Fictions of Empire and the (Un-)Making of Imperialist Mentalities: Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Criticism Revisited

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Abstract This article explores some of the issues that are of crucial importance for any attempt to come to grips with the logic of the fictions which provided the ideological backbone of British imperialism. After briefly delineating the continuity of the imperial past in the present, section 2 provides a preliminary exploration of the meanings of the term "fictions of empire," i.e. of the ambiguous title of this essay. Section 3 then provides an attempt to conceptualize the relationship between fiction and reality, and between culture and imperialism, emphasizing the creative or performative role that works of fiction can play in the construction and deconstruction of the ideological fictions of imperialism. Section 4 presents a narratologically informed revison of colonial discourse analysis and post-colonial criticism, which is the the approach that informs this article. Section 5 discusses six of the main functions that both literary and conceptual fictions can fulfill with regard to the making, and unmaking, of imperialist mentalities, while the last section provides a brief conclusion.

Key words ideological fictions of British imperialism; colonial discourse analysis and post-colonial criticism; postcolonial narratology; functions of narrative fiction

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> More than any other, the Age of Empire cries out for demystification, just because we — and that includes the historians — are no longer in it, but do not know how much of it is still in us.
>
> (E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* 5)
>
> For fictions have their own logic and their own dialectic of growth or decline.
>
> (Edward Said, *Orientalism* 62)

1. Introduction: On the Continuity of the Imperial Past in the Present

The Age of Empire lies in the past, but its ambivalent heritage is still very much with us. The British Empire, like the colonial empires of the other European powers, came to an end when independence was granted to previously colonized countries. But many of the values, preconceptions, and cultural stereotypes associated with the imperial world-view have been bequeathed to us. The reasons for this are not hard to determine. A plethora of books dealing with the British

imperial experience, as well as television, films, and the resources of other media, have contributed to preserving the glories of the imperial past in Britain's cultural memory and to constructing highly standardized images by means of which the British Empire continues to be remembered. Moreover, a host of novels, plays, and poems, many of which reflect a persistent imperial world-view, testify both to the fascination that the British Empire still has for authors and to the great importance that imperial heritage continues to have for the way Britain sees itself.

It is largely due to culture that the perceptual and ideological fictions that form the conceptual matrix of imperialism live on as an integral part of what has been called "cultural memory" and "collective identity." Referring to popular boys' adventure stories, Susan Bassnett has pointed out that "the values of those stories, however we may wish to repudiate them on the grounds of racism, sexism and xenophobia generally, are encoded into our thought patterns" (Bassnett, *Teaching British Cultural Studies* 71). This, of course, has nothing to do with a people's genes, but is the result of the discursive practices of cultural transmission.

Our project in this article will be to explore some of the issues that are of crucial importance for anyone trying to come to grips with the logic of the fictions which provided the ideological backbone of British imperialism. If one agrees with Hobsbawm and Said that "the Age of Empire cries out for demystification" (Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* 5) and that "fictions have their own logic and their own dialectic of growth or decline" (Said, *Orientalism* 62), one is faced with the question of how such a revisionist project of exploring and demystifying the fictions of British imperialism is to be undertaken. We will suggest some issues which might be helpful for that enterprise, but which have mostly been neglected by scholars as yet.

One way of approaching the demystification of the Age of Empire is to take a revisionist look at the role that literary fictions have played in nurturing "the sentiment, rationale, and above all the imagination of empire" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 12) and in helping to create "imperialism's consolidating vision" (288). By making use of some insights of narratology, we will try to show ways to explore the fictions of empire and the relationship between literature and the complex process that Mangan has felicitously called "making imperial mentalities" ("Introduction" 1). Though the works of such authors as Tennyson, Rider Haggard, Kipling, Conrad, and Forster have already been interpreted as examples of colonial discourse, we will focus on the question of in how far a narratological analysis of such fictions of empire can serve to shed light on the making, and unmaking, of imperialist mentalities.

After this brief prologue, section 2 will be devoted to a preliminary exploration of the meanings of the term "fictions of empire", i.e. of the ambiguous title of this essay. Section 3 will then attempt to conceptualize the relationship between fiction and reality, and between culture and imperialism, emphasizing the creative role that works of fiction can play in the construction and deconstruction of the ideological fictions of imperialism. Section 4 continues to outline the approach that informs this article, presenting a narratologically informed revision of colonial discourse analysis and post-colonial criticism. Section 5 discusses six of the main functions that both literary and conceptual fictions can fulfill with regard to the making, and unmaking, of imperialist mentalities. Section 6 will provide a brief conclusion.

2. Fictions of Empire and the Empires of Fiction

The title of this essay contains the key concept of *Fictions of Empire*, and one might as well begin by explaining what that phrase can mean. According to one of the standard works on the subject, "Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society" (Doyle, *Empires* 45). Although the meaning of the word "empire" is as clear as its reference, in the present context, to Britain's overseas colonies or "possessions," as they were often called, the British Empire's "diverse character" needs to be stressed. The empire was, as John M. MacKenzie has emphasized,

> at least four separate entities. It was the territories of settlement [...]. It was India [...]. It was a string of islands and staging posts, a combination of seventeenth-century sugar colonies and the spoils of wars with European rivals, China and other non-European cultures. And finally, Empire was the "dependent" territories acquired largely in the last decades of the nineteenth century. (MacKenzie, "Introduction" 1)

This highly diverse conglomeration of entities that made up the British Empire make it next to impossible to identify a single, consistent attitude among the contemporary British that could explain their actions. It does not allow for simple oppositions like "master race" and "dependent peoples," for instance, and it certainly does not allow for the many generalizations that made the Empire so attractive to many British people. Politics did not help conceiving the Empire as a unity, because, as Charles Wentworth Dilke admitted in 1890, "[n]o country can be less homogeneous than a nation which includes within its territories the Oriental despotism of British India and States as democratic as Queensland"

