

Tobias Döring (Ed.)

A History of Postcolonial Literature
in 12½ Books

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**A History of
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in 12½ Books**

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A History of Postcolonial Literature in 12½ Books /

Ed. by Tobias Döring. -

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T.D.

Introduction

Half-Books, Half-Breeds, Half-Truths

In recent decades, issues broached in postcolonial literature have made a great impact on public cultural debates. Sometimes these debates have been conducted on the level of international politics and conflicts, such as the “Rushdie affair” in the 1990s about his novel *The Satanic Verses* or, in a bizarre rerun, the campaigns staged in 2007 against assumed or actual violations of so-called religious sensibilities due to Rushdie’s knighthood – campaigns which clearly show the need for more productive modes of cross-cultural acknowledgement. Other debates on these issues may have been less spectacular, without hitting the headlines, but still addressed what has been called the “clash of fundamentalisms”¹ and thus concerned a field where postcolonial writing has long posed a challenge to entrenched beliefs and established attitudes. In universities, literature departments, teaching curricula and research contexts, too, cross-cultural engagements are much in demand and lead to the revision not just of reading lists and study options but of our fundamental views on literary and cultural studies. How can teaching and research in these disciplines, in the twenty-first century, take trans-cultural developments into account and face social realities that go beyond the notions of nation and national culture, on which the subject of philology traditionally rested?

It is with regard to this question, for example, that postcolonial writing can surely make a contribution. But when trying to address it, we realize that many familiar categories and concepts we employ in our work are often strongly questioned. As all chapters in the present volume argue, this pertains, above all, to the category of “history” when applied to the postcolonial world. There have also been many – and many thoughtful – reservations against the concept of the “postcolonial” itself, a cover term for what is clearly a very vast and heterogeneous socio-cultural field that should not be seen as seamless whole; but whatever other problems there may be, it surely is especially problematic to try and write a history of this field. For, no matter how we decide to define it, postcolonial writing first emerged and became internationally acknowledged in the 1960s with a strong critique of European historiography and its conventions of representation. More often than not, the point of view in the prevailing history

1 This is the title of a study by the British-Pakistani writer Tariq Ali (2003) on the implications of American politics in the Middle East. The phrase is a critical echo of a book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), in which the American political scientist Samuel Huntington gave an influential, though controversial, account of the new challenges facing the world after the end of the Cold War.

books, just as in the modes of story-telling and the cultural canon they conventionally applied, was seen as part of the colonial project, i.e. of the power structures once established to ensure domination over large parts of the world. Postcolonial writers, therefore, frequently began to reclaim their own world by rejecting these conventions and working towards reassessing and, potentially, changing the familiar patterns by which history is made and written. On the other hand, we have long been aware that all histories are, to some extent, constructions that cannot do without narrative models, that must select and order their material, discarding some, highlighting other points, and that – even if for purely practical reasons – must seek a point where to begin their story. So how can these conflicting notions come together, addressing both the basic need for a historical perspective and look beyond its limitations?

The present *History of Postcolonial Literature in 12½ Books* is an attempt to do so, a series of independent but interlinked chapters setting out to address this double agenda. This introduction, then, should serve to justify and illustrate the central critical idea, beginning by considering the main terms in the volume title.

Reading by the book

As mentioned, a contentious issue here arises with the word *postcolonial*, circulating in contemporary literary and cultural studies and discussed in many relevant publications, while it remains a term that has occasioned much controversy and ongoing debate.² Even though their point may sometimes seem far-fetched and difficult to see, these theoretical debates are in fact *practical* debates; they are not at all removed from, but closely connected to our own activity – especially our work as students or teachers of English literature, because they raise fundamental questions about what we do when we study or teach “English”. Whom or what precisely do we mean by such a designation, how do we define its boundaries, what do we consider its characteristic features, and how should we relate them to the here and now, the context and determinations of our own cultural position? All these are questions raised and, to a large extent, motivated by the term and field of Postcolonial Studies. However, before venturing to offer some working definition of this term for our purposes – i.e. for the chapters in the present volume –, it maybe helpful to approach it with a closer look at the other operative words in our title and then place it in relation to their meaning.

