Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

Said and postcolonialism: from *Orientalism* (1978) to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

- a broadening of the argument of Orientalism to include other 'Others', i.e. objects of Imperialist representation.

- a critique of the Western bias of the discipline of comparative literature, and a call to reinterpret the canon of Western literature in the light of Imperialism.

- develops the notion of 'contrapuntal reading', i.e. a reading that would pay attention to the connection between different realities and experiences, some of which are foregrounded by the text and/or its readers while others are suppressed or marginalized.

- a (limited) call for the opening of the canon to non-Western works (much of Said's work remains centered on already canonical works or authors).

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

Is Said unfair to Austen when he criticizes her supposed complicity with Imperialism and slavery? He sometimes mentions her in the same breath as apologists of empire:

> "These colonies are, Mill says, to be considered as hardly anything more than a convenience, an attitude confirmed by Austen, who in *Mansfield Park* sublimates the agonies of Caribbean existence to a mere half dozen passing references to Antigua." (59)

Said himself actually alerts us to such a passage in the novel when he writes:

> "everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery. Fanny Price reminds her cousin that after asking Sir Thomas about the slave trade, "There was such a dead silence" as to suggest that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both." (96)

"It would be silly to expect Jane Austen to treat slavery with anything like the passion of an abolitionist or a newly liberated slave." (96)

From Austen's *Mansfield Park*

[Edmund] "Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny—and that is the long and the short of the matter. Anybody but myself would have made something more of it, and any body but you would resent that you had not been thought very pretty before; but the truth is, that your uncle never did admire you till now—and now he does. Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!—and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle. If you cannot bear an uncle's admiration, what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.—You must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman."

"Oh! Don't talk so, don't talk so," cried Fanny, distressed by more feelings than he was aware of; but seeing that she was distressed, he had done with the subject, and only added more seriously, "Your uncle is disposed to be pleased with you in every respect; and I only wish you would talk to him more.—You are one of those who are too silent in the evening circle."

From Austen's *Mansfield Park*

"But I do talk to him more than I used. I am sure I do. Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?"

"I did—and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther."

"And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like—I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel."

Influence and critiques of *Culture and Imperialism*: re-reading and adapting Austen's Mansfield Park (cf. video extract from the 1999 Miramax film adaptation of the novel)

The Empire Writes Back (1989/2002)

Postcolonial challenges to Western literature: from a critical examination of the canon (Said) to a recovery of marginalised/peripheral voices (EWB)

Background of the authors: Australia

Title: refers to a 1982 essay by Salman Rushdie called 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance'

Contexts: challenges to the canon, democratization of higher education in former colonies, demographic impact of post-colonial migration on Western education systems, institutional crises within English and Comparative Literature in the 1980s that triggered searches for new objects/paradigms.

The Empire Writes Back (1989/2002)

Critiques of *EWB*'s postcolonial approach:

- *EWB* makes sweeping generalizations about the postcolonial experience. It fails to distinguish properly between different forms and experiences of colonization, between different imperial projects, or between different modes of colonization within the same empire (e.g. British). It does not address 'internal colonialism', although its vocabulary and concepts are sometimes used in studies of internal colonialism (e.g. the relations between Russia and former other states of the Russian Empire / Soviet Union).

- *EWB* fails to properly account for 'borderline' cases like the USA or Ireland, which have been acknowledged or claimed as postcolonial, but which have largely remained outside the scope of the book and of the case studies it has inspired.

The Empire Writes Back (1989/2002)

Critiques of EWB's postcolonial approach:

- The Empire writes back: to/for whom? Who are the intended readers of texts that 'write back': metropolitan and/or postcolonial ones? Is there a tension between the possible inclusion of such texts in metropolitan reading lists and their relevance for the postcolonial contexts in which they emerge? (cf. claims that writers like Salman Rushdie are "writing for the West").

- Writing back, language and translation: does the focus on "english" lead to a neglect of work produced in indigenous languages? (cf. Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiongo, who at some stage gave up writing in English to produce drama and fiction in Kikuyu).

