

The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India

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THIS PAPER IS part of a larger inquiry into the construction of English literary education as a cultural ideal in British India. British parliamentary documents have provided compelling evidence for the central thesis of the investigation: that humanistic functions traditionally associated with the study of literature – for example, the shaping of character or the development of the aesthetic sense or the disciplines of ethical thinking – are also essential to the process of sociopolitical control. My argument is that literary study gained enormous cultural strength through its development in a period of territorial expansion and conquest, and that the subsequent institutionalization of the discipline in England itself took on a shape and an ideological content developed in the colonial context. . . .

English literature made its inroads in India, albeit gradually and imperceptibly, with a crucial event in Indian educational history: the passing of the Charter Act of 1813. This act, which renewed the East India Company's charter for commercial operations in India, produced two major changes in Britain's role with respect to its Indian subjects: one was the assumption of a new responsibility towards native education, and the other was a relaxation of controls over missionary work in India. . . .

In keeping with the government policy of religious neutrality, the Bible was proscribed and scriptural teaching forbidden.

The opening of India to missionaries, along with the commitment of the British to native improvement, might appear to suggest a victory for the missionaries, encouraging them perhaps to anticipate official support for their Evangelizing mission. But if they had such hopes, they were to be dismayed by the continuing checks on their activities, which grew impossibly stringent. Publicly, the English Parliament demanded a guarantee that large-scale proselytizing would not be carried out in India. Privately, though, it needed little persuasion about the distinct advantages

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that would flow from missionary contact with the natives and their 'many immoral and disgusting habits'.

Though representing a convergence of interest, these two events – of British involvement in Indian education and the entry of missionaries – were far from being complementary or mutually supportive. On the contrary, they were entirely opposed to each other both in principle and in fact. The inherent constraints operating on British educational policy are apparent in the central contradiction of a government committed to the improvement of the people while being restrained from imparting any direct instruction in the religious principles of the English nation. The encouragement of Oriental learning, seen initially as a way of fulfilling the ruler's obligations to the subjects, seemed to accentuate rather than diminish the contradiction. For as the British swiftly learned to their dismay, it was impossible to promote Orientalism without exposing the Hindus and Muslims to the religious and moral tenets of their respective faiths – a situation that was clearly not tenable with the stated goal of 'moral and intellectual improvement'.

This tension between increasing involvement in Indian education and enforced noninterference in religion was productively resolved through the introduction of English literature. Significantly, the direction to this solution was present in the Charter Act itself, whose 43rd section empowered the Governor-General-in-Council to direct that 'a sum of not less than one lac of rupees shall be annually applied to the revival and improvement of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India' (Great Britain 1831–2: 486). As subsequent debate made only too obvious, there is deliberate ambiguity in this clause regarding which literature was to be promoted, leaving it wide open for misinterpretations and conflicts to arise on the issue. While the use of the word 'revival' may weight the interpretations on the side of Oriental literature, the almost deliberate imprecision suggests a more fluid government position in conflict with the official espousal of Orientalism. Over twenty years later Macaulay was to seize on this very ambiguity to argue that the phrase clearly meant Western literature, and denounce in no uncertain terms attempts to interpret the clause as a reference to Oriental literature:

It is argued, or rather taken for granted, that by literature, the Parliament can have meant only Arabic and Sanskrit literature, that they never would have given the honourable appellation of a learned native to a native who was familiar with the poetry of Milton, the *Metaphysics* of Locke, the *Physics* of Newton; but that they meant to designate by that name only such persons as might have studied in the sacred books of the Hindoos all the uses of cusa-grass, and all the mysteries of absorption into the Deity.

(Macaulay 1835: 345)

This plea on behalf of English literature had a major influence on the passing of the English Education Act in 1835, which officially required the

natives of India to submit to its study. But English was not an unknown entity in India at that time, for some natives had already begun receiving rudimentary instruction in the language more than two decades earlier. Initially, English did not supersede Oriental studies but was taught alongside it. Yet it was clear that it enjoyed a different status, for there was a scrupulous attempt to establish separate colleges for its study. Even when it was taught within the same college, the English course of studies was kept separate from the course of Oriental study, and was attended by a different set of students. The rationale was that if the English department drew students who were attached only to its department and to no other (that is, the Persian or the Arabic or the Sanskrit), the language might then be taught 'classically' in much the same way that Latin and Greek were taught in England.