(Dilke, *Greater Britain* 583). In 1883, one of the foremost "makers" of fictions of the Empire, the historian John Robert Seeley, wanted to change the as yet sceptical view of the Empire, which was difficult to reconcile with the ingrained belief in the English love of liberty (cf. V. Nünning, "Daß Jeder seine Pflicht thue"; *Where the Discourses*; *Where Literature*), which had allegedly informed the history of the nation. For him, the failure to realize the vital importance of the Empire was "one of those monsters [...] which are created not by imagination but by the want of imagination!" (Seeley, *The Expansion of England* 356). At least in one respect, Seeley was right; to think of Great Britain and her numerous dependencies all over the world as a unity indeed demanded an act of imagination. To conceptualize the co-existence of quite a number of different ethnicsties in places geographically and culturally remote from England as an entity was not a matter of reflecting reality; the Empire of the mind had to be created.

Much more so than the loaded word "empire," which at least at first sight seems to be self-explanatory, "fiction" is an ambiguous term which can easily generate confusion. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows, the word "fiction" has quite different meanings. On the one hand, the word can designate "[t]hat which, or something that, is imaginatively invented," or more specifically, "[t]he species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters," viz. "[a] work of fiction; a novel or tale" (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "fiction"). On the other hand, "fiction" refers to any "supposition known to be at variance with fact, but conventionally accepted for some reason of practical convenience, conformity with traditional usage, decorum, or the like" (ibid.). In this latter sense, fictions are used in law, for instance, with the fiction that a corporation is a person separate from its members being a case in point. Such legal fictions are theoretical constructs or rules that assume something as true that is clearly false or at variance with fact, but that is highly useful in dealing with complex phenomena and shapes our thinking as well as our actions.

The title of this essay is thus deliberately ambiguous, self-consciously alluding as it does to the double meaning of "fiction": "the meaning of 'fiction' as literary, nonreferential narrative and its meaning (often [...] in its plural form) as theoretical construct" (Cohn, "Optics and Power" 18). This double meaning is essential for the questions that the article tries to answer in that we are concerned with the interplay between works of narrative fiction that deal with the British Empire and those theoretical and ideological constructs which constituted the imperial idea.

First, then, the phrase "fictions of empire" simply refers to those literary narratives that focus on the British Empire and that deal with the experience of the

empire. Nineteenth-century travel writing, the adventure fiction of such authors as Frederick Marryat, Robert Ballantyne, G.A. Henty and H. Rider Haggard, Kipling's stories and poems, and Conrad's novels not only constructed the imperial subject, but were also immensely popular and influential fictional models of imperialism and of the empire (cf. Sullivan, *Narratives of Empire*; White, *Joseph Conrad*). But such a limited definition does not adequately account for the complexity of the issues involved in the relationship between culture and imperialism.

In a broader sense, the title of this essay also refers to the diversity of ideological constructs which the colonial discourse has projected. These constructs can also be called fictions since they were clearly at variance with fact. Such conceptual and ideological fictions can be defined as recurring images of the empire, of the imperialist, of what he regarded as his mission, and of the colonized, the "Other." Such fictions consist of predispositions, biases, values, and epistemological habits which provide both agreed-upon codes of understanding and cultural traditions of looking at the world. The fact that those who make use of them are usually not conscious of the fact that they are mere fictions and at variance with the facts does not detract from their influence; indeed, it might make them all the more powerful because they shape our thoughts without our critically reflecting upon them. In their entirety these fictions constitute that culturally sanctioned system of ideas, beliefs, presuppositions, and convictions which constitutes imperialist mentalities. Such ideological fictions are closely connected with literary fictions because they find their most succinct expression in conventional plot-lines, myths, and metaphors that support and legitimize the imperial project.

It is this second meaning of fiction that Said has in mind when he calls Orientalism a "system of ideological fictions" (Said, *Orientalism* 321) and when he equates that phrase with such terms as "a body of ideas, beliefs, clichés, or learning" (205), "systems of thought," "discourses of power," and with Blake's famous "mind-forg'd manacles" (328). Moreover, most of what Said says about those Western conceptions of the Orient he calls Orientalism is equally relevant for understanding the structure and functions of the ideological fictions of the British Empire that we are concerned with. Just as "the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (5), the British empire can also be profitably understood as a set of ingrained and largely unconscious beliefs, ideas, feelings, and values.

What this article, then, mainly attempts to explore are manifestations of the imperial idea, as reflected in or constructed by what we have designated as

fictions of empire, which served to create their own empires of fiction. As John MacKenzie has convincingly demonstrated in his seminal work *Propaganda and Empire*, in the late nineteenth century an ideological cluster of ideas known as the "New Imperialism" took shape and forged new links between imperialism and patriotism. It was compounded of Social Darwinism, militarism, and Christianity, and it fostered and led to the propagation of the belief that empire was an adventure and an ennobling responsibility. Moreover, MacKenzie argues that there was an extraordinary continuity in this system of ideas from late Victorian times until well into the twentieth century and that it was of central importance to British self-perception and pride.

The ideological fictions that constituted the New Imperialism were not just reflected in or produced by the canonical works of "high culture." On the contrary, from the late nineteenth century to the second world war, nationalist and imperialist ideas were conveyed through various popular genres and media, e.g. boys' stories and other fictions for young people, the music hall, popular art, school books, postcards, packaging, cinema, exhibitions, parades, and a broad range of other genres and media (see MacKenzie, "Introduction"; *Imperialism and Popular Culture*). In other words, although the empires of fiction are not the only fictions of empire that one should take into consideration if one wants to come to grips with the questions of what made up the imperial idea, for the purposes of this essay the focus will be on narrative fictions and their contribution to fostering, challenging or even deconstructing the imperial idea.

