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‘Bordercrossings’.
Literary, Sociological and Geographical Borders in
Isabella Bird’s *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

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2019

1. Preliminaries to the research

In the centre of my dissertation there is a Victorian travel narrative, Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*¹ written in 1883, in which the writer gives account of her travels throughout the South East Asian colonies of the British Empire, especially in today's Malaysia and Singapore. The reason for choosing this topic is rather personal: in 2010 I had the possibility to spend 6 months in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for family reasons. Here I gained access to the 'Rare Collection' of the National Library, where I found a huge amount of literary works written by women writers in the colonial era: autobiographies, recollections, correspondences. The study of these narratives has become the first step of my research work, thus having started to reach a more complex system of interrelatedness examined from a wider point of view. In order to achieve this goal, it was unavoidable to narrow down the range of sources while at the same time extend the aspects of the examination. Thus, the aim of my dissertation is to analyse the motive of *bordercrossings* from a literary, a sociological as well as from a geographical point of view. The reason why I have chosen Bird's narrative is that in *The Golden Chersonese* the motive of *bordercrossing* can be captured on various levels. The literary aspect focuses on the borderline between different genres this work might belong to. From the sociological aspect the boundary between women's and men's role in Victorian England's society has been examined, while regarding the actual geographical borders a possible postcolonialist interpretation has been outlined.

The process of the detailed analysis has been the following: in the first chapter I point out that although Bird defines her book as an example of the "literature of travel"², but in fact it could be associated with further generic groups such as letter, autobiography or memoir. Here the focus has been put on the various textual groups, generic categories and the flexibility of the borderline between them. Here the difference between fictive and non-fictive narratives is an essential question, too. Having examined the possible genres the *Golden Chersonese* might belong to, the category of travel literature is detailed, bearing in mind what Derrida has said about the "demarcation lines" between the different genres.³

After this, various sociological issues follow: in the chapter examining women's roles I focus on those characteristics of Bird's book which are in harmony with the traditional gender roles in Victorian British society. Also, I have underlined those points which are in contrast with them. Here the question of women's *roles*, *woman travellers* and *woman writers* are dealt with separately, where focus has been put on the characteristics of the *Golden Chersonese* which are valid only for one of these three categories. However, the interrelatedness of these three groups are also analysed in this chapter.

As the historical and sociological aspects of the era examined in the dissertation – i.e. the Victorian era, British imperialism, and colonialism – make it inevitable, in the last chapter a possible postcolonialist interpretation

¹ Isabella BIRD, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* Uckfield, Rediscovery Books Ltd. published in association with the Royal Geographical Society, 2006. Due to the length of the original title, in what follows I will mention the book in its short version, i.e. *The Golden Chersonese*.

² BIRD ix.

³ J. DERRIDA, *The Law of Genre* = *Inquiry*, 1980, vol. 7, no. 1, 55–81 „as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation.”

is outlined. With the help of the terms of Mary Louise Pratt: the “contact zone”, the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” scene and the “anti-conquest narrative” technique I throw light on the relevance of these expressions in connection with Bird’s narrative. Although we obviously have to bear in mind the findings of the “classical” postcolonialist thinkers and writers, it is essential in this section of the dissertation to remember to examine the questions of colonialism also from the viewpoint of the “Other” – i.e. that of the colonized.

2. Approach and method

My main hypothesis throughout the dissertation has been that instead of the exact categorization normally used in natural sciences, in literary studies another attitude should be applied: that of the scale- or spectrum-like method. The findings of each chapter have to be interpreted with this technique. The three aspects of analysis of the *Golden Chersonese* make it clear that our present terminology is not applicable to clarify either the questions of gender roles or the “we” vs. “others” opposition of colonialism. Thus, our efforts to describe the problematics of the opposition of the “West” and the “East” in colonialism as well as in postcolonialism seem to be in vain. All the more so, since the boundaries of these two notions, again, raise a lot of questions, and are definable only in relation to one another. Consequently, I use these two terms throughout the dissertation with quotation marks.

This scale- or spectrum-like method guarantees the flexibility of the borderlines, the transition – i.e. the bordercrossing – between the different literary or sociological categories. Here we are talking about groups that are not easy to circumscribe, which obtain their meanings from the minimal discrepancy between the different points on the scale. The identification developed from these differences determines the exact place of the notions within the scale. To give an example: in the chart outlining the problematics of defining a genre I point out that the different generic categories – such as the autobiography, the memoir, the letter and the travel literature – (might) be definitely separated from one another. However, between each and every group we can also find parts where definitions overlap, and by changing one aspect the genre itself also changes, or a so-called *transitional* genre comes into existence.

The same scale-like positioning can be noticed in the case of the flexibility of gender roles, and practically speaking the main thesis of the postcolonial approach, i.e. the relativity of “here” and “there” is based on this flexibility, too. This range of minimal differences produces the spectrum where the two endpoints are precisely positioned and defined, but the states in between can be interpreted only from the two ends.