It is important to emphasize that the early British Indian curriculum in English, though based on literary material, was primarily devoted to language studies. However, by the 1820s the atmosphere of secularism in which these studies were conducted became a major cause for concern to the missionaries who were permitted to enter India after 1813. Within England itself, there was a strong feeling that texts read as a form of secular knowledge were 'a sea in which the voyager has to expect shipwreck' (*Athenaeum* 1839: 108) and that they could not be relied on to exert a beneficial effect upon the moral condition of society in general. This sentiment was complemented by an equally strong one that for English works to be studied even for language purposes a high degree of mental and moral cultivation was first required which the mass of people simply did not have. To a man in a state of ignorance of moral law, literature would appear indifferent to virtue. Far from cultivating moral feelings, a wide reading was more likely to cause him to question moral law more closely and perhaps even encourage him to deviate from its dictates. . . .

The uneasiness generated by a strictly secular policy in teaching English served to resurrect Charles Grant in the British consciousness. An officer of the East India Company, Grant was one of the first Englishmen to urge the promotion of both Western literature and Christianity in India. In 1792 he had written a tract entitled *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain*, which was a scathing denunciation of Indian religion and society. What interested the British in the years following the actual introduction of English in India was Grant's shrewd observation that by emphasizing the moral aspect, it would be possible to talk about introducing Western education without having to throw open the doors of English liberal thought to natives; to aim at moral improvement of the subjects without having to worry about the possible danger of inculcating radical ideas that would upset the British presence in India. Moral good and happiness, Grant had argued, 'views politics through the safe medium of morals, and subjects them to the laws of universal rectitude' (Great Britain 1832: 75). The most appealing part of

his argument, from the point of view of a government now sensing the truth of the missionaries' criticism of secularism, was that historically Christianity had never been associated with bringing down governments, for its concern was with the internal rather than the external condition of man. . . .

As late as the 1860s, the 'literary curriculum' in British educational establishments remained polarized around classical studies for the upper classes and religious studies for the lower. As for what is now known as the subject of English literature, the British educational system had no firm place for it until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the challenge posed by the middle classes to the existing structure resulted in the creation of alternative institutions devoted to 'modern' studies.

It is quite conceivable that educational development in British India may have run the same course as it did in England, were it not for one crucial difference: the strict controls on Christianizing activities. Clearly, the texts that were standard fare for the lower classes in England could not legitimately be incorporated into the Indian curriculum without inviting violent reactions from the native population, particularly the learned classes. And yet the fear lingered in the British mind that without submission of the individual to moral law or the authority of God, the control they were able to secure over the lower classes in their own country would elude them in India. Comparisons were on occasion made between the situation at home and in India, between the 'rescue' of the lower classes in England, 'those living in the dark recesses of our great cities at home, from the state of degradation consequent on their vicious and depraved habits, the offspring of ignorance and sensual indulgence', and the elevation of the Hindus and Muslims whose 'ignorance and degradation' required a remedy not adequately supplied by their respective faiths. Such comparisons served to intensify the search for other social institutions to take over from religious instruction the function of communicating the laws of the social order.

It was at this point that British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education. With both secularism and religion appearing as political liabilities, literature appeared to represent a perfect synthesis of these two opposing positions. The idea evolved in alternating stages of affirmation and disavowal of literature's derivation from and affiliation with Christianity as a social institution. The process illuminates and substantiates what Lowenthal has called a central factor in the construction of every ideology: the self-conscious glorification of existing social contradictions. A description of that process is reconstructed below from the minutes of evidence given before the British Parliament's Select Committee, and recorded in the 1852-3 volume of the *Parliamentary Papers*. These proceedings reveal not

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only an open assertion of British material interests but also a mapping out of strategies for promoting those interests through representations of Western literary knowledge as objective, universal, and rational.

The first stage in the process was an assertion of structural congruence between Christianity and English literature. Missionaries had long argued on behalf of the shared history of religion and literature, of a tradition of belief and doctrine creating a common culture of values, attitudes, and norms. They had ably cleared the way for the realization that as the 'grand repository of the book of God' England had produced a literature that was immediately marked off from all non-European literatures, being 'animated, vivified, hallowed, and baptized' by a religion to which Western man owed his material and moral progress. The difference was poetically rendered as a contrast between

the literature of a world embalmed with the Spirit of Him who died to redeem it, and that which is the growth of ages that have gloomily rolled on in the rejection of that Spirit, as between the sweet bloom of creation in the open light of heaven, and the rough, dark recesses of submarine forests of sponges.

*(Madras Christian Instructor and Missionary
Record 11(4) 1844: 195)*

This other literature was likened to Plato's cave, whose darkened inhabitants were 'chained men . . . counting the shadows of subterranean fires'.

