

The Colonial and the Metropolitan

DAN JACOBSON
discusses with
LEWIS NKOSI
the meaning of
Commonwealth literature
and its interaction with
the English tradition

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NKOSI: *Dan, this September there is something called the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Britain. It is often argued amongst politicians that the whole concept of a Commonwealth — political concept of a Commonwealth is a sham. I wonder, is this concept a viable one in terms of literature?*

JACOBSON: I suppose the extent to which it is viable in literature does depend in some measure on the extent to which it is viable in politics. But I think it's also true that whatever may happen politically it is quite clear that over the last fifteen or twenty years we have seen the development of a literature which is in English, but not English and not American. And whether one calls this Commonwealth literature or gives it some other name seems to me of relatively little importance. The writing is being done and it seems to me to be of a recognisable kind.

NKOSI: *Is there anything that unites this literature, apart from language?*

JACOBSON: I'd say little apart from language, but language is so much in any literature, the fact that a writer writes in English does create common ground immediately between himself and anyone else writing in English. And while you may say that this should bind him equally to American literature, in fact we know that it simply hasn't done so, that the Commonwealth writers do turn towards England for an audience, for intellectual sustenance of some kind, and for the sense of being involved in some way in a common effort.

NKOSI: *I presume that this has something to do with the fact that these colonial countries have a special relationship with Britain, that is extra-literary—in other words, that is economic and political?*

JACOBSON: That's economic, political and historical. And here of course we do come back to the political question. But in fact whatever—I won't say whatever may happen in the political sphere—in the cultural spheres the lines it seems to me are so well established by now, the tracks, the paths are so well beaten that these will continue to be followed.

NKOSI: *The other thing that we know is the debt that the colonial countries owe to the metropole. Can you tell us whether you see anything that can be or has been contributed by the colonial countries, that is again in terms of literature, to the metropolitan culture?*

JACOBSON: Well, I think what they can contribute are good books. There haven't been a great many really outstanding works, there never are. But there have been some. And this development is one which it seems to me the metropolitan country should indeed be grateful for: it is obvious the writers don't write as they do in order to repay any debt consciously, but nevertheless it is curiously flattering to the metropolitan country that their literature, their social examples and so on should have had

the kind of effect they have had. And the Commonwealth or colonial writers in many cases positively do not wish to pay this flattery, they resent what the metropolis imposed upon them or imparted to them, which is a perfectly legitimate reaction. The relationship as I see it must be one full of ambiguity and ambivalences on both sides.

NKOSI: *Is there a possibility that through the colonial writer's use of the English language that in fact the language itself may be extended to cover certain forms of feeling or social forms, that have been neglected by the metropolitan writers going out to the colonies? Do you see this as another contribution?*

JACOBSON: I think this most certainly happened—it happened in American literature which of course is the great example as it were going before any other literature emerging in the English language, and I see absolutely no reason why it shouldn't happen again in the different Commonwealth countries. On the other hand I think it is important, I think it's significant, that what I consider at any rate to be the best Commonwealth writers have written a very good English prose. This is one of the things that marks them off so sharply from the Americans. There has been in the actual use of the language, there has been relatively little experimentation of a self-conscious kind. But there has been an almost ironic use of English literary forms to portray areas of experience for which those forms were originally never designed.

NKOSI: *Yes, isn't there also a danger that through this timidity in using the English language in a new and experimental form, that the colonial writer, at least the writer within the Commonwealth, may neglect certain forms of experience that lie outside the metropolitan culture?*

JACOBSON: No, I don't think so. I cavil at the word timidity because—I suppose I'm just by temperament suspicious of self-conscious jiggery pokery with the language. If the experience demands a language of a slightly different kind to that of the English, normal English usage, it will appear in the work, this difference will appear natural, it will be naturalised within the work. I mean you see it for instance in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* where the dialogue is of a kind of English one never hears in England or one hears only in certain parts of England. Whereas the narrative appears to be traditional, straightforward English narrative prose. But in fact his narrative is strong enough to naturalise the dialogue as it were, and the dialogue is strong enough to give a special flavour to the narrative. And this seems to me the most profitable and healthiest way of going about it.

NKOSI: *There is of course a parallel process in Nigeria.*

JACOBSON: Absolutely.

NKOSI: *Especially in the literature of these*

screeds, these pamphlets that are sold for say sixpence a copy in the streets. They're usually written in this very viable form—a form of distortion of the English language really. This of course does introduce another aspect of the problem: how far you can go changing the English language without becoming purely idiosyncratic.

JACOBSON: And purely local. Well, I think the English language is a wonderful language, it can take an immense amount, and yet remain English. A case in point which I often think of is *Huckleberry Finn*, which is written in a classic English. I mean the book is a classic as they say, very much so. And yet the English is that which no Englishman in 1880 would have dreamt of writing. And the point about it was that Twain's material and his society demanded this language and he gave tongue to it. And when the impulsion is that of expressing or encapsulating a society truthfully and profoundly, the language can I'm sure absorb almost any area, any kind of experience. What I was cavilling against was the way we put the cart before the horse, as it were, and imagine that by surface working upon the prose we will reach the depths instead of the depths imposing the form upon the surface.

