



Review

Youngs, Tim. 1994. *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues 1850-1900.*

Manchester : Manchester University Press. xi + 235 p.

ISBN 0 7190 3969 X.

Tim Youngs revisits familiar territory. The book concentrates in its first chapter on the Abyssinian crisis of the 1850s and 60s which culminated in the British campaign of 1867-1868 against the charismatic Emperor Theodore, and in its final chapters on Henry Morton Stanley's equally publicized but much less conclusive Emin Pasha Relief Expedition of 1887-1889. In between are chapters that round up some of the other usual suspects: Speke, Grant, Burton, Cameron, though Livingstone is pointedly excluded. This careful selection of evidence reveals a major weakness to which I shall come. Youngs concludes his study with a brief look at the close influences of the Relief Expedition and its subsequent polemics on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

The informing inspiration of this exercise in colonial discourse analysis is familiar, too. It is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and despite Youngs's attempts to establish some distance between himself and the vast Saidean school of postcolonial critical discourse, he fails to escape its binarist, reductionist and conformist imperatives. Despite recognizing that earlier students of Victorian representations of Africa – he names Patrick Brantlinger, but one could cite scores – are often “guilty of not distinguishing between different parts of Africa or between different ‘tribes’”; that such distinctions were actually “made by contemporary commentators to a much greater extent than is commonly realised”; that there exist as a matter of historical record “quite different representations of West, East and Central, North, and South Africa, according to different geographical and historical relationships” (9); and that, emphatically, “studies which assume an undifferentiated imperial centre consensually imposing linguistic, political, and economic rule on external societies are guilty of creating the very monolith they purport to condemn” (6), Youngs seems unable or unwilling to look beyond this monolith. His Introduction spells out an unambiguous binarist *credo*:

And it is my judgement that what travellers describe in Africa is mainly Britain: that the portrayal of the wilderness contains an apprehension of the city; that accounts of feudal systems in Africa constitute a commentary on the changes in British society; that the traveller's report on his or her relation to companions and to Africans is displacement of or compensation for anxieties about one's position in the British class system (6).

Not surprisingly, the broad outcome of Youngs's circular reading of the Euro-colonial archive is entirely predictable. His anxiety to contextualize British imperialism in Africa means that he effectively remains constrained in British rather than African history. Ironically, despite protestations to the contrary, his study erects a monolith of British colonial history with the African encounter as an embellishment in the margins. Despite his laudable recognition that the modern reader should attend to the actual texts and textuality of the colonial encounter, and not merely to its anthropologized stereotypes, he fails to apprehend the play of dialogic, polyphonic discourse that such recognition should entail, and hence to do justice to the complex, dynamic, often wholly contradictory nature of the world which that discourse partly reflects and partly constitutes. What emerges is simply another alterist paradigm of European (i.e. British) univocal hegemonic colonialism.

The pity of it all is that Youngs's readerly instincts to attend to texts rather than theories, to the records and their making rather than the presumed Anglocentrism of their makers, repeatedly point him in the right direction, only to fail him when the anxiety to be postcolonially correct overcomes him. At the level of individual text and instance, Youngs is often alert to the conflictual nature of the discourse he is dealing with. So, for instance, he cites Mansfield Parkyns's strikingly dissentient comments at the end of the second volume of his *Life in Abyssinia* (1853), and concedes that these "prefigure the dilemma facing the modern ethnographer" and raise "large and genuine questions of cultural translation and assimilation" (21). But instead of conceding any ideological ground to Parkyns, Youngs insists instead on the latter's confining Eurocentricity, his "desire to fix the other in its place", and a textual strategy "ostentatiously tactical in [its] posture" (22). Just how much more cringingly contortionist and anachronistic in his rhetoric must one expect an author of 1853 to be in order to convince a 1990s audience of his considerable awareness of the prickly nature of translating and representing the transculturally unusual and totally unknown? At the root of this anachronism lurks a misprision that has infected the whole Saidean Orientalist enterprise from the beginning, namely, the Janus-faced expediency of invoking Foucauldian agnosticism about the knowability of "truth" in order to dismantle Western humanist imperial intellectual appropriations, yet, at the same time, of wishing earnestly to hang on to precisely such Cartesian notions of non-subjective "truth" in order to postulate just those "genuine" non-Western "realities" that are supposed to have been occluded by Western misconstruals. In order to sit in

judgement on Parkyns, Burton, Cameron, Stanley and the rest, we have to assume that someone else, perhaps Africans themselves, have or had an unmediated access to the “truth” of Africa and Africans, and are not themselves the products of discursive (self-)construction.