Questions

1. Said draws explicit parallels between the work of Third World scholars and other work focusing on "minority or suppressed voices within the metropolis" (*Culture and Imperialism* p. 63), including feminist criticism. What similarities and differences (methodological, political, ...) can you find between those various challenges to traditional ideas about Western literature? What is Said's attitude to those other challenges?

2. Said warns against "resistance hardening into dogma" (*Culture and Imperialism* p. 63) and the excesses of "rhetoric of blame" (*Culture and Imperialism* p. 63): have more recent calls for 'decolonization' disregarded those warnings? Did Said's own work sometimes show such tendencies?

Questions

3. “To read most cultural deconstructionists, or Marxists, or new historicists is to read writers whose political horizon, whose historical location is within a society and culture deeply enmeshed in imperial domination. Yet little notice is taken of this horizon, few acknowledgements of the setting are advanced, little realization of the imperial closure itself is allowed for.” (*Culture and Imperialism* p. 56). Beyond post-colonial analyses, have other modes of literary criticism taken more notice of imperialism and its cultural effects? Do they all need to? How much impact have Said’s arguments had in the study of literatures other than English? Is there still a blindness to imperialism in the study of those literatures or in some modes of literary theory/comparative literature?

4. Do you agree with Said that imperialism is “the major, I would say determining, political horizon of modern Western culture” (Culture and Imperialism, 60). If it is so, what should the consequences be for a study of ‘Western culture/literature’?

Questions

5. “To represent Africa is to enter the battle over Africa, inevitably connected to later resistance, decolonization, and so forth.” (*Culture and Imperialism* p. 68). Do Said’s arguments shed light on recent controversies surrounding Western representations of Africa, e.g. debates about the reopening of the Africa museum in Tervuren (cf. https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-africa-congo-museum-king-leopold-legacy/)

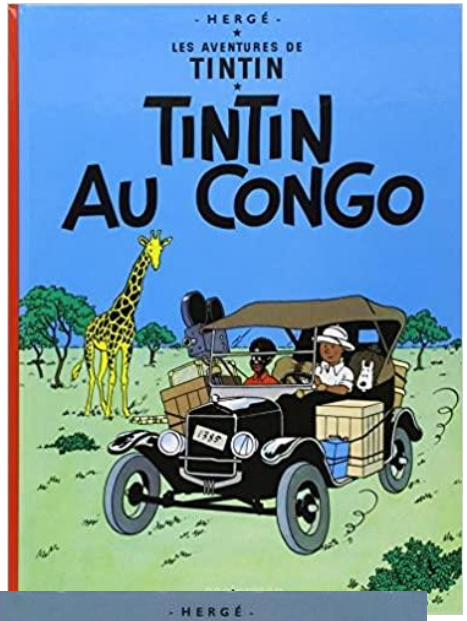
6. How different are challenges involved in ‘decolonizing the canon/literary curriculum’ from those involving the decolonization of public space (cf. controversies surrounding the statues of Cecil Rhodes and Leopold II among others)?

Questions

5. Do you agree with any of the criticisms of *The Empire Writes Back* listed above? According to you, what are the strengths and weaknesses of a focus on 'writing back'?

6. The arguments of *Culture and Imperialism* and *The Empire Writes Back* have recently fed into highly publicized controversies about 'decolonising the curriculum' at Cambridge and other places (cf. Sarah Jilani's article and the links listed below). Do you think your own syllabus needs 'decolonising', and if so, why would such a decolonization imply? Jilani writes that "decolonizing the curriculum does not stop at handling the canon through more historically-informed and non-Eurocentric viewpoints. That is only the critical mindset – this clarity about the exploitative nature of Empire – that precedes the real work that needs to be done": do you agree?

