THE LOCATION OF CULTURE

Three years before the native Christians received the Bible at Hurdwar, a schoolmaster named Sandappan wrote from southern India, asking for a Bible:

Rev. Fr. Have mercy upon me. I am amongst so many craving beggars for the Holy Scriptures the chief craving beggar. The bounty of the bestowers of this treasure is so great I understand, that even this book is read in rice and salt-markets.

(MR, June 1813, pp. 221–2)

But in 1817, the same year as the miracle outside Delhi, a much-tried missionary wrote in some considerable rage:

Still everyone would gladly receive a Bible. And why? That he may store it up as a curiosity; sell it for a few pice; or use it for waste paper.... Some have been bartered in the markets.... If these remarks are at all warranted then an indiscriminate distribution of the scriptures, to everyone who may say he wants a Bible, can be little less than a waste of time, a waste of money and a waste of expectations. For while the public are hearing of so many Bibles distributed, they expect to hear soon of a correspondent number of conversions.

(MR, May 1817, p. 186)

ARTICULATING THE ARCHAIC

Cultural difference and colonial nonsense

How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble.... She calls ‘Come’ through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.

E. M. Forster, A Passage to India

The Fact that I have said that the effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel, a kern to use Freud’s own term, of non-sense, does not mean that interpretation is in itself nonsense.

Jacques Lacan, ‘The field of the other’

I

There is a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth, whatever that might be. Around the turn of the century there emerges a mythic, masterful silence in the narratives of empire, what Sir Alfred Lyall called ‘doing our Imperialism quietly’, Carlyle celebrated as the ‘wisdom of the Do-able – Behold ineloquent Brindley ... he has chained the seas together,’ and Kipling embodied, most eloquently, in the figure of Cecil Rhodes – ‘Nations not words he linked to prove/His faith before the crowd.’ Around the same time, from those dark corners of the earth, there comes another, more ominous silence that utters an archaic colonial ‘otherness’, that speaks in riddles, obliterating proper names and proper places. It is a silence that turns imperial triumphalism into the testimony of colonial confusion and those who hear its echo lose their historic memories. This is the Voice of early modernist ‘colonial’ literature, the complex cultural memory of which is made in a fine tension between the melancholic homelessness of the modern novelist, and the wisdom of the sage-like storyteller whose craft takes him no further afield than his own people. In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Marlow seeks Kurtz’s Voice, his words, ‘a stream of light or the deceitful flow from the heart
of an impenetrable darkness' and in that search he loses 'what is in the work - the chance to find yourself'. He is left with those two unworkable words, 'the Horror, the Horror!' Nostromo embarks on the most desperate mission of his life with the silver tied for safety around his neck 'so that it shall be talked about when the little children are grown up and the grown men are old', only to be betrayed and berated in the silence of the Great Isabel, mocked in the owl's deathcall 'Ya-aca-lo! Ya-aca-lo! it is finished, it is finished.' And Aziz, in A Passage to India, who embarks jauntily, though no less desperately, on his Anglo-Indian picnic to the Marabar caves is cruelly undone by the echo of the Kawa Doli: 'Boum, ouboum is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it ... if one spoke silences in that place or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same ou-boum.7

As one silence uncannily repeats the other, the sign of identity and reality found in the work of empire is slowly undone. Eric Stokes, in The Political Ideas of English Imperialism, describes the mission of work - that medium of recognition for the colonial subject - as a distinctive feature of the imperialist mind which, from the early nineteenth century, effected the transference of religious emotion to secular purposes'. But this transference of affect and object is never achieved without a disturbance, a displacement in the representation of empire's work itself. Marlow's compulsive search for those famous rivets, to get on with the work, to stop the hold, gives way to the compulsive quest for the Voice, the words that are half-lost, lied about, repeated. Kurtz is just a word, not the man with the name; Marlow is just a name, lost in the narrative game, in the 'terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares'.9

What emerges from the dispersal of work is the language of a colonial nonsense that displaces those dualities in which the colonial space is traditionally divided: nature/culture, chaos/civility. Ouboum or the owl's deathcall - the horror of these words! - are not naturalized or primitivistic descriptions of colonial 'otherness', they are the inscriptions of an uncertain colonial silence that mocks the social performance of language with their non-sense; that baffles the communicable verities of culture with their refusal to translate. These hybrid signifiers are the intimations of colonial otherness that Forster describes so well in the beckoning of India to the conquerors: 'She calls "Come" ... But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.' It is from such an uncertain invitation to interpret, from such a question of desire, that the echo of another significant question can be dimly heard, Lacan's question of the alienation of the subject in the Other: 'He is saying this to me, but what does he want?'