My arguments are not meant to imply that we should simply take on trust, or attempt to mitigate, what Victorian (and later) travellers in Africa tell us, or ignore the often breathtaking cultural ignorance and arrogance displayed by some of them. In this regard Youngs comes up with some choice examples. His second chapter shows perceptively how a pervasive and pejorative concern in Victorian African travelogues with African eating habits was regularly thematized as metonymic of wider depravity: “Disorder in eating [was taken to signify] social disorder and a lack of an effective social differentiation” (68). In chapter 3 Richard Burton is shown to employ sophisticated and ironic narrative techniques and a sceptical authorial stance in order to present Africans as undifferentiated and perpetual children (96-97). Verney Lovett Cameron, too, is neatly revealed as a master of a duplicitous rhetoric of self-effacement which beguils the reader into consent (101). But little of this is new. Burton and Co. have been demonized in one postcolonial dismantlement after another as purveyors of a rampant Eurocentrism. Surely, this is where Youngs, had he been really convinced of the essential heterogeneity of transcultural representations, and really committed to opposing notions of “an undifferentiated imperial centre” and “any notion of stereotypes as fixed throughout time” (7), should have sought out and explored the many counter-indicators in the Victorian Afro-imperial archive, notably in the work of writers such as John Philip, Thomas Pringle, David Livingstone, Robert Moffat, Stephen Kay, Henry Barth, to mention just a few. In this regard the omission of Livingstone because “to discuss him in full would have had him take over the book completely” and because “much of what I say about the other travellers applies to Livingstone” (8) anyway, is somewhat breathtaking – indeed disingenuous, since Livingstone is the self-reflective, self-critical African traveller *par excellence*, whose work is shot through with profound self-doubt, a pervasive awareness of an uncomfortable outsider status, and recurrent self-admonitions about the difficult, discordant and discursive “crisis of representation” in which he was engaged. With Livingstone out of the way, Youngs’s enunciated revisionary thesis can only continue to undermine itself and confirm what it claims to oppose.

Even so, the final chapters of Youngs’s study, devoted to Stanley and the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition (EPRE), initially promise to reverse the process. The EPRE story has often been told, starting in the controversies which accompanied its inception and were aggravated by everything that followed. Youngs shrewdly decides to focus on the cultural, social and discursive contexts of the expedition, the forces which conditioned its conduct and shaped the records and narratives of

its progress, the controversies surrounding its collapse, and, finally, the processes of production and reception of those narratives. He makes an excellent reading of the agonized figure of Stanley himself, socially inferior and hence overly sensitive to slights and correspondingly maladroit with all subordinates, white and black alike. Stanley's brand of self-promoting entrepreneurialism becomes the centrepiece of Youngs's well-informed analysis of the multiple discursive constructions, revelations, refutations, reconstructions, and promotional hype that followed Stanley's return to London in 1890 with the manuscript of *In Darkest Africa* sizzling in his baggage. He recognizes, quite correctly, that the many and discrepant book-length narratives of the expedition had to insert themselves into a raging public controversy and amidst sensationalist revelations in the press, resulting "in an intense scrutiny of text as a record of experience and perception" (144). But he remains disappointingly preoccupied with the superficialities of these debates, with the issues raised, rather than with the implications that the EPRE affair has for his whole enterprise.

For what is really at issue here is the whole business of the construction and reception of *all* representations of Africa in the Western consciousness. In this regard the EPRE polemics constitute only a more spectacular instance of the conflictual, dialogic matrix in which all such transcultural representation takes shape. Victorian writers about Africa wrote as they did because they expected not bland agreement but sharp controversy. They wrote not to confirm but to challenge, whatever we may now think about their presumed prejudices. What this means (as Youngs initially perceived) is that there never was a monolith of European (or English) racial and cultural prejudice, even in the very hey-day of Victorian ethnocentrism. What there always was, was a debate, a dialectic, revisionary process which, eventually, of course, produced the very platform of cultural, cognitive liberation from which we can now speak and presume to judge our Victorian predecessors as somehow ideologically short of the mark. It is to Youngs's credit that he recognizes something of the importance of what he has uncovered, but the discussion has a long way to go.

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