Let us begin with the least conspicuous and last word: with *books*. This clearly seems to be quite uncontentious. For all students of literature, books are what we live on: the media and matter we deal in, work with, think about, carry around, read through or leaf through – or perhaps just photocopy or scan chapters from – without usually spending much thought on what they actually involve as media. But just a

2 Several of the following chapters engage with these debates more fully and offer cogent reasons to be sceptical about the uses – or misuses – of the term with reference to the books under discussion. – For introductions to and surveys of the field, see Lazarus (2004), Loomba (2005) and Childs, Weber & Williams (2006), Döring (forthcoming).

moment of reflection shows us that books are not self-evident nor unproblematic items that could be taken just for granted. Even when we study English literature in the canonical, mainstream tradition that used to dominate university departments until the 1970s – the tradition, let us say, from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf – books may be central for us, but not for the tradition we set out to study. *Beowulf*, for example, is not really a book, or only in the later versions we encounter in the classroom or the library, but which are of course transcribed, edited, emended, annotated, printed versions – hence fundamentally different from the oral modes in which this text was historically produced, received and long perpetuated. As a Germanic epic, *Beowulf* was only turned into a book as the result of particular historical and scholarly developments. We need not go into any details here to make the basic, but far-reaching point that there simply *is* a history in it for us to consider. Many, possibly all, old texts we come across as books were not originally in that medium, and it is not a trivial question to ask how our understanding of them is conditioned, perhaps determined, by the fact that we read them in print, that we keep them on shelves, i.e. that we generally find them in the form of books.

To take another example for the same point, we could think of a central writer in the canonical tradition, whose works have long been cornerstones for English literature: William Shakespeare. Whenever we deal with his texts, essential parts of the curriculum in English departments around the world, we are not actually dealing with books, at least not with regard to the historical conditions in which these texts emerged and continue to function in contemporary cultures. Again, this is a fundamental point with powerful implications:³ Shakespeare wrote principally for the theatre; his major medium was the stage, not the page; and if we can go by the available evidence he does not seem to have been all too interested in turning his play scripts into a printed book – this was done posthumously by some of his former colleagues. To be sure, unlike the bardic poets of the epic tradition, Shakespeare was highly aware of books. During his lifetime, the English book market became a vast place of fast business, and his own works quickly became valuable parts of it. But it is just as crucial for us to acknowledge that Shakespeare in print is not an unproblematic connection but a historical and cultural production that has specific consequences for our interpretation of his plays.

To understand what cultural meanings are involved in the book medium, consider the famous scene in *Romeo and Juliet* when the two title figures meet for the first time, early in the play. Juliet's family, the Capulets, are giving a party, which Romeo attends in disguise; he encounters Juliet, but does not know who she is. They are immediately drawn to one another; their hands touch and he ventures to kiss her, while they exchange the celebrated lines:

3 These are explored, for instance, in Kastan (2001) and Erne (2003).

4 Tobias Döring

ROMEO: Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged.

JULIET: Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

ROMEO: Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again. [*He kisses her*]

JULIET: You kiss by th' book.

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.104-108)

Juliet's final phrase is interesting because it offers a conjunction of two things, which do not really go together. Like Shakespeare's play texts, kisses should perhaps be best experienced in action, not in the medium of books or on dry, dusty pages. Even though we may well wonder how the young daughter of a respected Verona family should know about any books that give instructions for kissing, it is quite clear what her remark means: to do something "by the book" is to do it according to the rules, following a prescribed model, a recommended pattern to be repeated and applied in all given occasions. This may not be appropriate for kisses, but it illustrates – and this is the only reason why the scene is cited here – how the book, in general, can serve as an instrument of social regulation: a way to lay down rules. Whatever else it comes to be, the book is a medium of cultural authority or represents, at least in European contexts since the Renaissance, a strong attempt to serve as such a model. This is why texts set down and read in books offer themselves as matters of instruction, often with a particular gesture or assumption of authority, and this is why books have become, for most of us, a central medium of learning and teaching. Until very recently, they have defined the archives and techniques of cultural training, offering most efficient modes to affiliate readers to the authority of knowledge.

In recent years, of course, we have seen that books are being rivalled, though clearly not displaced, by other media of cultural training, most importantly by electronic archives and their networks. Still, books will certainly endure and their effects may never be so evident as when we think about the histories and circumstances of *postcolonial* books – as indicated in the title, a central point throughout the present volume. For, however we may define postcolonial literature, a useful way to understand it is to see it as the kind of literature that historically emerged from the encounter between the cultural authority of books and other, very different forms of cultural authority, embedded in alternative traditions, such as the popular performances and oral practices centrally at work also in the non-European societies that were subjected to colonial rule. It would perhaps even be worthwhile to study the entire history of colonialism on just these terms: as an enterprise by European readers to impose their cultural authority, regularized through books such as the Bible, onto non-European people, in the process trying to supplant or suppress other modes by which cultural authority can be established.

