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Renaissance: Introduction

Jaine Chemmachery

I wish to warmly thank Marilyne Brun for her collaboration in the early stages of the project and Christine Lorre-Johnston and Kathie Birat for their invaluable help during the editing process.

- 1 In an interview dating back to May 2021, President Macron declared that France in 2021 made him think of the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. In his terms, France is currently experiencing the type of phenomena that “shape a people.” In the same sentence, the French president compared our current era to one corresponding to the “reinvention of a civilisation.”¹ “Renaissance,” as conjured up in President Macron’s speech, partakes of a binary paradigm in which tradition is associated with “oldness,” and “newness” with the “modern.” Yet, this Manichean opposition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance must be questioned. The humanist construction of the subject as individualistic, an entity characterised by consciousness (and epitomised in Descartes’s “Cogito, ergo sum”), is now under reconsideration as it has erased alternative ways of conceptualising living entities such as the idea that subjects can be seen as (always already) part of collectives instead of being considered as individuals disconnected from each other. Therefore, more echoes may be found between the ways the Middle Ages, other cultures predating the Renaissance – such as Aboriginal groups in Australia and First Nations in Canada – and postcolonial approaches have imagined human and non-human subjects.
- 2 “Renaissance,” “rebirth,” and “revival” are concepts which are particularly relevant to examine in the context of postcolonial literatures in English. Postcolonial literatures have long been referred to as “new literatures” which is problematic since such literatures were born in the wake of the historical processes of independence. As Kerry-Jane Wallart asks in her article, what happens when what used to be considered new finally becomes old, knowing that the first examples of postcolonial literatures written in English date back more than sixty years?² Moreover, the label invites us to wonder about perspective: if such literatures are referred to as new, one should ask for whom these practices should be new. These “new literatures” eurocentrically imply the existence of older literatures – European literatures – which are often thought of as ancient and having stood the test of time. Furthermore, the adjective “old” can be

considered from different perspectives: the term can either be synonymous with long standing or with what is now outdated. Similarly, “new” can mean “young” – as lacking maturity – but it can hint at the possibility of reinvention, even revolution, thus reconnecting with the positive connotation of the term “rebirth” despite the fears that “newness” and its potential for radical change may imply. To quote Wallart again, “renaissance is a moment of crisis, of uncertainty and cultural disjunction.”

- 3 Postcolonial works were – and are – frequently characterised by their attempts to renew literary forms, genres and language. One of the first renowned postcolonial works is Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) which offers a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of Rochester’s first (and Caribbean) wife, Antoinette Mason. Innovative practices in postcolonial literatures sought, and often still seek, emancipation from European norms and canons, with a risk of creating new orthodoxies; the primacy of the novel over all other genres in the Indian postcolonial literary scene is one example of this. Some writers still challenge these new norms from within by promoting an aesthetics of the mundane or reworking form and genre. Thus Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) gives her own take on the *Bildungsroman*, and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) mixes the European novelistic genre with the *Arabian Nights*.
- 4 Behind these ideas of renewal and rebirth lie complex dynamics that this issue seeks to explore: from the colonisers’ point of view, colonies could be seen as being born again under colonial rule, an idea which rests on the problematic assumption that the pre-colonisation past of these territories would be obscure, uncivilised or in decay. Historically, the European empires have staged themselves as paragons of modernity in opposition to the countries they subjugated, which they associated with tradition and conservatism. Yet, if one thinks of early Orientalism, some Orientalists helped Europeans re-“discover” ancient languages (Sanskrit) or art forms (the ghazal), all of which were revived, or at least offered new visibility in different cultural contexts. The issue is therefore largely one of perspective: while these cultures might have been seen as reborn from a European point of view, they were already there for colonised peoples, and this calls up the problematic notion of origin, which Rushdie has famously written about in *The Satanic Verses*:

[H]ow does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine? Is birth always a fall? (1988, 8)
- 5 Postcolonial literatures have often played a role in the birth, or rebirth, of nations, with many literary works engaging with, or sometimes questioning, ideas of nation, national literature and national borders. Some kinds of “rebirth” have to do with a nationalist conception of culture and may push a political agenda, notably after colonisation or in more recent times with Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, in India. In such cases, “rebirth” is rather to be understood as “revival” since it refers to the process of retrieving something that had disappeared or been erased, as if what is resuscitated had remained unchanged, almost fossilised, and was only waiting to be unearthed, hence the association between such a process and a form of idealistic essentialising of a culture of the past. As Coentrin Jégou argues, “the essence of revivalism is precisely to seek roots that may serve as origins for a national literature or culture.”