+ Any question you want to raise.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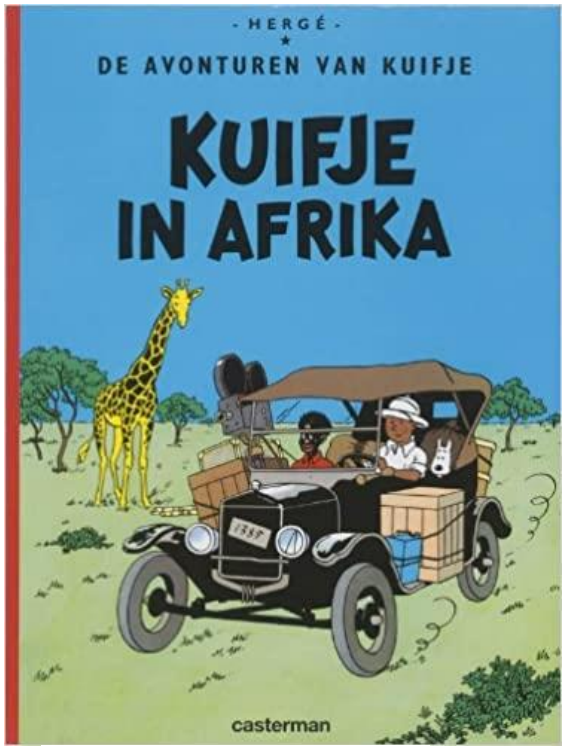
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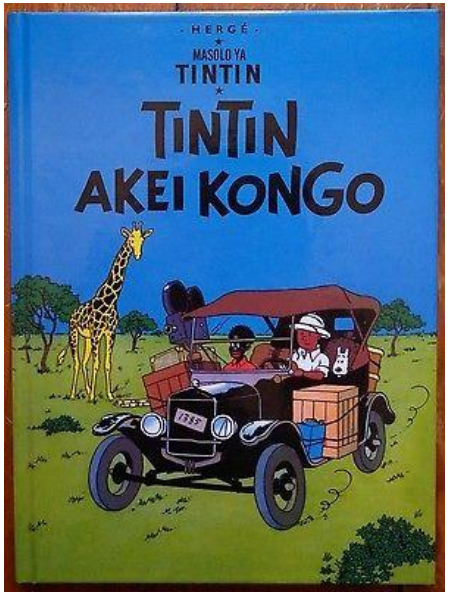
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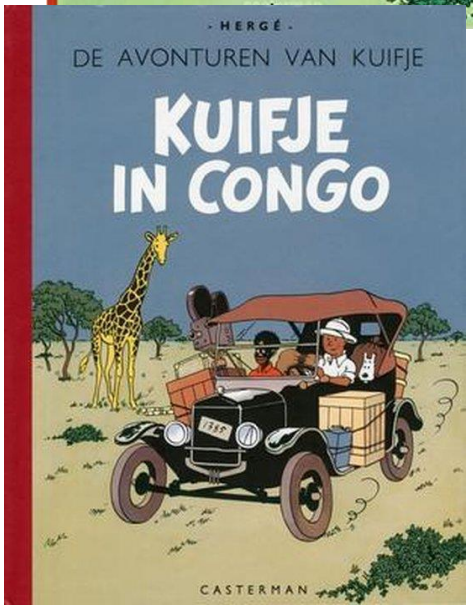
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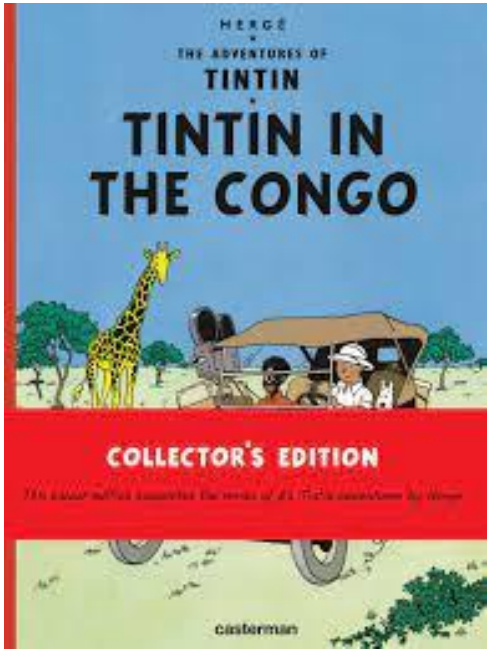
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