

POSTMODERNIST FICTION AND THE IMPERIAL THEME

The present paper suggests a review of modern and postmodern epistemology and their respective positions in reference to history and literature. The postmodern will be seen as a reformulation of modern classical realist positions both in the field of art and of history. This revisionist attitude is manifested in the treatment of the theme of Imperialism in the contemporary novels *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, and *Cambridge* by Caryl Phillips here analysed.

As a first step to understand the nature of the modern and the postmodern views, it is necessary to focus on those aspects in which they stand in opposition. Modernity is based on the Enlightenment philosophy and its later empiricist-positivist developments and is characterized by certainty and dogmatism while postmodernity is marked by liberation or emancipation from positions of subjection. This opposition is most clearly seen in the conception of history that each movement sustains. Modernity conceives history as a unitary process of permanent evolution in which the latest is always the best. Gianni Vattimo (1990: 9) defines modern times as “la época en la que el hecho de ser moderno viene a ser un valor determinante” and he sees postmodernity as a break with this modern cult of the new. Contemporary philosophical thought questions the idea of history as a unitary and coherent process and sustains the need for a multiplicity of versions. To Vattimo, this process leads to the liberation of difference and to emancipation from the centralizing rationale of history. As Lyotard (1979) sustains, to be postmodern, you have to be modern in the nascent state, before that modernity turns into a dogma. In postmodernity, it is the avoidance of dogmatism that will liberate humanity from totalitarianism.

In the literary scene, classical realism, epistemologically related to modernism, can be seen as equally dogmatic. It sustains the absolutism of truth as the basis of an orderly totality or pattern that explains events and can institute itself as a tool of prediction and control. At the centre of this pattern stands a coherent subject defined as the master of meaning in a culture in which knowledge was possible and certainty cherished. The realist paradigm ascertains the feasibility of representation and the capacity of language to function as a reliable mimetic vehicle. The world of literary realism is characterized by the presence of hierarchies (natural, social, economic, moral) that constitute the organizing

grid of a rational conception of the universe. In her precise and summarily description of the characteristics of the literature resulting from this conception of the world, Patricia Waugh (1984:7) mentions “[] the well-made plot, chronological sequence, the authoritative omniscient narrator, the rational connection between what characters do and what they are, the causal connection between surface details and the deep, scientific laws of existence [].”

In opposition to the above description, postmodern literary productions portray a world characterized by dispersion, relativism and uncertainty within which the subject cannot sustain centrality. Much to the contrary, s/he is described as de-centred and fragmented, incapable of achieving absolute knowledge or truth. Thus belief replaces Truth and the coexistence of a multiplicity of contradictory versions stands for Reality. Above all, and as Lyotard explains, what defines the postmodern is an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1979:XXIV). Those great stories that provided humanity with a stable, totalizing and coherent framework within which to make sense of their endeavours were no longer sustainable. From this perspective, the project of imperialism (based on Enlightenment tenets) is suspected of ethnocentrism while classical science and history are interpreted as mystification. Metanarratives that universalize experience and normalize divergence such as that of imperialism are replaced by a multiplicity of versions to achieve emancipation from the blinding myth of assurance.

Simultaneously, with the advent of postmodernity, the crisis of representation ensues. The realistic epistemology allowed the unified subject to pose the accessibility of the world outside for mimetic representation. In the same way as the scientist could reach truth through the application of reason to observed data, the artist could rely on his senses and his art to present us with a faithful reproduction of “the real”. From the postmodern standpoint, though, the objectivity of the outside world is put to question so that we now need inverted commas to enclose *the real*: representation has become a problem. Textuality has turned into an event in which signs have broken loose of their referents. This characteristic leads to a number of far-reaching consequences among which we can mention a drastic modification of the conception of history and a marked interest in the study of the laws of discourse construction and their connection to ideological issues. The monological interpretation of facts as history dissolves in favour of the production of a multiplicity of contradictory versions none of which can be truly verified making the

conception of history as unitary process impossible. According to Vattimo (1990) the disappearance of a central rationale of history gives rise to a good number of local rationales all conscious of their historicity, contingency and limitation. The result is a humanization of society: the recognition of the diversity of viewpoints and the need for dialogue and consensus. At the same time, the recognition of the incidence of ideology in the discourse of both history and fiction has led to the disclosure of linguistic/literary/structural devices to deconstruct their ideological effects. In fiction this has favoured the use of metafictional devices and the exploitation of intertextuality as a means to dismantle the powerful force of metanarratives with their sub-conscious ideological messages. The metanarrative of imperialism figures prominently among the ideological constructions dethroned by postmodernism.