- 6 But other forms of “rebirth” may be thought of more as gradual co-construction, involving processes of imitation, creation, innovation and hybridisation. Are such phenomena then more related to emergence than rebirth? 1960s literary works often included reflections on national identity such as Ngugi wa Thiongo’s early novels while recent developments in indigenous literatures have rather tended to stress the connections that exist between indigenous peoples and literatures beyond national borders. Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) offers a striking example of a literary endeavour which aims at drawing connections with world literature while bypassing white Australian literature, as the latter has often been the site of problematic representations of Aboriginal cultures.
- 7 Renaissance can then be discussed from the perspective of “renaissance movements”: can we consider that an indigenous literary renaissance has taken place in Canada or in Australia? Such new practices may imply the promotion of oral cultures and vernacular languages and even sometimes the inclusion of forms of orality within written genres, as Olive Senior’s short story “Arrival of the Snake-Woman” or Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* show.
- 8 “Rebirth” may also imply looking back at past historical moments from a new perspective, which for instance led Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* to be associated with Neo-Victorianism, in the form of the “Neo-Victorian at sea.” According to Elizabeth Ho, the novel provides us with “global memory of the Victorian” (Ho, 2012). The Renaissance era itself is sometimes conjured up in postcolonial literatures: Taylor’s *Ubu and The Truth Commission* borrows elements from Shakespeare while Walcott’s epic poem *Omeros* draws from *The Iliad* – as it stages Hector and Achille as Saint Lucian fishermen – but also from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.
- 9 Finally, the process of “renewal” can be applied to theory since theoretical approaches evolve constantly. Postcolonial theory is no exception and has largely been renewed since the 1980s. While the fields of both postcolonial and decolonial studies are deeply marked by dissensus, new approaches have characterised these fields of research as is illustrated by the emergence of concepts such as “coloniality of power” (Quijano) or “epistemologies of the South” (de Sousa Santos) over the last twenty years. The former indeed refers to the persistence of colonial policies and practices after the historical phases of decolonisation such as, for instance, the fact of using Asian and African countries as dumping grounds for waste produced in Europe. In 2020, Malaysia offered a decolonial response to the practice by sending back 150 containers of plastic waste to thirteen countries including France, the UK and the US. The promotion of “epistemologies of the South,” meaning knowledges coming from countries located in the global South, partakes of a more general call for epistemic decolonisation, i.e. challenging “epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies” (Grosfoguel 2007, 11). The emergence of new perspectives within the postcolonial and decolonial fields can be linked to the notion of “theoretical renewal.” The recurrent question of the suitability of the term “postcolonial,”³ the persistent doubts about the future of postcolonial studies, as well as the emergence of a variety of subfields such as Oceanic Humanities or Discard studies, testify to the ways in which the field of “postcolonial studies” keeps reinventing itself.
- 10 Coentín Jégou’s article focuses on Caribbean writing and translation. His work analyses how Derek Walcott’s references to the Irish Revival in *Omeros* (1990)

complicate the poet's statement about history being marked by erasure and amnesia, which should make the very notion of historical rebirth impossible. According to Jégou, in the case of *Omeros*, translation offers "the creative potential of a displaced rebirth" and is a mediating process through which history may be "(re)articulated in the future tense."