'Yacabo! Yacabo! It is finished ... finished': these words stand not for the plentitudinous place of cultural diversity, but at the point of culture's 'fading'. They display the alienation between the transformational myth of culture as a language of universality and social generalization, and its tropic function as a repeated 'translation' of incommensurable levels of living and meaning. The articulation of nonsense is the recognition of an anxious contradictory place between the human and the non-human, between sense and non-sense. In that sense, these 'senseless' signifiers pose the question of cultural choice in terms similar to the Lacanian tel, between being and meaning, between the subject and the other, 'neither the one nor the other'. Neither, in our terms, 'work' nor 'word' but precisely the work of the colonial word that leaves, for instance, the surface of Nostromo strewn with the detritus of silver - a fetish, Emilia calls it; an evil omen, in Nostromo's words; and Gould is forever silent. Bits and pieces of silver recount the tale that never quite adds up either to the narcissistic, dynastic dream of imperial democracy, or to Captain Mitchell's banal demand for a narrative of 'historical events'.

The work of the word impedes the question of the transparent assimilation of cross-cultural meanings in a unitary sign of 'human' culture. In-between culture, at the point of its articulation of identity or distinctiveness, comes the question of signification. This is not simply a matter of language; it is the question of culture's representation of difference - manners, words, rituals, customs, time - inscribed without a transcendent subject that knows, outside of a mimetic social memory, and across the - ouboum - kernel of non-sense. What becomes of cultural identity, the ability to put the right word in the right place at the right time, when it crosses the colonial non-sense?

Such a question impedes the language of relativism in which cultural difference is usually disposed of as a kind of ethical naturalism, a matter of cultural diversity. 'A fully individual culture is at best a rare thing,' Bernard Williams writes in his interesting work Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. Yet, he argues, the very structure of ethical thought seeks to apply its principles to the whole world. His concept of a 'relativism of distance', which is underwritten by an epistemological view of society as a given whole, seeks to inscribe the totality of other cultures in a realist and concrete narrative that must beware, he warns, the fantasy of projection. Surely, however, the very project of ethical naturalism or cultural relativism is spurred precisely by the repeated threat of the loss of a 'teleologically significant world', and it is the compensation of that loss in projection or introjection which then becomes the basis of its ethical judgement. From the margins of his text, Williams asks, in parenthesis, a question not dissimilar to Forster's India question or Lacan's question of the subject; 'What is this talk of projection [in the midst of naturalism] really saying? What is the screen?' He makes no answer.

The problematic enunciation of cultural difference becomes, in the
difference. It lies in the staging of the colonial signifier in the narrative uncertainty of culture's in-between: between sign and signifier, neither one nor the other, neither sexuality nor race, neither, simply, memory nor desire. The articulated opening in-between that I am attempting to describe, is well brought out in Derrida's placing or spacing of the hymn. In the context of the strange play of cultural memory and colonial desire in the Marabar caves, Derrida's words are uncannily resonant.

It is neither desire nor pleasure but between the two. Neither future nor present, but between the two. It is the hymn that desire dreams of piercing, of bursting in an act of violence that is (at the same time or somewhere between) love and murder. If either one did take place, there would be no hymn... It is an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites 'at once'.

It is an undecidability that arises from a certain culturalist substitution that Derrida describes as anti-ethnocentrism thinking itself as ethnocentrism while 'silently imposing its standard concepts of speech and writing.'

II

In the epistemological language of cultural description, the object of culture comes to be inscribed in a process that Richard Rorty describes as that confusion between justification and explanation, the priority of knowledge 'of' over knowledge 'that': the priority of the visual relation between persons and objects above the justificatory, textual relationship between propositions. It is precisely such a priority of eye over inscription, or Voice over writing, that insists on the 'image' of knowledge as confrontation between the self and the object of belief seen through the mirror of Nature. Such an epistemological visibility disavows the metonymy of the colonial moment, because its narrative of ambivalent, hybrid, cultural knowledges – neither 'one' nor 'other' – is ethnocentrically elided in the search for cultural commensurability, as Rorty describes it: 'to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible.' And such agreement leads inevitably to a transparency of culture that must be thought outside of the signification of difference; what Ernest Gellner has simplistically resolved in his recent work on relativism, as the diversity of man in a unitary world. A world which, if read as 'word' in the following passage, illustrates the impossibility of signifying, within its evaluative language, the values of anteriority and alterity that haunt the colonial non-sense.
Gellner writes:

Assume the regularity of nature, the systematic nature of the world, not because it is demonstrable, but because anything which eludes such a principle also eludes real knowledge; if cumulative and communicable knowledge is to be possible at all, then the principle of oneness must apply to it... Unsymmetrical, idiosyncratic explanations are worthless – they are not explanations.18

It is the horizon of holism, towards which cultural authority aspires, that is made ambivalent in the colonial signifier. To put it succinctly, it turns the dialectical 'between' of culture's disciplinary structure – between unconscious and conscious motives, between indigenous categories and conscious rationalizations, between little acts and grand traditions, in James Boon's19 words – into something closer to Derrida's 'entre', that sows confusion between opposites and stands between the oppositions at once. The colonial signifier – neither one nor other – is, however, an act of ambivalent signification, literally splitting the difference between the binary oppositions or polarities through which we think cultural difference. It is in the enunciatory act of splitting that the colonial signifier creates its strategies of differentiation that produce an undecidability between contraries or oppositions.

Marshall Sahlins's 'sympathetic synapses'20 produce homologous differentiations in the conjunction of oppositions from different cultural planes. James Boon's cultural operators produce the Traviata effect – when Amato del Passato turns into the sublime duet Grandio – as a moment that recalls, in his words, the genesis of signification. It is a moment that matches the right phones to the language system, producing from different orders or oppositions a burst of cross-referencing significance in the 'on-going' cultural performance. In both these influential theories of the culture-concept, cultural generalizability is effective to the extent to which differentiation is homologous, the genesis of signification recalled in the performance of cross-referencing.

What I have suggested above, for the colonial cultural signifier, is precisely the radical loss of such a homologous or dialectical assemblage of part and whole, metaphor and metonymy. Instead of cross-referencing there is an effective, productive cross-cutting across sites of social significance, that erases the dialectical, disciplinary sense of cultural reference and relevance. It is in this sense that the culturally unassimilable words and scenes of nonsense, with which I started – the Horror, the Horror, the owl's deathcall, the Marabar caves – suture the colonial text in a hybrid time and truth that survives and subverts the generalizations of literature and history. It is to the ambivalence of the on-going colonial present, and its contradictory articulations of power and cultural knowledge, that I now want to turn.

The enunciatory ambivalence of colonial culture cannot, of course, be derived directly from the 'temporal pulsation' of the signifier; the rule of empire must not be allegorized in the misrule of writing. There is, however, a mode of enunciation that echoes through the annals of nineteenth-century Indian colonial history where a strange discursive figure of undecidability arises within cultural authority, between the knowledge of culture and the custom of power. It is a negation of the Traviata moment; it is a moment when the impossibility of naming the difference of colonial culture alienates, in its very form of articulation, the colonialist cultural ideals of progress, piety, rationality and order.

It is heard in the central paradox of missionary education and conversation, in Alexander Duff's monumental India and India Missions (1839): 'Do not send men of compassion here for you will soon break their hearts; do send men of compassion here, where millions perish for lack of knowledge.'21 It can be heard in the aporetic moment of Sir Henry Maine's Rede Lecture (1875) and is repeated again in his contribution to Humphry Ward's definitive commemorative volume on the reign of Queen Victoria:

As has been truly said, the British rulers of India are like men bound to keep true time in two longitudes at once. Nevertheless, the paradoxical position must be accepted in the most extraordinary experiment, the British Government of India, the virtually despotic government of a dependency by a free people.22

The paradox is finally fully exposed in Fitzjames Stephen's important essay on 'The foundations of the government of India', in his opposition to the Ibert Bill – an opportunity which he uses to attack the utilitarian and liberal governance of India.