Telling history

This brings us, in the discussion of the title, to the key term *history*. As noted in the opening remarks, this concept is notoriously debated. Simply put, *history* covers what we know or assume to have happened in the past, i.e. events that once took place and that can be recorded and, to some extent, recovered. But even if we are no sceptics principally doubting the reality of such events, we would still have to admit that *what* we know or learn of them is necessarily selective, due to the availability and interpretation of often questionable sources. This problem relates to the telling link between the terms *history* and *story*, which in many languages, including German, are actually identical: *Geschichte* denotes both the events of the past and how we narrate them, i.e. the word has an objective aspect – whatever happened – and a less objective aspect – whatever is being told –, and even though we should be wary to give up this distinction altogether, it is clear that these two aspects are hard to keep apart. To say the least, the need for story telling, for representing any history in the medium of narrative has drastic consequences. What we include or exclude from the record, how we order the events and link them with each other, what kind of patterns we employ to mark distinctions, what sort of tropes are used to make them meaningful: all these are ways in which the devices of story telling structure and condition the history they are supposed to capture.

None of this is any news. The points raised here have been discussed at least since Aristotle who, in his *Art of Poetry*, established a distinction between historians and poets, claiming that historians show the way things are whereas poets show the way that things should be (Aristoteles 1982: 29). This argument is sometimes cited when trying to defend historians against suspicions that they are merely story-tellers. Yet there is one point where even Aristotelians must admit that the historian cannot but rely on the conventions of narrative: the point of beginning. *Where* we set off to study historical developments, and where we decide to begin our description and narration is a crucial and determining decision. Aristotle famously put down that stories have a beginning, a middle and an ending, and he defined the beginning as the point which itself does not follow from anything but from which everything else follows with necessity (Aristoteles 1982: 25). So wherever we take our starting point will necessarily determine where we end.

Take, for example, the history of colonialism. How exactly we should understand this term depends, to a significant degree, on the question at what point we think colonialism actually *began*: is it a nineteenth-century phenomenon beginning, say, in the 1830s after the Napoleonic Wars and culminating in the so-called Scramble for Africa in the 1890s? Or is it, rather, a much older phenomenon beginning with the ancient Phoenician voyages and settlements in the Mediterranean, i.e. in the world of antiquity? Or is colonialism a specifically modern development beginning in the Renaissance with the European voyages of exploration? Most views would probably tend towards this third alternative, dating the starting point for colonial projects, in the most common sense we use the term, around 1500. In fact, the date most likely to be men-

tioned in this context is the year 1492, when Columbus first sailed west in the hope to arrive in the East, in India or China. There are indeed good reasons to regard this voyage which ended, as we know, after less than half the journey he intended on the intervening coast of another continent, i.e. America, as a useful beginning to tell the history of colonialism, hence, also as a reference point for postcolonial histories.

But anyone can see that even such a central date is really rather arbitrarily chosen. In the sense of Aristotle's definition, this clearly cannot have been a point which does not follow on anything that went before. After all, Columbus could not have sailed without elaborate preparations, raising money, gaining patronage, acquiring his ships, hiring his crew, doing his research and reading about the East etc. So there must have been such a wealth of powerful colonial activity – projects, thoughts and attitudes – well before 1492 that the point of beginning should be earlier, perhaps in 1490 or 1483 – who could tell? On the other hand, it is well known that Columbus never realized where he actually arrived. So we might say more accurately that colonialism as a conscious project began later, perhaps with Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian merchant and sailor who gave the feminized version of his own name to the new continent and thus brought the New World into the purview of the Old. Coming to think of it, then, the dates of history are generally doubtful, not because we do not always know what happened, but because we are uncertain as to its interpretation. How can we appreciate true historical significance without, to large extents, making it up? We may well feel, therefore, that this entire approach leads us nowhere:

We get scared by history; we allow ourselves to be bullied by dates.

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue

And then what? Everyone became wiser? People stopped building new ghettos in which to practice the old persecutions? Stopped making the old mistakes, new mistakes, or new versions of old mistakes? (And does history repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce? No, that's too grand, too considered a process. History just burps, and we taste again that raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago.)

Dates don't tell the truth. They bawl at us – left, right, left, right, pick 'em up there you miserable shower. They want to make us think we're always progressing, always going forward. But what happened after 1492?

In fourteen hundred and ninety-three
He sailed right back across the sea.

That's the sort of date I like. Let's celebrate 1493, not 1492; the return, not the discovery. What happened in 1493? (Barnes 1990: 241)

What indeed? Whether or not we agree to it, this quotation offers a clear statement against the historical convenience of dates and the convention of narrative sequencing. What happened in 1493? Surely, a great many things, but the only reason why any of these may be relevant lies in the significance we are inclined to give them, not in their inherent meaning. The statement is cited from a well-known novel by the contemporary British writer Julian Barnes, entitled *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. It is