- 11 Kerry-Jane Wallart uses the recently rediscovered West Indian origins of the Harlem Renaissance movement – through the equally recent rediscovery of Claude McKay – as a methodological tool to discuss Black Atlantic transnationalism. Wallart demonstrates how the constitution of the Harlem Renaissance as a national, American movement led to the silencing of dissonant Caribbean artists characterised by more fluid diasporic affiliations. Her paper analyses Alain Locke's *New Negro* anthology (1925) "in the light of US exceptionalism, politically insurgent canon rebuilding and transcultural negotiations." Wallart also argues that newness does not exist in absolute terms and considers for instance how the Harlem Renaissance "claimed a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity" (Locke, x) for Black Americans just as North America did when it sought emancipation from the British yoke through, for instance, the founding of a distinctly American literature. Finally, the article asks essential questions pertaining to methodology, among which: how are we to "negotiate the canonisation of postcolonial authors?" and "what tradition, if any, do we contribute to building?"
- 12 Pauline Amy de la Bretèque's article examines cultural and poetical rebirth in Olive Senior's short story "Arrival of the Snake-Woman" (1989). The analysis focuses on rebirth and the challenges of creolisation in contexts of migration, and more particularly in Jamaican society. The article also examines how the genre of the short story is capable of renewing Caribbean oral traditions and vernacular speech by revitalising writing from within. The author thus demonstrates how Senior's short story questions the separation between writing and orality. According to Senior, "in our culture, there is the collective voice that might not be written down in books but is nevertheless an equally potent force: the voice of ancestral heritage that is labelled – in academic circles – orality" (2005, 36).
- 13 Laura Singeot's article also reflects upon cultural and bodily rebirth through the embedding of oral phrases and vernacular language into written form. Her piece draws upon Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* (1957) and its characterisation of the novel as a "modern" genre which has seen the rise of the individual as one of its key features. By looking at Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* trilogy, Singeot questions the possibility of transposing the codes of the novelistic genre upon works written in the Pacific context. Her article focuses more specifically on the construction of Maori subjectivity in relation to community, and as being grounded within corporeality – one that is defined on Maori terms and not predicated upon Western conceptions of "the body."
- 14 In her article on *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), Mathilde Rogez analyses the stakes of Jane Taylor's borrowing of elements from Shakespeare's and Jarry's plays and their transposition to the South African context. Starting with the evocation of how the "Robben Island Bible," i.e. the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, was disguised ("reborn"?) into a Hindu prayer book to make its way again back into prison, Rogez asks whether the "recycling" of Renaissance texts could lead to a rebirth of sorts for South Africa. By looking into the layers of texts and modes of representation in the play, Rogez suggests that *Ubu and the Truth Commission* partakes of an endeavour to find renewed ways of articulating the debates around the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission and possibly pave the way, albeit not a necessarily linear one, towards collective catharsis.

- 15 Sandrine Soukaï's article discusses the ambivalence of the concepts of "renaissance" and "rebirth" in relation to the history of Bengal. She examines two works focusing on the "rebirth" of East Pakistan into Bangladesh in 1971, Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2007), and reflects upon the reasons why the creation of Bangladesh was accompanied by both a revival and a questioning of nineteenth-century Renaissance movements in Bengal as well as an attempt to recover vernacular practices that date back to times prior to the various Partitions of Bengal. Soukaï's article therefore complicates the concept of "rebirth" by highlighting the idea that rebirth does not necessarily imply a radical break with the past but may consist of an intermingling of the old and the new, up to the point when "the new might seem eclipsed by the new."

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NOTES

1. "Macron compare la France de 2021 à 'la fin du Moyen Âge'," 26 May 2021, Le HuffPost, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/entry/macron-compare-la-france-de-2021-a-la-fin-du-moyen-age_fr_60adec28e4b03135479dc579
2. What qualifies as literature is also problematic since if one focuses on the case of Australia, the first work of Aboriginal literature is said to be David Unaipon's 1929 *Native Legends*. But if one takes into account the letters of protest that were written by Aboriginal people to Australian settlers to claim rights, the first occurrence dates back to Bennelong's 1796 letter to "Mr Phillips, Steward to Lord Sidney."
3. An international conference titled "Name of a Discipline" was organised by the SEPC in France in January 2021 to reflect on the appellations over time of the field commonly known as "postcolonial literature." The conference led to the decision to rename this journal, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, *Journal of Postcolonial Literature and Arts*. (For practical reasons the change will become effective in 2022.)

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