A barrel of gunpowder may be harmless or may explode, but you cannot educate it into household fuel by exploding little bits of it. How can you possibly teach great masses of people that they ought to be rather dissatisfied with a foreign ruler, but not much; that they should express their discontent in words and in votes, but not in acts; that they should ask from him this and that reform (which they neither understand nor care for), but should on no account rise in insurrection against him.23

These statements must not be dismissed as imperialism's doublethink; it is, in fact, their desperate acknowledgement of an aporia in the inscription of empire that makes them notable. It is their performance of a certain uncertain writing in the anomalous discourse of the
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"present" of colonial governmentality that is of interest to me. And not to me alone. For these enunciations represent what I take to be that split-second, that ambivalent temporality that demonstrates the turn from evolutionism to diffusionism in the culturalist discourse of colonial governmentality; an ambiguity that articulated the otherwise opposed policies of the utilitarians and comparativists in the mid-nineteenth-century debate on colonial cultural "progress" and policy. According to John Burrow, such an ambivalence was signally representative of cultural governance, for, as he writes in *Evolution and Society*

when [they] want to emphasise the fact of continuity, the similarity between barbaric institutions and those of the European past, or even present, they speak in an evolutionary manner. But almost equally often they speak in terms of a straight dichotomy: status and contract, progressive and non-progressive, barbarous and civilized.\(^{24}\)

In these gnomic, yet crucial, historical utterances, are displayed the margins of the disciplinary idea of culture enacted in the colonial scene: British/India, Nostromo, ouboum – each cultural naming represents the impossibility of cross-cultural identity or symbolic synapses; each time there repeats the incompleteness of translation. It is such a figure of doubt that haunts Henry Maine’s naming of India: in his essay on the ‘Observation of India’, India is a figure of profound intellectual uncertainty and governmental ambivalence.

If India is a reproduction of the common Aryan origin, in Maine’s discourse it is also a perpetual repetition of that origin as a remnant of the past; if that remnant of India is the symbol of an archaic past, it is also the signifier of the production of a discursive past-in-the-present; if India is the immanent object of classical, theoretical knowledge, India is also the sign of its dispersal in the exercise of power; if India is the metaphoric equivalence, authorizing the appropriation and naturalization of other cultures, then India is also the repetitive process of metonymy recognized only in its remnants that are, at once, the signs of disturbance and the supports of colonial authority. If India is the originary symbol of colonial authority, it is the sign of a dispersal in the articulation of authoritative knowledge; if India is a runic reality, India is also the ruin of time; if India is the seed of life, India is a monument to death. India is the perpetual generation of a past-present which is the disturbing, uncertain time of the colonial intervention and the ambivalent truth of its enunciation.

These moments of undecidability must not be seen merely as contradictions in the idea or ideology of empire. They do not effect a symptomatic repression of domination or desire that will eventually either be sublated or will endlessly circulate in the dereliction of an identifiatory narrative. Such enunciations of culture’s colonial difference are closer in spirit to what Foucault has sketchoy, but suggestively, described as the material repeatability of the statement. As I understand the concept – and this is my tendentious reconstruction – it is an insistence on the surface of emergence as it structures the present of its enunciation: the historical caught outside the hermeneutic of historicism; meaning grasped not in relation to some un-said or polysemue, but in its production of an authority to differentiate. The meaning of the statement is neither symptomatic nor allegorical. It is a status of the subject’s authority, a performative present in which the statement becomes both appropriate and an object of appropriation; repeatable, reasonable, an instrument of desire, the elements of a strategy. Such a strategic repetition at the enunciative level requires neither simply formal analysis nor semantic investigation nor verification but, and I quote, 'the analysis of the relations between the statement and the spaces of differentiation, in which the statement itself reveals the differences.'\(^{25}\)

Repeatability, in my terms, is always the repetition in the very act of enunciation, something other, a difference that is a little bit uncanny, as Foucault comes to define the representability of the statement: ‘Perhaps it is like the over-familiar that constantly eludes one’, he writes, like ‘those famous transparencies which, although they conceal nothing in their density, are nevertheless not entirely clear. The enunciative level emerges in its very proximity.’\(^{26}\)

If at first sight the statements by Duff, Maine and Fitzjames Stephen are the uncommon commonplace of colonial or imperial history, then, doubly inscribed, their difference emerges quite clearly between-the-lines; the temporal in-between of Maine’s past-present that will only name India as a mode of discursive uncertainty. From the impossibility of keeping true time in two longitudes and the inner incompatibility of empire and nation in the anomalous discourse of cultural progressivism, emerges an ambivalence that is neither the contestation of contradictories nor the antagonism of dialectical opposition. In these instances of social and discursive alienation there is no recognition of master and slave, there is only the matter of the enslaved master, the unmastered slave.