Instead of assuming that imperialism was merely reflected in literary works, we argue that narrative fictions, just like patriotic poetry, boys' stories, history books, travellers' tales, and a host of overtly propagandistic genres, played an active and constitutive role in creating the imperial idea and in making imperialist mentalities. Moreover, literary as well as nonliterary fictions of empire have arguably not only given the British Empire and the imperial idea form, and thus also reality and presence, but they have also secured the empire a lasting and significant place in Britain's cultural memory. The ideological fictions of empire which such genres helped to create served as a filter through which the imperial experience came into the British public consciousness.

What are the most important ideological fictions of empire that constituted the conceptual backbone of imperialism and that determined contemporary perceptions of the Empire? One of the dominating fictions of British imperialism was the ingrained belief in English superiority and the concomitant conviction that the native peoples in the various colonies were in need of elevation and civilization.

Said even goes so far as to locate "the essence of Orientalism" in "the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (Said, *Orientalism* 42), which was itself based on the "binary typology of advanced and backward (or subject) races" (206). Because of what Said has called "the structures of attitude and reference" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 62, 73, 89, 114, 134, 157) that constituted the imperial world-view, this fiction went hand in hand with another assumption fostered by Social Darwinism, viz. the ingrained belief "that subject races should be ruled, that they *are* subject races, that one race deserves and has consistently earned the right to be considered the race whose main mission is to expand beyond its own domain" (62). Said's choice of words already indicates the unholy alliance between imperialist fictions and religion that developed during the late nineteenth century, when the discourses of Christianity and imperialism became closely entwined, and the hand of Providence was held to be responsible for territorial expansion. During that period, imperial conquest and rule by that "superior race" were invested with holy connotations; and many scholars even nowadays implicitly accept that the British felt a sense of mission, for which sacrifices had to be made (cf. V. Nünning, *Where Literature*).

Moreover, Said has drawn attention to two other important conceptual fictions of empire or features that are characteristic of imperialism as a mode of thought and a set of attitudes: "stereotypes about 'the African' [or Indian or Irish or Jamaican or Chinese] mind" and "the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples" (*Culture and Imperialism* xi). The colonized peoples were not only habitually regarded as inferior, but they were turned into undifferentiated types, the ingrained stereotypes about the Oriental or the African. This does not mean, however, that these stereotypes were not given different forms in many fictions. Many adventure stories by authors like George A. Henty, for instance, make use of the distinction between the "good native" — that is, those who help the British characters along and are said to be innocent, naïve and rather child-like — and the "bad natives," who are attributed with cruelty, ingratitude and treachery, and compared to wild beasts (cf. V. Nünning, "Viktorianische Populärliteratur"). Such differentiations, and even the occasional exception to the rule, however, did not detract from, but rather served to confirm the underlying belief in the inferiority of the so-called "subject races" that emphasised the alleged superiority of the British, and thus even meliorated the hostility between the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish and the British, who were united in the imperial endeavour.

These processes of dividing up the world into "them" and "us," of fostering a sense of one's own superiority that was based on the principle of inequality, and

of creating cultural stereotypes in turn brought forth and legitimized the notion of "the White Man's Burden." According to this fiction, it was the White Man's job, duty, and even mission to act as a bearer of moral and intellectual values, to bring humanity and civilization to primitive peoples, and to impose their benefits on a world of savagery. The deep-seated belief in European superiority over the alleged backwardness of indigenous peoples finds its most succinct expression in Kipling's idea of 'the White Man', whose (self-imposed) burden of fulfilling his civilizing mission was regarded as his unalterable destiny.

Another important ideological fiction of British imperialism was "the ideology of empire as family" (Sullivan, *Narratives of Empire* 105), which was vividly expressed in the form of conceptual metaphors (see A. Nünning, "Metaphors the British Thought"; "On the Emergence"; "On the Knowledge"). The recurrent use of the family metaphor assigned the colonies the role of children dependent on the tutelage of the mother country. The widespread dissemination of this particular trope justifies calling the image of the British Empire as a world-wide family one of the metaphors that popular imperialism lived by (cf. A. Nünning, "Metaphors the British Thought, " "Metaphors of Empire"), to adapt the felicitous title of George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's well-known book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Closely related to these ideological and metaphorical fictions was another recurrent feature of what Said has aptly called "the imperial lingua franca," namely the tendency to delineate the relationship between Britain and its colonies "in terms of possession, in terms of a large geographical space wholly owned by an efficient colonial master" (Said, *Orientalism* 213).

As even a brief glance at a random selection of texts concerned with the British Empire will illustrate, talking about the relationship between Britain and its colonies in terms of possession often went hand in hand with another fiction of colonial and imperialist discourse, viz. with denigrating or even erasing the native population of the countries that were colonized. What is implied in such a phrase as the "many blank spaces on the earth" (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 52), which fascinated Conrad's Marlow in his boyhood, for instance, is that there are whole regions waiting desperately for the colonialist or imperialist to populate them: "Colonialism conceptually depopulated countries either by acknowledging the native but relegating him or her to the category of the subhuman, or simply by looking through the native and denying his/her existence" (Tiffin and Lawson, "Introduction" 5).