The basic oppositions between modernism and postmodernism having been established, it is now necessary to concede that the postmodern opposition to realism is not so clear-cut as the above relation makes it. In fact, the former movement stands on the basis of the realist paradigm with the purpose of subverting its “regularizing and normalizing” (Davis 1987:17) effects. Postmodern novels base themselves on traditional realist texts with the purpose of subverting them from within. The characteristic realist certainty is shattered by putting reality itself to doubt. The factuality of the real and the substantiality of the individual are dissolved in the insubstantiality of language (Waugh 1984::23-24). The ideological assumptions of the realist paradigm as present in the hypotexts are reframed in the revised postmodern versions with the purpose of establishing a critical dialogue, an intertextual connection that opens established beliefs to discussion and divergence. The old is then seen with new, often parodic eyes: classical realistic texts are re-visited, rescued from their normative readings to transform them into vivid exponents of present-day values and preoccupations. Often the new perspective subverts power relations within the original text to unveil hidden injustices exposing the emplotment of history. In this way Hayden White’s (1992) thesis of the ideological foundation of history is performed by the re-writing of traditional texts. As a consequence, postmodern writing is more democratic, leveling differences and hierarchies and giving opportunity of expression to the suppressed voices of the marginalized and defeated. Postcolonial theory, as an expression of postmodern thought is engaged in the interpretation of semiotic practices from the perspective of

national, racial or social groups that have been victimized in the imperial struggle for power. Contemporary metafictional writing often takes the same stand, producing rewritings of traditional texts for the purpose of offering an alternative version to that naturalized by a canonic production oblivious of ideological implications.

In her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, without striding too far from realism except for the avoidance of omniscience in preference for limited, internal focalization, Jean Rhys gives a surprisingly different picture of the character of the mad Creole in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. As a character in a world "made of cardboard" (WSS 180) Antoinette has a fixed destiny sealed by Brontë's novel. However, within those limits, *Wide Sargasso Sea* endows Antoinette with a voice and a tragic existence she was not allowed in *Jane Eyre*. The novel dramatizes a central issue: that the ethics that direct politics of state can be observed to prevail at the level of the personal life of the individual. The ideological system that gives consistency to the social organization in this fictional piece is founded on patriarchal assumptions. Rhys confronts us with a world where the male dominates, establishes the rules and has the power to enforce them. This ideological construction permeates all levels of experience. At the macro level of analysis, the patriarchal spirit is expressed in the politics of imperialism with its inherent use of power and the creation of inequality between social groups in the context of the West Indies, a territory that suffered both English and French domination. In the economic sphere patriarchy manifests itself through the appropriation of the individual and the suppression of his right to freedom in the system of slavery which, although over by the time of the novel, still lets its effect be felt in the relationship between the Creoles and the coloured population of African origin. In the private sphere, the power struggle is enacted through the appropriation of the woman by the dominant male. In fact the influence of the political and economic macro structures over the private life of the individual is so great that the story in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, though dealing with private experience, can be read as the tragic consequence of the imperial policies enforced in the West Indies. All interpersonal relations in *Wide Sargasso Sea* bear witness to social inequality based on prejudice and stereotypical representations of the other, excluded and disparaged by the ideology of superiority on the grounds of sexual, social, economic or cultural difference. Both Edward and Antoinette are fundamentally passive victims of an ideological construction which Rochester legitimises by repeating learnt

practices. His weakness is an inability to free himself from a patriarchal, imperial system that holds him as its prey.

The reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* can only result in a re-assessment of the values underlying *Jane Eyre*. The mad woman in the hypotext, scarcely human, and unmanageable other who can only inspire hatred and denial becomes the pathetic victim of a system that has obliterated her personally, socially, and economically. After reading Rhys's novel, we have a different perception of the ending of *Jane Eyre*. What used to be read as the beginning of a well-deserved life of peace and happiness for the protagonists is now felt to be the unfair issue of a number of discriminatory attitudes and violent actions. Edward and Jane's promising future life is built on the ashes of a world they have trampled on, pilfering its riches regardless of the suffering caused. Thus the later novel makes a contribution by subverting the reader's facile acceptance of the uncritical imperial assumptions in the hypotext.