The missionary description was appropriated in its entirety by government officers. But while the missionaries made such claims in order to force the government to sponsor teaching of the Bible, the administrators used the same argument to prove that English literature made such direct instruction redundant. They initiated several steps to incorporate selected English literary texts into the Indian curriculum on the claim that these works were supported in their morality by a body of evidence that also upheld the Christian faith. In their official capacity as members of the Council on Education, Macaulay and his brother-in-law Charles Trevelyan were among those engaged in a minute analysis of English texts to prove the 'diffusive benevolence of Christianity' in them. The process of curricular selection was marked by weighty pronouncements of the 'sound Protestant Bible principles' in Shakespeare, the 'strain of serious piety' in Addison's *Spectator* papers, the 'scriptural morality' of Bacon and Locke, the 'devout sentiment' of Abercrombie, the 'noble Christian sentiments' in Adam Smith's *Moral Sentiments* (hailed as the 'best authority for the true science of morals which English literature could supply') (Great Britain 1852-3). The cataloguing of shared features had the effect of convincing detractors that the government could effectively cause voluntary reading of the Bible and at the same time disclaim any intentions of proselytizing. . . .

To disperse intention, and by extension authority in related fields of knowledge and inquiry proposed itself as the best means of dissipating

native resistance. As one government publication put it, 'If we lay it down as our rule to teach only what the natives are willing to make national, viz., what they will freely learn, we shall be able by degrees to teach them all we know ourselves, without any risk of offending their prejudices' (Sharpe 1920). One of the great lessons taught by Gramsci, which this quotation amply corroborates, is that cultural domination operates by consent, indeed often preceding conquest by force. 'The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways', he writes in the *Prison Notebooks*, 'as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership"'. . . . It seems clear . . . that there can, and indeed must be hegemonic activity even before the rise of power, and that one should not count only on the material force which power gives in order to exercise an effective leadership' (Gramsci 1971: 57). He argues that consent of the governed is secured primarily through the moral and intellectual suasion, a strategy clearly spelled out by the British themselves: 'The Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could have' (Farish 1838: 239).

Implicit in this strategy is a recognition of the importance of self-representation, an activity crucial to what the natives 'would freely learn'. The answer to this last question was obvious to at least one member of the Council on Education: the natives' greatest desire, averred C. E. Trevelyan, was to raise themselves to the level of moral and intellectual refinement of their masters; their most driving ambition, to acquire the intellectual skills that confirmed their rulers as lords of the earth. Already, he declared, the natives had an idea that 'we have gained everything by our superior knowledge; that it is this superiority which has enabled us to conquer India, and to keep it; and they want to put themselves as much as they can upon an equality with us' (Great Britain 1852-3: 187). If the assumption was correct that individuals willingly learned whatever they believed provided them with the means of advancement in the world, a logical method of overwhelming opposition was to demonstrate that the achieved material position of the Englishman was derived from the knowledge contained in English literary, philosophical, and scientific texts, a knowledge accessible to any who chose to seek it.

In effect, the strategy of locating authority in these texts all but effaced the sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation, and class and race oppression behind European world dominance. Making the Englishman known to the natives through the products of his mental labour served a valuable purpose in that it removed him from the plane of ongoing colonialist activity – of commercial operations, military expansion, administration of territories – and de-actualized and diffused his material presence in the process. In a crude reworking of the Cartesian axiom, production of thought defined the Englishman's true essence, overriding all other aspects of his identity – his personality, actions, behaviour. His

material reality as a subjugator and alien ruler was dissolved in his mental output; the blurring of the man and his works effectively removed him from history. As the following statement suggests, the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state: '[The Indians] daily converse with the best and wisest Englishmen through the medium of their works, and form ideas, perhaps higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of a more personal kind' (Trevelyan 1838: 176). The split between the material and the discursive practices of colonialism is nowhere sharper than in the progressive rarefaction of the rapacious, exploitative, and ruthless actor of history into the reflective subject of literature.

How successful was the British strategy? That is clearly a topic for another paper, though it is worth noting that the problematics of colonial representations of authority have been brilliantly analysed by Homi Bhabha . . . in his essay 'Signs Taken for Wonders'. [This account] provides a compelling philosophical framework for analysing native interrogation of British authority in relation to the 'hybridization' of power and discourse, the term Bhabha uses to describe the nontransparency of the colonial presence and the problems created thereby in the recognition of its authority. Though my purpose in this paper has primarily been to describe a historical process rather than to do a microanalysis of the techniques of power, the question of effectiveness of strategy is never far removed. Indeed, the fact that English literary study had its beginnings as a strategy of containment raises a host of questions about the interrelations of culture, state, and civil society and the modes of assertion of authority within that network of relations.