In addition to these ideological fictions and rhetorical figures that one encounters in colonial discourse, there are a number of other more specific fictions

of empire. In his thorough monograph *The Language of Empire*, R.H. MacDonald has provided an overview of some of the most influential myths and metaphors of popular imperialism. One of the main fictions imperialism lived by manifested itself in a "poetics of war" and in the "public school code of 'playing the game'" (MacDonald, *Language of Empire* 19). Both are based on the "metaphor of war as sport — and its corollary, sport as war," which encouraged people "to behave as though the battle-field was an extension of the playing field, requiring the same attitudes and spirit" (20). The vocabulary of war provided imperialism with a set of metaphors, of which "the trope of war-as-a-lesson" is another famous, or rather infamous, example. It also supplied the imperial project with stereotyped plots: "The framing narrative of imperialism, the ur-plot, was that of conquest: first came the traders and missionaries; the 'natives' resisted or 'rebelled'; then came the army to conquer and pacify" (26). Although the above brief overview of some of the main ideological fictions of popular imperialism is anything but complete, it may at least serve to convince the sceptic that there is more to the phrase "fictions of empire" than meets the eye or than anyone thinking only in terms of narrative fiction may have anticipated.

3. Culture and Imperialism: Fictions of Empire and the Making of Imperialist Mentalities

Making a distinction between the literary fictions that deal with the British Empire and the conceptual and ideological fictions of popular imperialism, of course, raises the question of how the relationship between literature and imperialism can be conceptualized. In his important work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said provides a methodological framework for applying the well-known epigraph of E.M. Forster's novel *Howard's End* — "Only connect" — to the realms of culture and imperialism.

The present article follows the path laid out by Said in that it, too, considers literary fictions of empire within the context in which they were written and read, in order to "show the involvements of culture with expanding empires, to make observations about art that preserve its unique endowments and at the same time map its affiliations" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 5). Looking at the connections between fiction and the pursuit of imperial aims is, of course, something that has often been done before. Yet the question of how culture participates in imperialism has traditionally been posed in a mimetic framework, and we think that the contribution of literature to the making and unmaking of "fictions of empire" and thereby of shaping attitudes and encouraging actions is much more important than

this rather limited view allows for.

What has not been adequately explored as yet is the extent to which literature may have played a constitutive rather than a reflective role in colonial and imperialist discourse. This article questions the traditional assumption that the relationship between fiction and reality is based on mimesis. We argue that it is more rewarding to conceptualize fiction as an active force in its own right leading to the actual generation of ways of thinking and of attitudes and, thus, of something that stands behind historical developments. Rather than being merely a passive vehicle that reproduced the imperial ideology of their time, narrative fictions need to be conceptualized as a productive medium that can play a creative role in the production of the ideological fictions that provide the conceptual framework of imperialism.

The imperial idea and the fictions it projected did not merely copy features of the "objective" historical reality, but constructed an imperial ideology consisting of stereotypes, beliefs, feelings, and values. Studies dealing with popular imperialism ought to take to heart what Peter Burke has called the "philosophical foundation of the new history," viz. "the idea that reality is socially or culturally constituted" (Burke, "Overture" 3). Such a view of the "social construction of reality," to borrow Berger and Luckmann's well-known formula, has important and far-reaching consequences for the conceptualization of the relationship between the language of popular imperialism and the reality of the British Empire: "Words did not just reflect social and political reality; they were instruments for transforming reality" (Hunt, "Introduction" 17). It bears emphasizing that the discursive practices of imperialism did not reflect objectively pre-existing properties. On the contrary, the conceptual and ideological fictions of empire constituted the very reality they purported merely to reflect. Creating their own reality, they not only assigned roles to the colonizer and the colonized, but they also gave meaning to the imperialist project.

Moreover, colonial discourse is highly self-referential in that what it considers to be a fact does not reflect historical reality, but the preconceptions, values, and perceptions of the colonialist who produces the discourse in the first place. Just like Orientalism, the colonial discourse which projected such ideological fictions as those outlined above "responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object, which was also produced by the West" (Said, *Orientalism* 22): "it ascribes reality and reference to objects (other words) of its own making" (321). The authors of one of the canonical texts of post-colonial criticism, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, make basically the same point when they warn

against what they call the "danger in 'transcultural dialogues'," viz.

> that a new set of presuppositions, resulting from the interchange of cultures, is taken as the cultural reality of the Other. The described culture is therefore very much a product of the particular ethnographic encounter — the text creates the reality of the Other in the guise of describing it. (Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back* 59)

Such a constructivist conceptualization of the relationship between culture and imperialism is indebted to the insights of a number of fairly recent approaches, especially to the New Historicism (see Schwarzbach, "London and Literature" 112; Healy and Sawday, *Literature and the English Civil War* 2).

If one adopts such a view of the dialectical relationship between culture and imperialism, it becomes clear that narrative fictions, just like travelogues, poetical works and other genres involved in the imperial project, need not necessarily just reflect imperialist issues and preconceptions. Instead of merely reproducing the imperial ideology of their time, literary fictions concerned with the empire can just as well contest, criticize, or deconstruct the ideological and racist premises on which imperialism rested, serving to foster the unmaking rather than the making of imperialist mentalities. Joseph Conrad's and E.M. Forster's ambivalent fictions of empire are a case in point, whereas H. Rider Haggard's and G.A. Henty's works, for instance, show very little (if any) critical distance from the imperial project. On the other hand, some works of literature also fulfilled a crucial role in shaping "fictions of empire." A novel such as Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* (1855), which was disseminated among British troops in order to boost morale during the Crimean War, employed some central fictions of British imperialism even before politicians like Disraeli (in his famous Crystal Palace speech of 1872) or historians like Robert Seeley. Projecting back onto the Elizabethan Period the idea of British superiority over "natives" as well as European rivals, along with the ideal of gentlemanly public service and a pronounced sense of duty as well as sacrifice, Kingsley's novel provided a tradition of heroic empire builders and fostered central features of the "fictions of empire" (cf. V. Nünning, "Where Literature").

