

In definitiva, come appare evidente, Trollope offre nient' affatto un' immagine edificante della classe politica inglese, della quale, fra le tante cose, biasima ipocrisia e malafede. Ancora più cupa, del resto, risulta la concezione del mondo che emerge nella continuazione del romanzo, *Phineas Redux* (1873), in cui lo scrittore mostra come il protagonista pervenga a una consapevolezza molto amara: il mondo politico costituisce un territorio dominato da disvalori che egli non si sente più di condividere, né direttamente né indirettamente. La vita parlamentare e la politica delle classi dominanti diviene, nell'immagine trollopiana, una tragedia storica per la società anglossassone, vera e propria ferita di quella cultura moderna e liberale di cui egli si sentiva un autorevole rappresentante.

Nella "Afterword: With the Benefit of Hindsight", lo studioso osserva: "There is a gulf which separates us from nineteenth century, and it can be described; we are nevertheless joined to that century by innumerable traditions which are more or less active at the present moment" (p. 166). In fondo, anche se non siamo figli del Vittorianesimo, ne siamo i diretti discendenti, soprattutto se assumiamo la prospettiva culturale britannica. Nel complesso, il libro, anche nelle dense pagine dedicate a Ruskin e a William Morris, riesce a mostrare in maniera molto convincente il significato di un'opera letteraria, che, nel suo transito da un decennio all'altro, da un secolo all'altro, subisce una serie di interpretazioni che sono vere e proprie ricodificazioni culturali da parte dei suoi nuovi lettori. Da questa instabilità testuale scaturisce la forza dei "nineteenth-century canonical texts" presi in considerazione da Simon Dentith che, anche in questo volume, come in quelli precedenti, si dimostra un fine interprete dei processi storici in rapporto con la ricezione della grande narrativa dell'Ottocento inglese.

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READING EMPIRE TODAY: RACE STEREOTYPES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Patrick Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals. Race and the Victorians*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2011, 277 pp. [ISBN 978-0-8014-5019-8]

After the publication of *Rule of Darkness* (1988) and *Dark Vanishings* (2003), Patrick Brantlinger sheds new light on the role of Empire in nineteenth-century culture in his volume *Taming Cannibals*, a study about race and the influence of colonial politics on British reforms and social changes. In *Rule of Darkness* Brantlinger analysed a number of colonial literary texts together with a careful reading of their respective historical context. Later, the figure of "the other" in *Dark Vanishings* stood as a metaphor to explore all the theoretical aspects linked to the extinction of indigenous people. In *Taming Cannibals* various phases of the civilizing mission are investigated by concentrating on a number of crucial contradictions in race and empire ideology. The first oxymoronic relation lies in the *raison d'être* itself of imperialism whose civilizing mission of "taming cannibals" proved untenable since its ultimate goal was the total assimilation

of the natives. It is around this antithesis that Brantlinger structures the four parts of his book, tracing the development of racist stereotypes from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century.

One of the merits of the book is its original focus on the question of race, understood as a global, abiding colonial affair and seen in the perspective of its relevance to modern times. As the author explains in the *Introduction*, racism has long been considered as detached from British national institutions and society:

If they attend to it at all, many past and present historians of Britain and the British Empire have viewed racism as an unfortunate excrescence mainly affecting activities overseas, on imperial frontiers or in the colonies. The gist is usually that racism may have been a colonial problem, but in Britain it was not very important. It might crop up in British public opinion during a war or a crisis in imperial affairs [...] There is the further habit of attributing racism to the prejudices of individuals, ignoring its lengthy history, its relationship to slavery and empire, and the many ways it has been structured into institutions, laws, language, behaviour and culture (p. 9).

Through the analysis of non-canonical colonial works and cultures, Brantlinger seeks to disclose the intrinsic potential of racial stereotypes, their role in the sociocultural imperial context, and their legacy in our life today. Indeed, the title of the book contains a significant double meaning, the cannibals to be tamed being not only savages to be civilized, but also the hidden symbol of fears and ambivalences deeply engrained in Victorian and late-Victorian society, whose influence was largely felt even after the imperial period.

Taming Cannibals presents different attempts at civilization by exploring less known colonial experiences, such as those conveyed in the opening chapter through the accounts of Thomas Williams and Joseph Waterhouse, two missionaries in Fiji. The reader learns how colonialists were able to gain respect from indigenous chiefs and managed to convert Thakombau — the main Fijian leader — and his people who abandoned cannibalism and became a British colony in 1874. This positive view of the missionary enterprise is followed by George Augustus Robinson's unsuccessful attempt to save the Aborigines of Tasmania from extinction by totally assimilating their culture to western standards, on the grounds that "savage customs could and should be eradicated in favour of Christianity" (p. 54). Robinson's *Journals* are compared with another important source on Tasmanians, *Daily Life and Origins of the Tasmanians* (1870) by ethnographer James Bonwick, with the intent to underline different missionary and anthropological approaches while reaching the conclusion that both would have equally led to the disappearance of the Aborigine race.