What is articulated in the enunciation of the colonial present – in-between the lines – is a splitting of the discourse of cultural governmentality at the moment of its enunciation of authority. It is, according to Frantz Fanon, a ‘Manichaean’ moment that divides the colonial space: a Manichaean division, two zones that are opposed but not in the service of a ‘higher unity’.\(^{27}\) Fanon’s Manichaean metaphors resonate with something of the discursive and affective ambivalence that I have attributed to the archaic nonsense of colonial cultural articulation, as it emerges with its significatory edge, to disturb the disciplinary languages.
and logics of the culture-concept itself. 'The symbols of the social – the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags – are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating; ‘Don't dare to budge... Get ready to attack'.' If Fanon sets the scene of splitting around the uncanny and traumatic fetishes of colonial power, then Freud, in describing the social circumstances of splitting in his essay on 'Fetischism', echoes the political anxiety of my examples of colonial nonsense. 'A grown man', Freud writes, 'may experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that throne and Altar are in danger, and similar illogical consequences will ensue.'

Splitting constitutes an intricate strategy of defence and differentiation in the colonial discourse. Two contradictory and independent attitudes inhabit the same place, one takes account of reality, the other is under the influence of instincts which detach the ego from reality. This results in the production of multiple and contradictory beliefs. The enunciatory moment of multiple belief is both a defence against the anxiety of difference, and itself productive of differentiations. Splitting is then a form of enunciatory, intellectual uncertainty and anxiety that stems from the fact that disavowal is not merely a principle of negation or elision; it is a strategy for articulating contradictory and coeval statements of belief. It is from such an enunciatory space, where the work of signification voids the act of meaning in articulating a split-response – 'Ouboum', 'true time in two longitudes' – that my texts of colonial nonsense and imperial aporia have to negotiate their discursive authority.

Ambivalence, at the point of disavowal (Verleugnung), Freud describes as the vicissitude of the idea, as distinct from the vicissitude of affect, repression (Verdrängung). It is crucial to understand – and not often noted – that the process of disavowal, even as it negates the visibility of difference, produces a strategy for the negotiation of the knowledges of differentiation. These knowledges make sense of the trauma and substitute for the absence of visibility. It is precisely such a vicissitude of the idea of culture in its colonial enunciation, culture articulated at the point of its erasure, that makes a non-sense of the disciplinary meanings of culture itself. A colonial non-sense, however, that is productive of powerful, if ambivalent, strategies of cultural authority and resistance.

There occurs, then, what we may describe as the 'normalizing' strategy of discursive splitting, a certain anomalous containment of cultural ambivalence. It is visible in Fitzjames Stephen's attack on the undecidability of liberal and utilitarian colonial governance. What structures his statement is the threatening production of uncertainty that haunts the discursive subject and taunts the enlightened liberal subject of culture itself. But the threat of meaninglessness, the reversion to chaos, is required to maintain the vigilance towards Throne and Altar; to reinforce the belligerence of British civilization, which if it is to be authoritative, Fitzjames Stephen writes, must not shirk from the open, uncompromising, straightforward assertion of the anomaly of the British government of India. This insoluble anomaly preoccupied enlightened opinion throughout the nineteenth century; in Mill's words: 'the government of a people by itself has a meaning and a reality; but such a thing as government of one people by another does not and cannot exist.' The open assertion of the anomalous produces an impossible cultural choice: civilization or the threat of chaos – either one or the other – whereas the discursive choice continually requires both and the practice of power is imaged, anomalously yet again, as 'the virtually despotic government of a dependency by a free people' – once more neither one nor the other.

IV

If this mistranslation of democratic power repeats the 'anomaly' of colonial authority – the colonial space without a proper name – then Evangelical pedagogy in the 1830s turns the 'intellectual uncertainty', between the Bible and Hinduism, into an anomalous strategy of interpolation. With the institution of what was termed 'the intellectual system' in 1829, in the mission schools of Bengal, there developed a mode of instruction which set up – on our model of the splitting of colonial discourse – contradictory and independent textualities of Christian piety and heathen idolatry in order to elicit, between them, in an uncanny doubling, undecidability. It was an uncertainty between truth and falsehood whose avowed aim was conversion, but whose discursive and political strategy was the production of doubt; not simply a doubt in the content of beliefs, but a doubt, or an uncertainty in the native place of enunciation; at the point of the colonizer's demand for narrative, at the moment of the master's interrogation. This is Duff writing in 1835:

When asked whether it is not an imperative ordinance of his faith that, during the great festival of Ramadam, everyone of the faithful should fast from sunrise to sunset – [the Mohammedan] unhesitatingly, and without qualification, admits that this is a command which dare not be broken – an act of contempt against Mohammed... You then appeal to the indisputable geographical fact that in the Arctic and Antarctic regions, the period from sunrise to sunset annually extends to several months... either his religion was not designed to be universal, therefore not Divine, or he who framed the Koran was unacquainted with the geographical fact... and therefore an ignorant imposter. So galled does the
Mohammedan feel ... that he usually cuts the Gordian Knot by boldly denying the geographical fact ... and many, many are the glosses and ingenious subterfuges to which he feels himself impelled to resort.

The Brahmans treat with equal contempt, not only the demonstrations of modern science but 'the very testimony of their eyes'. The avowed aim of this systematic mistranslation, of 'this drawing from the metaphysics of the Koran its physical dogmata' is to institutionalize a narrative of 'verisimilitude of the whole statement' for in Duff's words, 'no sooner was the identity of the two sets of phenomena announced as a fact, than the truth of the given theory was conceded.' The normalizing strategy is, however, a form of subjection that requires precisely the anomalous enunciation - the archaic nonsense of the banal misreading of mythology as geographical fact - so that, as Duff writes, 'there was a sort of silent warfare incessantly maintained ... self-exploding engines that lurked unseen and unsuspected. ... When the wound was once inflicted, honourable retreat for the native was impossible.'

The aim is the separation of the heathen soul from the subterfuge of its 'subtle system'. The strategy of splitting is the production of a space of contradictory and multiple belief, even more sly and subtle, between Evangelical verisimilitude and the poetry of the Vedas or the Koran. A strategic space of enunciation is produced - neither the one nor the other - whose truth is to place the native in that moment of enunciation which both Benveniste and Lacan describe, where to say 'I am lying' is strangely to tell the truth or vice versa. Who, in truth, is addressed in the verisimilitude of such translation, which must be a mistranslation? In that subtle warfare of colonial discourse lurks the fear that in speaking in two tongues, language itself becomes doubly inscribed and the intellectual system uncertain. The colonizer's interrogation becomes anomalous, 'for every term which the Christian missionary can employ to communicate divine truth is already appropriated as the chosen symbol of some counterpart deadly error.' If the word of the master is already appropriated and the word of the slave is undecidable, where does the truth of colonial nonsense lie?

Underlying the intellectual uncertainty generated by the anomaly of cultural difference is a question of the displacement of truth that is at once between and beyond the hybridity of images of governance, or the undecidability between codes and texts, or indeed the impossibility of Sir Henry Maine's colonial problematic: the attempt to keep true time in two longitudes, at once. It is a displacement of truth in the very identification of culture, or an uncertainty in the structure of 'culture' as the identification of a certain discursive human truth. A truth of the human which is culture's home; a truth which 'differentiates' cultures, affirms its human significance, the authority of its address. When the Mohammedan is forced to deny the logical demonstration of geographical fact and the Hindu turns away from the evidence of his eyes, we witness a form of ambivalence, a mode of enunciation, a coercion of the native subject in which no truth can exist. It is not simply a question of the absence of rationality or morality: it leads through such historical and philosophical distinctions of cultural differences, to rest in that precariously empty discursive space where the question of the human capacity of culture lies. To put it a little grandly, the problem now is of the question of culture itself as it comes to be represented and contested in the colonial imitation - not identity - of man. As before, the question occurs in culture's archaic undecidability.

On the eve of Durgapuja in the mid-1820s, the Reverend Duff walks through the quarter of Calcutta where the image-makers are at work. A million images of the goddess Durga affront his eyes; a million hammers beating brass and tin assault his ears; a million dismembered Durgas, eyes, arms, heads, some unpainted, others unformed, assail him as he turns to reverie:

The recollections of the past strangely blend with the visible exhibitions of the present. The old settled convictions of home experience are suddenly counterpoised by the previously unimaginable scene. To incline [your quivering judgement] in one way or other, to determine the 'dubious propendency' you again and again watch the movements of those before you. You contemplate their form and you cannot doubt that they are men.... Your wonder is vastly increased; but the grounds of your decision have multiplied too.