It is therefore not the question of a correspondence, or the lack thereof, between the literary and ideological fictions of empire on the one hand and the "real" British empire on the other that is at issue, but the system of thought, feeling, and perception that constitutes the imperial idea and frame of mind. Said has poignantly argued why it was futile to "look for correspondence between the language used

to depict the Orient and the Orient itself": "not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate" (*Orientalism* 71). The significance of literary "fictions of empire" to an analysis of imperialist discourse is thus not in the historical accuracy of the accounts they give of the historical events of colonialism, but in the light they throw on both the system of thought, attitudes, and values that informs imperialism and on the way fictions construct the past and shape cultural memory. Said has argued that such cultural forms as the novel "were immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xii). If the empire was viewed in a framework constructed largely out of literary and ideological fictions, then a revisionist analysis of the fictions, myths, and metaphors of British Imperialism is a good place to start in attempting to demystify the Age of Empire.

4. A Revisionist Look at Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Criticism from the Point of View of Postcolonial Narratology

A host of books and articles have provided critical reassessments of the discourses of colonialism and imperialism from the point of view of post-colonial criticism, focussing on a broad range of influential literary fictions that deal with the British Empire, but they have neither paid much attention to the formal and narrative techniques of the novels nor tried to illuminate the role these works have played in the making of imperialist mentalities and in creating Victorian England's imperialist view of the world. By focussing on what Hayden White has called the "content of the form," we will attempt to make some modest proposals as to how one can demystify what Andrea White has poignantly called "the energizing myth of English imperialism, " which, she argues, was "the culture's dominant fiction" (White, *Joseph Conrad* 6).

What is needed for coming to grips with the complex relationship between literary fictions on the one hand and the making of imperial mentalities, the invention of traditions, and the constitution of a nation's cultural heritage on the other is a cross-disciplinary approach to intercultural studies that takes into account both the insights that postcolonial criticism has provided and the analytical tools developed by narratology. Proceeding from the epistemological premise of radical constructivism, such an approach incorporates the anti-mimetic view of the relationship between literary texts and their extra-literary contexts, something which poststructuralism and New Historicism have both argued for. Such a view rests on the assumption that, instead of conceiving of culture and imperialism as two distinct entities, it is more profitable to explore the ways in which literature as

well as other media and the imperial project mutually influenced and reinforced one another. Moreover, the approach adopted is cross-disciplinary in orientation in that it draws on both the theoretical framework of the history of mentalities and the insights of post-colonial criticism.

One of the main goals of such an approach is to explore those peculiarities of colonial discourse that are characteristic of British imperialism. Following Michael Titzmann ("Skizze" 406), the term "discourse" can be defined as a system of thought, feeling, and argument that is characterized by three features: a specific topic or subject-matter, regularities of speech, and interdiscursive relations to other discourses. Colonial discourse can thus be defined as the set of codes, stereotypes, and vocabulary employed whenever the relationship between a colonial power and its colonies is written or spoken about (cf. Said, *Orientalism* 71). An analysis of colonial discourse must therefore look at "the variety of textual forms in which the West produced and codified knowledge about non-metropolitan areas and cultures, especially those under colonial control" (Williams and Chrisman, "Colonial Discourse" 5). Since any attempt at drawing up an encompassing and systematic inventory of the features of colonial discourse would be doomed to failure, this essay focusses on some of its most important features and on literary manifestations of the imperial idea.

As anyone familiar with current developments in literary theory will know, the approach outlined would be inconceivable without the insights provided by post-colonial criticism. This takes in a number of theoretical and critical approaches used to explore both the complex relationship between culture and colonialism and imperialism's ambivalent heritage. They focus either on the cultural products of the former colonies of the European empires or on the problems inherent in imperialist views and representations of the colonies and their relationship to their mother countries. Both varieties of post-colonial criticism offer revisionist counter-narratives to the tradition of European imperial narratives. The roots of post-colonial criticism, or colonial discourse theory and analysis, as it is sometimes called, go back to the important work of Frantz Fanon and to Michel Foucault's work on the history of systems of thought, which has drawn attention to the fact that knowledge and power are articulated in discursive practices. Among the leading practitioners and theorists of post-colonial criticism at present are such well-known scholars as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, but Edward Said is often regarded as its founding-father.

Anyone trying to connect literary fictions with the imperial process of which they were a part is, of course, faced with the difficult problem of how one can

determine the imperialist, racist, or ideological bias of a given work. Since novels or poems do not generally do the critic the favour of making any direct statements for or against imperialism (or feminism, or anything else, for that matter), the critic has to expose them to detailed textual analysis. The things to look for, according to Said , "are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original"(*Orientalism* 21). If one substitutes the word "empire" for "Orient" in the following quote, one gets more than just an inkling of how to come to terms with the ways in which the ideological fictions of imperialism implied or created in literary fictions that deal with the British Empire can be ascertained:

> Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient; translated into his text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice he adopts, the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text — all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf. (Said, *Orientalism* 20).

Narratology in general, and postcolonial narratology in particular (cf. Knellwolf and King; Sommer) can provide some useful analytical tools and concepts which should be taken seriously if one believes in the content, or *sensu* Fredric Jameson, in the "ideology" of the form. A rather basic principle that, especially in older tales, is often of paramount significance, is the choice of the narrative voice: a heterodiegetic narrator is not involved in the fate of his characters; he stands aloof, knowing everything about them, and sometimes even judging them as well as drawing lessons from their behaviour. As Stanislaw Eile states, this kind of narrator does "not require verification", but rather "verifies all other statements" (Eile, "Novel as an Expression" 120). If these narrators praise one of the characters, explain his/her behaviour in favourable terms or even appeal to the sympathy of the reader and use other devices in order to demonstrate the character's worth, it is usually an important indicator of the kind of values a novel conveys. As Elizabeth Ermath has shown, this kind of "omniscient" narrator often functions as the moral centre of the story (cf. Ermarth, *The English Novel* 71-89).