A similar subversive effect is produced by Caryl Phillips's novel *Cambridge*. The very title creates expectations that the text will not satisfy since Cambridge is the name of a black African slave in the West Indies. The story told by this slave is part of a well-guarded secret in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The self-righteous spirit that characterizes the Eyres with St John at their head would not allow for the discussion or even conscious realization of the fact that the fortune Jane inherits and shares with her cousins is the result of the exploitation of colonized lands toiled by slaves. Phillips's novel portrays the suffering on which these fortunes were made thus undermining our unqualified empathy with the character of Jane. Reversal of expectations is also found in the use of the confessional novel for parodic effect. Traditionally the reader of such pieces identifies with the addresser's perspective. In *Cambridge*, however, the attitude of the implied author is evidently contrary to the judgements and values sustained by the narrator giving rise to ironic double meaning. Emily represents the white's reactions in the imperial encounter with the "savages" in a "dark tropical unknown" (C.22). The use of language in Part 1 of the novel betrays the character's conception of the colonial other as alien, incomprehensible and inferior. To the prejudices Emily has acquired through upbringing and education, she adds those of the white local informers, which she accepts indiscriminately. The tightly controlled, often euphemistic narrative of Part 1 in the voice of the central character is contrasted to the heterodiegetic

account of her situation at the end of the novel where, using internal focalization, the narrator describes her true feelings and thoughts, while miming her use of language. The well-composed, stable and rational being of the first part has been racked by a physical as well as an emotional cataclysm that has broken down her defences and exposed her to the life she used to keep at bay. The form of the novel shows this transformation by finally allowing the reader to become intimate with the contents of Emily's mind. Part 2 of the novel is also confessional though now in the voice of Cambridge. Phillips does not fall into the trap of giving us a black (all good) and white (all bad) account of events in the colonial encounter. To avoid this, he sustains the irony in this section as we see in the narrator's adoption of the Christian dogma together with its ethnocentric view. On this line, the Negro Cambridge adopts the white's conception of the other as "savage" thus contributing to the obliteration of Negro culture and the alienation of his fellow slaves. His conversion is so complete that he plans to found a school in his native Africa to acquaint his countrymen "with the knowledge of the Christian religion and the laws of civilization" (C:149). Irony is not only used to portray character but also to show the limited and biased view of the other that each racial group sustains. Often, the same negative evaluation of the other's language, attitude or behaviour is applied by each side in turn. It is here specially important that Emily's section should appear first so that Cambridge's account can offer an unexpected corrective of the imperial gaze. Part 3, the briefest of all, provides the final ironic touch. It is a journalistic account of the central incidents in the novel written long after the events had taken place. The realistic account in the voice of an authoritative heterodiegetic narrator, apparently objective in its interest in accurate spatial and temporal references as in its respect for contiguity (temporal, spatial and logical) represents the biased position of the imperial power. Bénédicte Ledent (2002:102), quoting Sharrad in "Speaking the Unspeakable" sustains that in the fictional universe, this piece of journalistic writing will probably survive and become part of history while the truthful personal relations of Emily and Cambridge will be lost. This device points to the unreliability of history: what counts as fact is no more than a hegemonic manoeuvre of the group in power.

Wide Sargasso Sea and *Cambridge* are not only connected by aspects of the setting and the imperial theme. The novels show other, more subtle correspondences. Formally, they both privilege the multiplication of homodiegetic voices to foster polyphony and avoid

monologism. This is not a random choice since the dialogue established between their parts ideologically sustains the simultaneous validation of opposing views of a single reality in opposition to the monologism of the imperial position.

The novels analyzed above sustain the position of modernism in the creation of worlds we can believe in and of characters we can recognize and sympathize with. At the same time, they are postmodern in their preference for versions over the assertion of the truth, of belief over knowledge, of disharmonious harmony (Jencks, 1987:282) over ordered unity and of multivocality over monologism. Simultaneously, they struggle towards liberation from diverse forms of subjection as shown by their disruption of the discourses of patriarchy and imperialism especially as inscribed in the realist paradigm with its preference for an a-historical and pervading human nature and the authoritative voice of the omniscient narrator. The intertextual dialogue between hypo and hypertext as well as among the different hypertexts themselves also contribute to dislodging the primacy of authority and to highlight the pre-eminence of language. As Linda Hutcheon (1989:3) sustains “ [] postmodernism works to ‘de-doxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import”.

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