," the literature of two Mediterranean peninsulas dating back to over two thousand years ago, as the body of texts used in the cultural training of young professional men in Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. Instead of Homer, Aeschylus, Pindar, Seneca, and Cicero, men in training now read Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, and Eliot. This change might have been inconsequential enough had Great Britain not been the center of a global empire. But because of that imperial status, "English" soon became a very powerful global cultural institution. Most of you reading this book will be doing so in the context of an "English Department" at an institution of higher learning. Those of you not doing so in such a context will probably be doing so for related reasons: either because you are in a literature department where the language in use is English even if the literature in question is not (is Australian or Canadian, say) or because the largest publishing market for literary discussions of any kind is in English even though your native language is something else.

While during the age of empire English the language was providing large parts of the world with a cultural, political, and economic *lingua franca* (as also French and Spanish) and English the cultural institution providing a supposedly universal set of ideals for proper living, people's lives were being changed and people's bodies moved in ways that made for painful and brutal contrasts to the benign values the English literary tradition supposedly fostered. The enslavement and displacement of large numbers of Africans to the Caribbean and North America is only the most powerful and violent example of such a counter-reality. The violence done by empire (with the US slave system being considered here a kind of internal imperialism) generated the negative energies that would eventually end empire and which have been the seeds out of which alternatives to "English" have grown.

That English the language and English the cultural institution are inseparable from the experience of empire does not mean that English is or was in itself an imperial undertaking. It was indeed used to help create a more "literate" and, one might argue, docile class of colonized subjects capable of co-administering empire, and English (the literary tradition and the conjoined academic institution) has for a long time and for reasons of empire occupied a central place in literature departments in many parts of the world. The cultural misconstrual of the local for the

universal could only endure for so long, however, and English's status for some time has also been changing, as indigenous literatures, from Australia to Africa to North America, have emerged to assume equal standing with or to displace entirely the English tradition. Those changes are bound up with the end of official empire and the transfer of political, if not always economic power, to formerly colonized peoples in the latter half of the twentieth century.

These historical developments wrought great changes in literature and in the discussion and teaching of literature. Entire bodies of writing emerged out of the imperial front, that line of contact between colonizer and colonized which is characterized as much by reciprocal envy and adulation as by reciprocal fear and resentment. On the one side of that front stand works like Forster's *Passage to India* or Kipling's *Kim*, while on the other stand such works as Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* or Kincaid's *A Small Place*. Each colonized nation also produced its own body of literature that dealt with the imperial experience or attempted to define a post-imperial sense of national and cultural identity, with the works of African writers such as Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong'o being exemplary in this regard. In places like the United States, the former slave population of displaced Africans has given rise to a literary tradition of its own, many works of which, from the poetry of Langston Hughes to the novels of Toni Morrison, seek to make sense of their history and their continuing experience of racism. And throughout the world, peoples in diasporic situations of dispersal sought to establish a sense of cultural and ethnic identity within locales like England itself, where the majority ethnic group tended to control the production of mainstream culture.

The 1960s are once again a time of enormous transformation. English in England expanded to include the literature of the Commonwealth, while in the former colonies like the Caribbean it began to be displaced by indigenous traditions. In the US, it came to embrace the long ignored tradition of African-American writing in the form of Afro-American Programs. Such changes in institutional shape and disciplinary self-definition both fostered and were brought about by new developments in literary criticism. Scholars emerged who were less interested in the European tradition and more interested in post-colonial writers like V. S. Naipaul or Nadine Gordimer.

If English was losing some of its institutional power, it was also being cast in a new light as a result of these developments. No longer could it present itself as a repository of good values or of appropriate style if those values were connected, albeit metonymically rather than metaphorically, to imperial violence or if that style could be shown to be the result of a history of the forced displacement of other linguistic forms which had the misfortune alone of being practiced by people with smaller or no guns. Scholars began to take note of the fact that many great works of English literature promoted beliefs and assumptions regarding other geographic regions and other ethnic groups - from Shakespeare's Caliban to Bronte's Mrs Rochester — that created the cultural preconditions for and no doubt enabled the work of empire. The promotion of such beliefs and assumptions in literature, Edward Said noted in his pathbreaking *Orientalism* (1978), was just one part of larger processes of discursive construction in a variety of forms of writing, from novels to scholarly treatises on geography and philology, that represented other peoples (in Said's example, the people of "the Orient") as less civilized or less capable and as needing western paternalist assistance. Any attention to processes of domination

usually spurs an interest in counter-processes of resistance, and as interest in colonial and post-colonial literature increased in the 1980s, attention turned, especially in the work of Homi Bhabha and in the collective volume *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), to the complex interface between colonizer and colonized, an interface that Bhabha found characterized as much by a subversive work of parody and mimicry as by straightforward domination. Later work along these lines, especially Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), has moved away from inter-national or inter-ethnic demarcations and toward an understanding of the para-national and trans-regional flows of culture. From the Caribbean to New York to London, black cultural influences and migrations tend not to heed traditional literary boundary lines, and these new realities demand new modes of non-national critical thinking.