　　This is sometimes, but by no means always, also true with regard to the "homodiegetic" narrator, who narrates his story from a different time level, thus having an advantage over the other characters, but who is nonetheless, as an "experiencing I," part of the story. In the context of postcolonial criticism and

postcolonial narratology (cf. Sommer), the position of the narrator is important: Is he/she writing from the centre or from the margins? Is he/she part of the culture which dominates "the other," or is he/she providing an indigenous view of the affairs? And, most important of all, is she/he critical of the "fictions of imperialism," or — maybe the most effective way of criticism — does he/she begin as someone who subscribes to the Imperial idea but is disillusioned and "convinced" by the fictional facts that he/she believed in a chimera? Scholes has done an excellent job at explaining why ethical, ideological and political approaches, and formalist appropaches like narratology, can complement each other in that no kind of literary criticism an afford to ignore a detailed analysis of the formal issues involved in literary representation and narrative technqiue: "The political enters the study of English primarily through questions of representation: who is represented, who does the representing, who is object, who is subject   — and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects, and nations?" (Scholes 153)

However, even with regard to overt narrators, who make pronounced value judgements, provide explanations, generalise, and even address the reader, thereby trying to establish a common ground and convince him/her of the correctness of one's views, things may be more complex than a superficial view at the narrator's position would suggest. Homodiegetic narrators are by no means to be trusted implicitly. Although it was not used very often, the phenomenon of 'unreliable narration' has to be taken into account. In Maria Edgeworth's novel, *Castle Rackrent* (1801), for instance, the Irish servant Thady Quirk does nothing but praise his master's family, but even a not very discerning reader gathers very quickly that this family, aptly called "Rackrent," is as egoistic as it is unscrupulous, cruel and dumb. Narratologists have by now established a number of features, both text-internal and text-external, which can help us to discern even those "unreliable" narrators, who are much more complex and interesting as Thady Quirk is (cf. A. Nünning "But why will you say"; "On the Emergence"; Phelan and Martin "The Lessons of Weymouth").

To concentrate on the narrative voice is therefore not enough; one also has to take its relation to the plot and the values that are believed in by the characters into account. In some cases, this is, again, quite simple: if the text is an "ideological" text, for example. This has been masterfully described by Sara Suleiman (*Authoritarian Fictions*), who argues that such writings provide many redundancies as far as the structure of the plot, statements and actions by the characters, as well as comments by the narrator are concerned — even though, as she rightly stresses,

even such texts are characterised by some elements which provide a "surplus" of meaning which cannot be fitted into the general system of values conveyed by such novels. Other texts, for example those by Forster, Kipling or Conrad, are much more complex and have to be analysed very closely, taking heed of as many strategies of narration and additional features such as the use of metaphors and symbols or the "semantisation of space" (*sensu* Lévi-Strauss) as possible.

Since the following categories have been identified even before the heyday of narratology, they can be mentioned only briefly. The structure of the plot and the question of "poetic justice" often play an important role: Does the plot and the ending confirm the system of values provided by the narrator and the main characters? Less complex works with a so-called "closed form" often confirm the dictum of the rather prudish governess in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895): "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means" (Wilde 22). That Wilde uses this statement in order to further expose the governess' lack of insight and her prim belief in conservative values shows, however, that things are not often as easy as that. Moreover, sometimes there are "ideal" characters who can be taken to embody most of the values confirmed in a specific work. In older works, such characters often acted as the mentor of the hero or heroine, who realises the truth of their councils only at the end of the story. Another narrative strategy that has been amply employed from the end of the seventeenth century onwards is the "doctrine of the just distribution of sympathy" (Wolfgang Zach, *Poetic Justice* 305, 311, our translation) of the characters. The "good" characters have to be presented in a positive way, and the villains have to be painted as black as possible. It is doubtful, however, whether this way of characterisation is always easy to recognise. The very pious and moral author Samuel Richardson, for instance, was horrified when he heard that the villain of his novel *Clarissa* was thought to be very attractive by a number of his readers (cf. Sabor, "Richardson" 143). We therefore have to look at a large number of important narrative strategies and determine their interconnections.

Another important feature is the constellation of characters and the distribution of "focalisers," i.e. of those whose consciousness we get insight into. The narrator — especially a "heterodiegetic," "ominiscient" one — may be quite reticent, but allow us insight into the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of quite a number of characters. In such novels, the distribution of "focalisation" is significant: It makes a world of difference, even if the same number of "colonisers" and "indigenous people" take part in the plot, whether we are presented mainly (or even exclusively) with the thoughts and feelings of one group. We tend to identify with the "heroes,"

those characters whose feelings, motives, fears and tribulations we are let to know at greater length — although there are, again, a few significant exceptions, such as "unreliable focalisers." However, many people feel that in Jane Austen's famous novel *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne is somewhat less praiseworthy than her more rational sister Elinor; but few notice that Elinor is by far the most important focaliser in this novel, and that we often even come to know (and evaluate) Marianne's feelings by way of Elinor's thoughts on them.