My final argument interrogates, from the colonial perspective, this cultural compulsion to 'be, become, or be seen to be human.' It is a problem caught in the vacillatory syntax of the entire passage; heard finally in the 'cannot' in 'you cannot doubt that they are men.' I will suggest that the coercive image of the colonized subject produces a loss or lack of truth that articulates an uncanny truth about colonialisat cultural authority and its figurative space of the human. The infinite variety of man fades into insignificance when, in the moment of the discursive splitting, it oversignifies; it says something beside the point, something beside the truth of culture, something asbesits. A meaning that is culturally alien not because it is spoken in many tongues but because the colonial compulsion to truth is always an effect of what Derrida has called the babelian performance, in the act of translation, as a figurative transference of meaning across language systems. I quote from Derrida:

When God imposes and opposes his name he ruptures the rational
transparency but interrupts also the . . . linguistic imperialism. He destinies them to the law of translation both necessary and impossible . . . forbidden transparency, impossible univocity. Translation becomes law, duty and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge.  

It is a performance of truth or the lack of it that, in translation, impedes the dialectical process of cultural generality and communicability. In its stead, where there is the threat of overinterpretation, there can be no ethically or epistemologically commensurate subject of culture. There is, in fact, the survival across culture of a certain interesting, even insurgent, madness that subverts the authority of culture in its ‘human’ form. It will hardly surprise you then, at this juncture, if having glimpsed the problem in those dismembered images of the goddess Durga, I now turn to that other living doll, Olympia, from Hoffmann’s The Sandman, on which Freud bases his essay on ‘The “uncanny”’, to explicate this strategy of cultural splitting: human/non-human; society/ouboun. 

In keeping with our taste for contraries, I suggest that we read the fable of the Double uncannily, in-between Freud’s analytic distinctions between ‘intellectual uncertainty’ and ‘castration’, between ‘surmounting’ and ‘repression’. Such doubts bedevil the essay to the point at which Freud half-suggests an analytic distinction between ‘repression proper’ as appropriate to psychological reality, and ‘surmounting’ – which extends the term repression beyond its legitimate meaning – as more appropriate to the repressive workings of the cultural unconscious. It is through Freud’s own ‘intellectual uncertainty’, at the point of his exposition of psychic ambivalence that, I believe, the cultural argument of the uncanny double emerges. 

The figure of Olympia stands between the human and the automaton, between manners and mechanical reproduction, embodying an aporia: a living doll. Through Durga and Olympia, the ghostly magical spirit of the double embraces, at one time or another, my entire colonial concert party: Marlow, Kurtz, Adela, Aziz, Nosnomb, Duff, Maine, the owl, the Marabar caves, Derrida, Foucault, Freud, master and slave alike. All these comedians of culture’s ‘non-sense’ have stood, for a brief moment, in that undecidable enunciatory space where culture’s authority is undone in colonial power – they have taught culture’s double lesson. For the uncanny lesson of the double, as a problem of intellectual uncertainty, lies precisely in its double-inscription. The authority of culture, in the modern epistêmê, requires at once imitation and identification. Culture is heimlich, with its disciplinary generalizations, its mimetic narratives, its homologous empty time, its seriality, its progress, its customs and coherence. But cultural authority is also unheimlich, for to be distinctive, signatory, influential and identifiable, it has to be translated, disseminated, differentiated, interdisciplinary, intertextual, international, inter-racial.

In-between these two plays the time of a colonial paradox in those contradictory statements of subordinate power. For the repetition of the ‘same’ can in fact be its own displacement, can turn the authority of culture into its own non-sense precisely in its moment of enunciation. For, in the psychoanalytic sense, to ‘imitate’ is to cling to the denial of the ego’s limitations; to ‘identify’ is to assimilate conflictually. It is from between them, where the letter of the law will not be assigned as a sign, that culture’s double returns uncannily – neither the one nor the other, but the imposter – to mock and mimic, to lose the sense of the masterful self and its social sovereignty. It is at this moment of intellectual and psychic ‘uncertainty’ that representation can no longer guarantee the authority of culture; and culture can no longer guarantee to author its ‘human’ subjects as the signs of humaneness. Freud neglected the cultural uncanny but Hoffmann was far more canny.

If I started with colonial nonsense, I want to end with metropolitan bourgeois burlesque. I quote from Hoffmann’s The Sandman, a passage Freud failed to note.