Much of the early work in this rather large and diverse area of ethnic, post-colonial, and international studies was shaped by categories that have since been rethought by scholars in the field whose critical perspective is shaped by Structuralism, Feminism, and Post-Structuralism. While early anti-imperialist thinkers like DuBois and Fanon resorted to unproblematic notions of ethnic identity or to ideals of a traditional "people's culture," later thinkers have pointed out the isomorphism of racist and racialist ideologies as well as the mistake of assuming the unproblematic existence of such things as ethnic identities where fluctuation, change, and temporary blood-line settlements are more likely to be the case. Others have contended that recourse to a supposedly more authentic traditional culture as a counterpoint to imperial or neocolonial domination merely reduces the complex history of cultural change to an inaccurate folkloric myth and selectively privileges quaint "tribal" practices which are misconstrued as original and without history. Feminists have noted that there would be no ethnic identity without the forced containment and channeling of women's reproductive capacities along consanguine family and clan lines and that the privileging of ideals of ethnic or national cultural identity conceals internal fissures of gender and sexual domination. And Post-Structuralists in the field suggest that other concepts of identity, from the nation or the ethnic group to the national culture, are no longer relevant to a transnational, migratory, and diasporic world culture. What the experience of geographic displacement teaches is that all the supposedly stable equations of place, ethnos, and national political institution are imaginary constructs which displace displacement by substituting for the history of permanent migratory dislocation an ontologizing image of home or of a homeland, a proper place where a spuriously pure ethnos can authenticate itself.

The recent critical attention to such concepts as exile, home, and diaspora as much reflects the influence of Post-Structuralism's re-examination of taken-for-granted notions of identity as it does the experience of writers and theorists of African, Asian, or Caribbean descent who live in former imperial centers like Britain. DuBois first formulated the problematic nature of such experience when he spoke of "two-ness," the twin experience of being both American and black, loyal to a nation while yet a victim of its prejudice against the minority ethnic group. For Fanon, the problem of twoness reappeared in a different guise, that of travelers to the imperial center from the colonized periphery who adopted the imperial culture as their own out of a sense of the inferiority of their own native culture. Since they wrote and since the emergence of new generations of people whose immigrant ethnic roots do not conflict with a sense of at-homeness in an imperial center like England, twoness gives way to a bilateral sense of parallel cultures and to a sense of multiple

belongings, plural identities with no one more standard or normal or appropriate than another. And with that change of experience comes, of course, the possibility of multiple languages - not Creole or English, as Fanon noticed, but Creole and English.

What does all of this mean for English, for English as an academic institution that still in many places consists of the teaching of THE national tradition century by century? It has meant the creation of new slots for an African-American specialist or a Post-Colonial specialist. And it has meant the reconceptualization of at least twentieth-century English literature to include Commonwealth literature and the emergence of new ways of organizing the American literary canon so that it includes more African and other voices (the much praised Heath Anthology). But if one source of empire was the national parochialism embodied in the ideal of the teaching of one's national literature alone and one result of the new ethnic, post-colonial, and international criticism is a sense of how all national literatures, especially those with global connections or with apparently singular ethnic roots, always cast shadows and are therefore always shadowed by their others, from Caliban to Mrs Rochester to *Beloved*, then perhaps English itself should be reconsidered as a project of knowledge limited by national and linguistic boundaries. The national parochialism of empire continues as the national parochialism of "international competition," with each nation or ethnic group's imaginary sanctity and identity upheld by just the kind of national literary traditions and academic literary institutions that made English English. But by piercing its others and walking with its shadows, English also generated a migratory and cultural reciprocity that means that the future of English in England at least is necessarily multicultural and multiethnic (if not polylingual). It is also, Paul Gilroy would argue, transgeographical, a culture without national boundaries that thrives on lateral connections and syncretisms, a culture where in-betweenness replaces identity as the defining trope of cultural production. And such a new English is in some respects a model (shades of empire) for a new kind of Literature Department, one that would be at once national, international, and non-national or non-ethnic, one in which students might become as familiar with African as with English literature and learn thereby, not falsely universal values or accurately parochial national traditions, but the complex reality of difference.