The seemingly basic feature of the quantity of the perspectives of narrators and characters that are presented is therefore just as important as the guiding principle behind the selection of characters and events. Even without the use of explicit narrators, for instance, woman novelists of the eighteenth century made ingenious use of such simple means as the selection of the perspective (concentrating, for instance, only on the smaller demeanours of the heroine and focussing on her remorse, instead of showing the damage she may have done to others), appealing to the reader's sense of sympathy by punishing misdeeds to an unwarranted degree, staging conflicts between the sexes and emphasising female powerlessness, highlighting the narrow range of choices of women by the use of contrasts and mirrors, and exploring the problem of women's use of speech (cf. V. Nünning, "Gender, Genre and Female Experience") — and it does not need emphasizing that all of these strategies are important for an analysis of the relation between "the coloniser" and "the other." In order to bolster the position of women in a society dominated by men, women writers also used ideal characters, who corresponded to an outstanding degree to dominant values, in order to highlight the deviant women's positive qualities: Often, such characters admire or even love the character who rebels against some social mores, and explain their behaviour to the reader, thus providing a model for the reader's reaction. Concomitantly, it has been a time-honoured tactic to put negative, misogynous opinions about women (which readers might agree with in "real" life), into the mouths of the most unattractive, dumb and ridiculous characters, thus discrediting the tale by way of the teller.

This very brief sketch of some of the most important narrative strategies that determine the "content" and the "ideology" of the form may have shown that it is not enough just to isolate one statement or even the values embodied by one character (even though he may be the protagonist or the narrator) and then condemn a work as "racist" or praise it for criticising dominant "fictions of empire." Although many scholars continue to look just at the plot and the content, often concentrating on isolated instances while disregarding formal features like multiperspectivity, ways of characterisation or "focalisation," any careful

interpretation of a novel's confirmation or critique of imperialist values should take heed of the categories that have been explored by narratology. Similarly, since poems restructure the empire through their use of metaphors, rhetorical tropes, and rhythms, it is these textual devices that provide insights into the complex relationship between culture and imperialism, between literary fictions of empire and the ideological fictions they project.

5. Functions of "Fictions of Empire": Making Imperialist Mentalities, Inventing Cultural Traditions, Legitimizing Imperialism, and others

The remarkable discrepancy between the often harsh and ignoble historical reality of the British Empire and the euphemistic myths and metaphors projected by both colonial discourse in general and narrative fictions in particular raises the question of why the British were so prone to constructing complacent and self-congratulatory fictions of empire. At least part of the answer can be sought in the fact that the word "empire" was generally regarded as an inappropriate term for designating the relationship between a mother country and her colonies. As late as 1905, Joseph Chamberlain asserted: "It is not an empire. We use that word; but it is not an empire in the sense in which other empires have existed on this globe" (Chamberlain, "Speech" 295). Another apologist of the empire, Lord Alfred Milner, admitted that the word "suggest[s] domination, ascendancy, the rule of a superior state over vassal states" (Milner, "Speech" 349). As James Anthony Froude succinctly put it: "One free people cannot govern another free people" (*Oceana* 2). This was somewhat unfortunate, as the English prided themselves on their love of liberty and the long tradition of representative government. The connotations of the words "empire" and "imperialism" constituted a threat to the notion of Englishness, i.e. to those traditions that were regarded as specifically English (cf. V. Nünning "Where the Discourses"; "Where Literature"). In order to overcome the negative connotations of the terms "empire" and "imperialism" (cf. Koebner and Schmidt, *Imperialism*; Williams and Chrisman, "Colonial Discourse" 1), and to provide the heterogeneous bundle of political unities that were subsumed under the term empire, therefore, the establishment of the "fictions of empire" fulfilled in important role. But significant though this insight into the unpopularity of these words in Britain is, it hardly suffices to answer the question of what functions the conceptual and ideological fictions of empire outlined above may have fulfilled.

In the first place, by reducing both the complexity and the strangeness of the empire's diverse character such fictions imposed form upon an untidy reality and served as models for thought. They turned vast geographical areas into

manageable entities, transformed complex series of diffuse events into simple imperialist myths, and made soldiers into heroes. Despite, or even because of, their inevitably reductive character, such conceptual fictions can fulfil heuristic or cognitive functions in that "they represent or stand for a very large entity, otherwise impossibly diffuse, which they enable one to grasp or see" (Said, *Orientalism* 66). In their capacity as mental models, fictions of empire served as means for explaining complex historical processes and constellations. They helped to make sense of the imperial experience and "familiarised the public with the bearings of the question[s]" (Froude, *Oceana* 390) that were raised by the debates and the agitation about the British Empire.

Secondly, the literary and conceptual fictions fulfilled normative functions because they authorized ideologically charged views of the relationship between the mother country and her colonies. Popularizing imperialist attitudes and norms, the myths and metaphors of empire established a configuration of values that was conducive to maintaining an imperial world view. Although colonial discourse purported merely to describe the empire and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, what it actually did was assign roles to them. Imposing not only structure but also transformations and corrections upon raw reality, the ideological fictions of popular imperialism shaped both the prevailing view of the relationship between the mother country and her colonies and the perception of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. By translating the foreignness of the imperial experience into a highly stylized language, literary as well as conceptual fictions of empire served to create habits of thought, feeling, and perception conducive to advancing the imperial project. More specifically, popular fictions helped to transform the public perception of the military which came to be viewed in a completely different light as a result of successful campaigns in the colonies (cf. MacKenzie, *Popular Imperialism*).

Thirdly, by establishing oppositions between "us" and "them," between self and other, fictions of empire served as an important means of maintaining an advantageous British self-image and of constructing Britain's national identity. In the imperial fiction of the "superior race," the differences between Englishmen, Welshmen, the Scottish and the Irish could for once be forgotten. The fiction of the White Man's Burden, for instance, supported, or even created, a pronounced sense of self-regard as a nation of great power destined to wield its civilizing influence over "an empire on which the sun never set" (as the famous formula had it). Colonial discourse and the fictions of empire it projected are closely bound up with the development of Britain's cultural identity, because a people's collective identity,

just like personal identity, is neither natural nor stable, but discursively constructed: "In an important sense, we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations [...] but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 60). Emphasizing one's own superiority, enhancing Britain's self-pride in its achievements, or denigrating stereotyped Orientals or Africans was thus not an end in itself, but part of that complex political and cultural process that Linda Colley has aptly called 'Forging the Nation' (Colley, *Britons*). In this respect, as in so many others, the so-called "Indian Mutiny" was one of the most significant ideological and moral turning-points because this key event of imperial history transformed both the reputation of the army and the conception Britain had of itself, of its national characteristics, and of its role in the world (cf. V. Nünning, "Daß Jeder seine Pflicht thue"; Erll, *Prämediation*).

