Essays and Trials: Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

As a genre, the essay may seem far from congenial to post-colonial concerns. It is, after all, a discourse that relies on authority, conceptuality, abstraction and reason, notions which have all been notoriously confiscated by Western imperialist thinkers to justify all sorts of deeds and misdeeds. The essay is a far cry from the indefiniteness of self and voice, from the twists of thought where postcolonial authors have been noticed to thrive and revel. It could be produced by the serious and possibly pedantic voice of the master but seems little adapted to the subversive and self-conscious roar of the former slave or domestic. It belongs to a great modern European tradition that, with Montaigne (*Essais*, first publication 1580) and Bacon on his heels (*Essays*, first publication 1597), goes back to the very decades when colonialism was being deployed (and, true enough, sometimes staunchly decried). It pertains to the construction of knowledge, to theoretical investigations and epistemological foundations, not to identities called into question. Yet the wealth and variety of the texts under scrutiny in the present volume testify to the vigour of the essay in postcolonial writings. From Australia to India, from the Caribbean to Canada and South Africa, such a genre has manifestly also been a way to 'write back' and 'write wrongs'. Novelists such as Naipaul, Rushdie, Ghosh and Coetzee have rightly been deemed outstanding essayists in their own right, while authors like André Brink can be read in the light of their own essayistic production. Not a privileged genre but certainly not a spurned one either, the essay has been reshaped by these and others in order to suit their specific needs and purposes. It is the aim of this issue to outline its postcolonial avatars.

The essay belongs to a grand tradition that would appear at odds with postcolonial writing, which is often confined to lower genres and works of literature not considered serious. One recalls Derek Walcott's verses in *Midsummer*, "in colonial fiction / evil remains comic and only achieves importance / when the gringo crosses the plaza" (Walcott 499). The essay also implies a right to write, it poses an authority as well as an authorship. It is signed and guaranteed by a thinker or a moralist. It springs forth from what Sartre called a 'position' and appears as a legitimate discourse. One of the singularities of the essay is thus the unity of its voice, the impossibility endlessly to play with the divide between character and narrator, between narrator and author. The source of the enunciation is clearer than ever, apparently. From this point of view, the essay presupposes the transparency that also lies at the base of lyricism, its poetic and sentimental counterpoint. Of course, irony inevitably seeps in, as do doubt and ambiguity. Still, essays have to do with unity of vision and denote a stable identity of the writing self. Conversely, one of the main fronts in the postcolonial struggle to write back has famously

been an exhilarating emphasis on diversity of viewpoints. Such emphasis could of course conveniently cancel the imperial discourse on race, progress and the like as one opinion among many others. It accounts for the passion of postcolonial authors and critics for dialogism. Impurity, insubordination, inbetweenness of the narrator, these prides of the formerly colonized fiction seem to go against the grain of the essay. Dialogism, polyphony and polyglossia have nonetheless not been gouged out of the various essays that are discussed here – as a matter of fact, Bakhtin's theory quite usefully figures in most of the articles in the present volume, not to mention his more recent followers.

Be they essays as such (Naipaul, Rushdie and Sen, Ghosh, Brink, MacLennan) or some form thereof inserted in a piece of fiction (Coetzee, Castro), the texts analysed here all deal with the impossibility to adhere to any unity of voice and vision. Masking, pretending and ventriloquising make an unexpected but quite typically postcolonial return. There is the splendid diffraction of voices in Coetzee's novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, as analysed by Richard Samin. This narrative opens on the authority of the main protagonist, Senor C, and ends with a chorus of the – quite ignorant but sensible, and audible, still – couple which has accompanied him during his days of writing. The gradual intermeshing of the voices of the three main protagonists inevitably leads to the cancellation of the superior position of the author. In contrast, Kathie Birat records the progressive striking of a right note on the part of both Lamming and Selvon through effects of orality. Her conclusions are actually that through its closer relation to voice and dialect, the novel is better suited to tell the colonial experience than the essay is, and that Samuel Selvon's novel outshines his friend George Lamming's essays.

In this issue, the essay is also linked to the general will of postcolonial authors to reclaim high-brow genres. Cécile Girardin rightly shows that Naipaul's stance on postcolonial societies also has to do with his despair at the inability of their leaders to forsake farce or, in the best cases, comedy. Under no circumstances does the history of postcolonial countries resemble the noble pattern of tragedy: "There were only events. There was no tragedy" (Naipaul 17). Similarly, South African author Olive Schreiner wrote at a time when Africa was merely deemed a suitable background for adventure stories in the vein of Henry Rider Haggard, as Susan Barrett shows in her analysis of Schreiner's progressive and scandalous attempts to pen realistic and committed novels set in her homeland. One of the purposes of these various authors is to do away with ascribing the essay to the (formerly) colonialist cultures. Catherine Pessoa-Miquel's paper concerns itself with Salman Rushdie and Amartya Sen, who have both quite efficiently reclaimed the genre and the tradition of rationality and learning that accompanies it. They insist on the fact that the supposed invention of the intellectual and contradictory debate by the West is an illusion. Focusing on India in very different styles, they describe it as a place where argumentation has its true place, and it is no haphazard that they should engage together in an imaginary dialogue around the 'idea of India' that also includes Tagore, Yeats and Arundhati Roy. As for André Dodeman, he shows