The history of the automaton had sunk deeply into their souls, and an absurd mistrust of human figures began to prevail. Several lovers, in order to be fully convinced that they were not paying court to a wooden puppet required that their mistress should sing and dance a little out of time, should embroider or knit or play with her little pug etc. when being read to, but above all things else that she should frequently speak in such a way as to really show that her words presupposed as a condition some thinking and feeling . . . Spalanzani was obliged, as has been said, to leave the place in order to escape a criminal charge of having fraudulently imposed an automaton upon human society.  

We are now almost face to face with culture’s double bind – a certain slippage or splitting between human artifice and culture’s discursive agency. To be true to a self one must learn to be a little untrue, out-of-joint with the signification of cultural generalizability. As Hoffmann suggests, sing a little out of tune; just fail to hit that top E in James Boon’s Aida effect; speak in such a way to show that words presuppose feeling, which is to assume that a certain nonsense always haunts and hinders them. But how untrue must you be to fail to be happily, if haphazardly human? That is the colonial question; that, I believe, is where the truth lies – as always a little beside the point. 

Native ‘folly’ emerged as a quasi-legal, cultural category soon after the establishment of the Supreme Court in Calcutta in the 1830s, almost
as the uncanny double of the demand for verisimilitude and testimony—the establishment of the Law. Folly is a form of perjury for which Halhed assures us, in his preface to the Code of Gentoo Laws, no European form of words exists. To our delight and horror, however, we find that its structure repeats that enunciatory splitting that I have been attempting to describe. It consists, Halhed writes,

in falsehoods totally incompatible with each other and utterly contrary to their own opinion, knowledge and conviction.... It is like the madness so inimitably delineated in Cervantes, sensible enough upon some occasions and at the same time completely wild and unconscious of itself.29

Despite adequate contemporary juridical and sociological explanations for perjury, the myth of the lie persists in the pages of power, even down to District Officers’ reports in the 1920s. What is the truth of the lie?

When the Muslim is coerced into speaking a Christian truth he denies the logic of his senses; the Hindu denies the evidence of his eyes; the Bengalee denies his very name as he perjures himself. Or so we are told. Each time what comes to be textualized as the truth of the native culture is a part that becomes ambivalently incorporated in the archives of colonial knowledge. A part like the geographical detail that is spurious and beside the point. A part like ‘folly’ that is untranslatable, inexplicable, unknowable yet endlessly repeated in the name of the native. What emerges in these lies that never speak the ‘whole’ truth, come to be circulated from mouth to mouth, book to book, is the institutionalization of a very specific discursive form of paranoia, that must be authorized at the point of its dismemberment. It is a form of persecutory paranoia that emerges from cultures’ own structured demand for imitation and identification. It is the archaic survival of the ‘text’ of culture, that is the demand and desire of its translations, never the mere authority of its originality. Its strategy, as Karl Abrahams has described it, is a partial incorporation; a form of incorporation that deprives the object of a part of its body in that its integrity may be attacked without destroying its existence. ‘We are put in mind of a child,’ the psychoanalyst Karl Abraham writes, ‘who catches a fly and having pulled off a leg, lets it go again.’30 The existence of the disabled native is required for the next lie and the next and the next — ‘The Horror! the Horror!’ Marlow, you will remember, had to lie as he moved from the heart of darkness to the Belgian boudoir. As he replaces the words of horror for the name of the Intended we read in that palimpsest, neither one nor the other, something of the awkward, ambivalent, unwelcome truth of empire’s lie.

THE LOCATION OF CULTURE

8

DISSEMINATION

Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation

THE TIME OF THE NATION

The title of this chapter – DissemiNation – owes something to the wit and wisdom of Jacques Derrida, but something more to my own experience of migration. I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status – the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man. The gathering of clouds from which the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks ‘where should the birds fly after the last sky?’

In the midst of these lonely gatherings of the scattered people, their myths and fantasies and experiences, there emerges a historical fact of singular importance. More deliberately than any other general historian, Eric Hobsbawm31 writes the history of the modern Western nation from the perspective of the nation’s margin and the migrants’ exile. The emergence of the later phase of the modern nation, from the mid-nineteenth century, is also one of the most sustained periods of mass migration within the West, and colonial expansion in the East. The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the ‘middle passage’, or the central European steppes,