Fourth, many of the literary as well as the conceptual fictions of empire constructed and propagated a patriotic view of imperial history and transmitted it from one generation to the next. Thus they played a significant part in the shaping of cultural memory that has been called the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*; Mangan "The Grit of Our Forefathers"). Popular history, historical novels, and the official historiography of empire created what MacDonald — using Tennyson's phrase — has called "the Island Story, " which had "very little to do with fact, but a great deal to do with metaphorical or imaginative reality [...]. Like all good stories, it had a plot, with a beginning and an ending, and in between, a series of crises" (MacDonald, *The Language of Empire* 51). It was in the framework of these patriotic myths of imperialism that officers acquired the aura of heroes and that these British heroes won each battle against native villains. The history of imperialism was thereby reduced to a series of memorable and heroic moments, each of which was endowed with patriotic meaning. MacDonald has called these mythologized events which made the "Island Story" accessible and by which the imperial past has largely been remembered "Deeds of Glory", which "provided a pattern-book of heroism" (81) and which were modelled on "an aristocratic sense of chivalry" (90). For obvious reasons, representations of such deeds of glory are of great interest to the cultural historian seeking to identify the set of values underlying imperialism: "A hero is a product of his society, the culture gives the hero's life its particular meaning. The culture, ultimately, produces heroes who reflect its values" (82). The growth of legends about the allegedly exemplary lives and heroic deeds of such eminent Victorians as

Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, the two English champions of the Napoleonic wars, of General Charles Gordon, the epitome of the soldier as Christian martyr and gentleman, or of Sir Henry Havelock, who died a heroic death as a Christian soldier when he tried to relieve the besieged in Lucknow, provides typical examples of the role fictions of empire played in the construction of national identity and the shaping of cultural memory (cf. 81-111).

Fifth, fictions of empire fulfilled a legitimizing function because they provided rationalisations and justifications of imperialism. They legitimized colonial conquest and imperial rule by dignifying them with a high-minded mission which putatively aimed at conferring moral, religious, and material benefits onto the colonies. According to Said, the "important thing was to dignify simple conquest with an idea, to turn the appetite for more geographical space into a theory about the special relationship between geography on the one hand and civilized or uncivilized peoples on the other" (*Orientalism* 216). The ideological fictions that imperialism lived by served as means of retrospective and prospective justification, because they legitimized imperial rule in advance as well as after the fact.

Last but certainly not least, fictions of empire served as subtle means of propaganda and as ideological handmaidens of imperialism, because they glorified the imperial project, disseminated highly advantageous myths and metaphors of popular imperialism (cf. Nünning and Rupp), and created a cult of exemplary heroes. The overtly propagandistic function that literary fictions played in the making of imperial mentalities is particularly obvious in Victorian popular literature. The popular fictions of prolific writers like G.A. Henty, Robert M. Ballantyne, Frederick Marryat, Cutcliffe Hyne and Edgar Wallace "became handbooks for the imperial programme" (MacDonald, *The Language of Empire* 205).

Literary fictions of empire, in particular, could fulfil such normative, legiti-mizing, and propagandistic functions because they shaped habits of thought, feeling, and perception. Their plots, myths, and metaphors played an important part in making imperialist mentalities because they organised "the metaphorical realities of empire" and "conditioned the way in which those who used them thought of the world" (233). The limited imagery, rhetoric, and vocabulary of popular imperialism provided conceptual and normative frameworks which functioned as more or less distorting lenses through which the empire was experienced.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, anyone interested in the impact of literary fictions on the growth and

decline of popular imperialism and imperialist mentalities will find it worthwhile to explore the relationship between narrative fictions of empire and the ideological fictions they served to generate and disseminate. By discussing and deconstructing some of the central ideological fictions of imperialism that are inscribed in many literary (as well as nonliterary) works, this article has tried to demonstrate that high and popular culture have "a specific history of complicity with imperial power, which it would be Panglossian to call irrelevant" (Said, *Orientalism* 342).

Moreover, only if we understand the logic and structure of what we have called conceptual and ideological fictions of empire will we be able to recognize "where and how our view of things is inflected (or infected) by colonialism and its constituent elements of racism, over-categorization, and deferral to the centre" (Tiffin and Lawson, "Introduction" 9). A great deal of the value and relevance of the exploration of what we have called 'fictions of empire' lies in the continuity between the past and the present: "Mentalities created by yesterday's certainties survive more frequently than some would like to believe. These mentalities still extensively influence those of today. The effort to collate and interpret such mentalities created in the past may well constitute in the present and the future, therefore, a moral prophylactic" (Mangan, "Introduction" 20).

Anyone interested in these complex processes would therefore be well advised to heed the implied warning with which Said concludes his *Orientalism*: "systems of thought like Orientalism, discourses of power, ideological fictions — mind-forg'd manacles — are all too easily made, applied, and guarded" (Said 328). If the discourse of popular imperialism cries out for demystification — and we think that it still does — then exploring fictions of empire from a postcolonial and narratological angle is surely a good place to start.[1]

Note

1. This article is a revised and expanded version of A. Nünning and V. Nünning, "Fictions of Empire and the Making of Imperialist Mentalities: Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory as a Paradigm for Intercultural Studies." We should like to thank Simon Cooke for his careful proof-reading and Mirjam Horn for formatting and proof-reading the text

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