that Canadian writer Hugh MacLennan had fought for a vein of essay writing that revoked both positivism in the field of the social sciences, and postmodernism in that of literature. According to MacLennan, the essay has porous borders which allows it to embrace the whole gamut of classified genres. He wished to render a Canadian reality which he found largely ignored, often to the profit of the neighbouring United-States, and set out to attain a classical tradition which predated the age of Enlightenment and of nineteenth century positivist scientific discourse. It led him to revoke the hallowed distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, between narrative and history, between theory and anecdote.

Like the novel, the essay is a genre that escapes definition. The old-fashioned meaning of the verb 'to essay' points to a trial, an attempt, a tentative endeavour, hence our title, 'Essays and Trials'. This understanding of the topic allows us to wonder to what extent literature is still necessarily linked to a moment of writing, to the biography of the authors, in the broadest meaning of the term. Thus, the papers of Kathie Birat on Lamming and Selvon, of Susan Barrett on Schreiner and of Catherine Rovera on Rhys all engage with the evolution of the authorial self, be it from a chronological, ideological, historiographic or generic perspective. Such a self lies at the core of the distinction between the self and the other, between fiction and non-fiction. The latter distinction is scrutinized by Marilyne Brun and André Dodeman from opposite viewpoints. Whereas Dodeman reads essays by MacLennan as a meditation on the contribution of fiction to historical narrative (with what Dodeman calls "essayistic interruptions" in MacLennan's fiction mirroring his essays proper), Brun's paper analyses a novel, *Drift*, as a fictional commentary on the ideas of experimental novelist B.S. Johnson. *Drift* takes place some twenty years after the death of the British writer and stages some characters which are fictitious, some borrowed from history, and most of which hover in some state of inbetweenness. The tension between fiction and non-fiction is equally present in the very career of Schreiner, who started writing essays only after she had signed a few novels. These papers, as well as that of Richard Samin, allow us to wonder whether the essay is an exclusively literary genre, and what its links to fiction are. As Girardin aptly writes, "[e]ssay writing is at its most complex when the writer problematizes his own subjectivity as a storyteller".

Postcolonial authors have been cunning in taking advantage of the idea of place to redeem a distinct authoritative voice. The papers by Kathie Birat and Cécile Girardin both insist on the idea of landscape as mindscape, as does Susan Barrett, as she retraces the birth of the voice of Olive Schreiner. Schreiner had started writing novels set in England before priding herself on describing the arid karoo that she knew, and which the colonials did not quite know how to render. In *The Writer and the World*, Naipaul writes wonderful pages about the despair which seizes him upon contemplating the arid India of his forebears. He links such barrenness to what he sees as an inability to produce intellectual works – even though Cécile Girardin sheds light on the evolution of such a judgment towards

more enthusiasm as years go by. On her part, Suhasini Vincent shows that Ghosh engages with dance in Cambodia in a way which does not dissociate the art from its sculptural representations in Angkor Wat and his journalistic pieces as (like Naipaul's) part and parcel of his touring the countries under scrutiny (in this case, Cambodia and Burma). There is in the essay a focus on the here and there, on the moment when thoughts appear and get jotted down. In a way, the essay has much to do with the autobiography, or, as Coetzee's title (*Diary of a Bad Year*) intimates, with the diary. The centrality which is thus given to the scriptural moment, the absence of tension between inside and outside, between past, present and future, between here and there, would stand in stark contrast with postcolonial literature, where the centre is always elsewhere and cannot stand, to borrow from yeatsian phrasing.

Under the postcolonial pen the essay discloses itself to be a protean genre, one which mangles convictions more than it establishes them. This remains in keeping with a certain idea of the essay, that of Renaissance doubts more than Enlightenment positivism, perhaps. It offers a possibility of erasure, a liberation from fixity. More empirical than transcendental, it draws no straight line but circles, it promises beginnings with no end, as the generic criticism deployed in Catherine Rovera's paper shows. This final article scrutinizes the manuscripts of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and looks at the way the novel had already been 'tried'. The splendid sentence quoted by Rovera from a letter by Rhys could well define any literary text, essayistic or not, postcolonial or otherwise: "I wrote this book before."

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