In these and many other imperial texts, the image of colonizers is constantly presented by following the standards of courage, integrity, and cultural superiority. However, the great risk of being influenced by the colonized is also introduced, especially in relation to the individual response to the civilizing mission. One of the main consequences of colonization is in fact represented by

the fear of “going native”, a condition accomplished by imitating indigenous behaviour. A fundamental aspect of Brantlinger’s criticism, the theme of degeneration testifies to the frequent transgression of cultural boundaries on the part of Europeans who end up subverting the imperial system based on the natives’ imitation of the colonizers, and not vice versa. This happens because “while the natives supposedly can’t achieve full civilization, a white person can shed civilization and achieve full savagery” (pp. 65-66). A number of imperial fictions — such as Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Beach of Falesá”, and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* — demonstrate that going native may have positive connotations while representing the double nature of the imperial enterprise, as it shifts between the will of supremacy and the fear of debasement.

Such a dichotomy is reinforced by the analysis of one of the most popular political figures of nineteenth-century England, that of Benjamin Disraeli, whose imperialistic policy did not prevent him from being “an Oriental traveler and emulator of aspects of Eastern cultures” (p. 91). His Jewish origins accounted for his closeness to the oriental world, and yet, his philo-Semitism, reinforced the notion of race advocated in his novel *Tancred* (1847), together with the idea that race and religion were the cornerstones of all great empires. By contrasting Disraeli’s philo-Semitism with Edward Said’s negative notion of Orientalism, Brantlinger advocates the positive outcomes of Disraeli’s hybridity on the conviction that “[his] Oriental self-fashioning was an aspect of his bold, aggressive defense against the anti-Semitism that he had to combat throughout his career” (p. 92). The study of Disraeli’s imperial views in the perspective of his Jewish legacy offers a new representation of his colonial strategies, while separating the political life from the individual and artistic personality. The portrayal of the Prime Minister conveyed through the reading of his own writings is certainly the most original part of the book and a successful way to illustrate the contradictory stances at the heart of racial theories.

As we read on, it is easy to notice that the effort made by the Victorians to “tame cannibals” conformed more and more to the equally significant effort to tame those atavistic fears accompanying the imperial enterprise itself. Savagery and cannibalism are also introduced in the western context of late Victorian England; Brantlinger, in fact, draws an interesting parallel between savage people and lower-class British citizens in the second half of the nineteenth century. Social Darwinism, Francis Galton’s eugenics, the impelling fear for the weakening of imperial races all played a decisive part in assimilating urban poverty to native life, with the result that far-away colonies were felt closer thanks to the presence of the poor living in the slums of industrial England. Moreover, the British attributed similar stereotypical characteristics to much closer populations, such as the Irish who were regarded as degenerate and brutes. If, on the one hand, the Irish — and Celts — are represented as physically and culturally inferior, on the other hand, they are romanticised and idealised, as in Matthew Arnold’s “On the Study of Celtic Literature”, where “[the] ideal Celt is itself a poetical apparition, belonging to the romantic past; the real Celt of the present is a troublemaker and probably a Fenian” (p. 147). The Celts are

thus put in contrast with the Anglo-Saxons, as well as labelled as belonging to a “dying race” (p. 147).

The implementation of racial stereotypes on a social level is expressed in cultural analysis and literary works with the double perspective of past and future perceptions of the phenomenon. For example, Rider Haggard’s imperial view is conveyed through his interest in the populations of ancient Africa and the permanent differentiation he recognized in them. The racial classification of savage people — the Zulus and the Egyptians were, for instance, superior to other African natives — unreservedly reinforced the author’s literary representation of imperial hierarchies, while promoting the permanency of British civilization. The study of H. R. Haggard’s racial archaeology is followed by the analysis of science fiction writers, such as H. G. Wells and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who are introduced to view the idea of race and cannibalism from a modern perspective. In the Victorian age, many authors showed interest in the mechanical world and some of them considered machines as organisms whose ability to evolve would mirror Darwinian evolutionary theories on human beings. This idea, advanced by Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1872), and later followed by George Eliot in her own essay “Shadows of the Coming Race” (1876), is amplified by the treatment of vampire cannibalism, seen as a tremendous threat for future generations. Also Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), while focusing on the distant past of the Middle Ages, actually envisages a future in which human beings will all become bloodthirsty vampires. *Dracula*’s implicit cannibalism is just another way of interpreting the colonial fear of degeneration while projecting it into an apocalyptic future. The blending of science and technology with racial thinking links past legacies with present anxieties making the problem of degeneration a present and future dilemma. Within this context in which race is analysed in the light of technological progress, Max Nordau’s studies on degeneration (*Degeneration*, 1895) might have added critical support to the discussion about race and science in ways that would have linked the theme of imperial Gothic to later literary and cultural expressions of degeneration.

In the book’s Epilogue, Brantlinger examines the afterlives of Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden”. His authoritative knowledge of Kipling allows him to deal with the overanalysed theory of the white men’s burden not only by applying it to the American imperial program at the beginning of the twentieth century — in fact, the poem had been sent to Theodor Roosevelt in 1898 as an encouragement to take over the Philippines —, but also by connecting it to more recent historical events related to American neo-imperial policies, such as the invasion of Iraq.

Indeed, the principal merit of *Taming Cannibals* is that of adding new perspectives to colonialism and race by relating them to unexplored sociohistorical paths. The massive number of quotations and references denotes an extensive knowledge about the subject, while the blending of less explored literary and anthropological areas with more popular works establishes a balanced picture of a complex theme, for which generalization and condensation are always difficult.

Scholars and readers who have already appreciated Brantlinger’s works

will recognize his typical method of organizing the discourse by interweaving a wide number of texts. History and culture combine to show the effect of imperial themes on modern political and social theories, and to demonstrate how literature comes alive and influences, determines, and continues to shape contemporary ways of thinking.

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