NKOSI: *Yes, the other problem, Dan, that interests me is whether you don't see some kind of tension or conflict within the colonial writer's work, stemming from his adherence to European forms; say for instance the concept of the anti-hero or T. S. Eliot's concept of the disassociation of values, or the kind of metaphysical despair that one finds in Beckett. And there are certain very practical demands that are made on the colonial writer to be more descriptive about his society or to render coherent certain social forms in societies which are after all in the process of being formed, that are not fully formed. And surely one of the writer's responsibilities is to make these social forms coherent to the society itself before he can also follow stylistic tendencies he must absorb to a certain extent through his awareness of what European writers are doing.*

JACOBSON: I think the point you've made is a valid one, that writers can be very easily tempted away from the truth of their own experience in order to be fashionable—to put it very unkindly. Or simply in order to feel themselves within the mainstream of European or American or world consciousness, if you like. Now this certainly is a problem for a writer from one of the Commonwealth countries, but then it's a problem for any writer. His relationship to the dominant literary forms of his time is bound to be one of temptation and resentment I think. And if a colonial writer writes about the waste land, let us say, and this is true to his experience, to his real and to his imaginative experience, then I have no argument with him.

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NKOSI: *It seems to me that it's still very difficult to imagine how the kind of European pessimism that one finds here could be adhered to by a colonial writer, who surely lives in that third part of the world which is still in the process of building and creating new social forms.*

JACOBSON: I agree. But I said if this is the truth of his experience, if the waste land is the truth of his experience, then he must be true to it. But if it isn't, if in fact there is no warrant for it, or less warrant for it than there might be in some other place, that he claims this experience as his own, then he is not being true to his experience and the work is bound to suffer. And if his society has genuine elements of vitality and strength and growth in it and he deliberately, for the sake of Beckett, turns his back on this, then his work is going to suffer. And retribution will be swift and sure!

NKOSI: *I'm also thinking of the other danger which stems from the demands of the society itself.*

JACOBSON: That's a very good point.

NKOSI: *Which has to solve certain very basic practical problems like how much food society wants to have. Chinua Achebe, for instance, has mentioned the fact that he's always aware of his social responsibility, which to a European writer may seem to be even extra-literary.*

JACOBSON: Yes. I thought the one piece of his which I read on the subject very illuminating and well put. The point is he genuinely feels those responsibilities, and therefore he must write out of them. And he does so with extraordinary success as we know. If a writer doesn't genuinely feel those responsibilities, but feels them is it were on the top of his head, this will also show. You know, the famous Lawrence dictum: never trust the artist, trust the tale, trust what he writes. And this is as true of Commonwealth writers and of their particular preoccupation as of any other. It's very easy to talk oneself into or out of social responsibilities. But both talking oneself into them and talking oneself out of them are bad. One must simply try to be as veracious as possible to one's real experience.

NKOSI: *Yes, to concur them to your own work. What do you consider your contribution to the metropolitan culture, as a colonial writer especially?*

JACOBSON: I can't really answer that. I have no idea. You know, I hope what I've written has been—other people have found it interesting and useful in some way, in whatever way writing is useful. I don't feel myself to be committed to any particular programme inwardly at all, or to achieve particular ends with what I'm writing.

NKOSI: *You don't feel any particular urge to instruct the people about your background and experience that may not come to hand for them?*

JACOBSON: Well, I'd say I'm trying to avoid this feeling as much as possible. I want what is unfamiliar in my background to the metropolitan reader to appear as naturally as possible within

the book. I want to avoid the tone of explanation. This is something I feel increasingly, and something I rather dislike about some of the other stuff I've written, that there is so much explanation in it. I think this shows a lack of concentration upon what one is writing about, it shows the diversion of the tension to the hypothetical reaction of the hypothetical audience. And I believe one should be absolutely single-minded about what is being put down.

NKOSI: *The last question, Dan. You have spoken about the tradition and the colonial writer's awareness of, say, the metropolitan tradition in the arts, in literature especially. And you have said that as a colonial person you have never taken this tradition too much for granted, in the manner in which say an English-born writer may tend to do, or may in fact be privileged to do so. I wonder if there is another corollary to this and whether you see a colonial writer as in a sense paradoxically emancipated from too great a burden of tradition, from too much self-consciousness of tradition and the past?*

JACOBSON: I'd be very hesitant to say so actually, because I think traditions, if they are living traditions, and felt vitally within those affected by them, are not a burden—are a stimulus and a companionship almost. And obviously no writer from a colonial country can feel that he has a direct and simple relationship to the English metropolitan tradition, his relationship must be in many ways an uneasy one. But this uneasiness is not, it seems to me, one of absence of a tradition. One can't be without a tradition. All one can hope for is that the colonial or Commonwealth writer will take what he wants from it—that's what traditions are for. That he will not regard the tradition as some kind of enormous mausoleum which he must inspect and bow down before, but as something which he can learn from and leave—walk away from—when it pleases him.

NKOSI: *I was thinking, when I was talking about the burden, I was thinking for instance about the way in which people here will say, talking about style, well, this has been done before. I mean this kind of realistic novel has been written before, this kind of naturalistic novel has been written before. You know, you want to go beyond this. Surely if, say you are an African writer, there is so much urgency about the content of your work that you can't be too sophisticated about the sort of styles or different styles given to you. You say what you want to say because it's so urgent to say it*

JACOBSON: I believe that is the way literature is written, by saying what you want to say because you have to say it. People may say this or that is—the realistic novel is—dead for instance. Then somebody produces a good realistic novel; he's shown that the realistic novel is not dead. I mean there are these voices crying continually instructions and directions and so on, which are largely to be ignored, it seems to me. I'm a great believer in the writer pleasing himself—pleasing himself or pleasing what has to be pleased within him is perhaps the best way of putting it.

KENYATTA'S COUNTRY

by

RICHARD
COX

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