A spectrum based on differences can be noticed in an even wider context, that of time: the answers to the questions “where are we coming from?” and “where have we ended up” is problematic not only during the research process but also in connection with the questions of periodization and the change of epoch. To try to give an answer to this I suggested the coinage of the term *post-postcolonialism* based on the example of *post-postmodern*.

3. Achievements

According to Jeffrey Nealon⁴ the key element in the process of approaching the *post*-postmodern era was undoubtedly the point when John Frow, in his collection of essays *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* changed the tense in the title of the first chapter like this: „What Was Postmodernism?”⁵ Frow answers the question from the aspect of literary criticism in short: “not more and not less than a genre of theoretical writing”.⁶ It is, however, essential to mention that a year earlier, in 1996 this change of tense regarding the “*post*-era” was already implied in the chapter *When was the „post-colonial”? Thinking at the limit*, written by Stuart Hall, in the volume *The Post-Colonial question*⁷. Obviously, the functions of past tense in both titles are the same. Also, at the beginning of the ‘90s Ágnes Heller tries to answer the same question from a sociological point of view, saying: “In short, what is nowadays called *postmodern* is the result of the long term dissolvment of the 1968’s attitude, way of thinking and imagination in the modern world.”⁸

Nevertheless, a certain phenomenon characteristic in the discourse of art movements in general is quite striking in both approaches above: namely that researchers want to answer the question of “What?” by all means, occasionally with the help of methods used in the natural sciences. As Spengler puts it,

The habits of the scientific researcher were eagerly taken as a model, and if, from time to time, some student asked what Gothic, or Islam, or the Polis *was*, no one inquired why such symbols of something living *inevitably* appeared just *then, and there, in that form, and for that space of time*.⁹

If in accordance with the suggestion mentioned above the question of *post*-postcolonialism is raised, then what we have to examine first of all is not *what* postmodern is, and based on this *what* post-postmodern is, so that, parallel with this, the *definition* of post-postcolonialism could also be clarified. We are looking for the answers to the questions *where, when and in what form* post-postcolonialist thinking appears instead. Indeed, it is advisable to use the present tense here, since post-postcolonialism deals with the problematics of our present, the 2000s and 2010s. And although this dissertation obviously cannot examine historical or sociological issues, it would be folly for anyone not even to mention the relation of the questions of *why there, then and in that form* contemporary events of world politics happen. Thus, it is essential to realize that the background motives of present days’ biggest crises – i.e. the problem of migration – should be interpreted as a way of counter-colonization. I would like to

⁴ Jeffrey T. NEALON, *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2012, x.

⁵ John FROW, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, 13.

⁶ Frow, *i.m.* 15

⁷ HALL, Stuart, *When was the postcolonial?* = Iain CHAMBERS and Lidia CURTI (Eds.), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 242.

⁸ HELLER Ágnes, 1968. Prelúdiu a posztmodernhez = Magyar Lettre Internationale 30. sz. (1998).

⁹ Oswald SPENGLER, *The Decline of the West. Form and Actuality*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1927.
<https://archive.org/details/Decline-Of-The-West-Oswald-Spengler/page/n1>

underline, however, that in this dissertation I wish to use the term counter-colonization objectively, without any negative connotations¹⁰, simply meaning the change of *direction* in the process of colonialism.

If the main motive of postcolonialism was to give way to the analysis from the perspective of the “Other” instead of the good old colonialist thinking, then it can be useful to follow this logic in the case of post-postcolonialism, too. This means that by post-postcolonialism a completely new approach has to be understood in history, sociology and literary studies. According to this approach, then, it has to be stated that the expected spiritual, interpretational or sociomoral changes of the postcolonialist turn have not – or only limitedly – taken place. As in the case of all changes of epoch, here also the “lack”, a “hiatus” is what makes researchers step on: everything that could not be achieved, could not come into existence and was “welcome” with sharp criticism will be now the central focus of study. Consequently, it must be stated that in vain did the period following the colonialist era try to step out of the perspective of the imperial analysis and make that of the “Other” his own. (Here we must remember what Spivak says about how difficult it is to leave eurocentrism, and how impossible it is for the European people to interpret the world from a viewpoint differing from that of the “Western colonizer”.)

¹¹ Instead, we have to count with challenges for which the solutions have not been created so far – or, are in the process of being created right now. But it is quite obvious that nor the “we”-centredness of colonialism, neither the “they”-centredness of postcolonialism will be able to function and provide answers to the questions of the 21st century. The first one, because it excludes groups of people from the society; the latter because it is still rooted in the same perspective, and is not able to represent the “Other” in an authentic way. The solution will be much more like the destruction of these categories: as each chapter of my dissertation argues for the flexibility of the barriers instead of the strictly isolated literary or sociological categories. In this way post-postcolonialism might be able to give space to this approach, questioning the principles of categorization that have been valid so far. Thus, there is the opportunity for a new way of interpretation lacking the classical forms of categorization, where instead of the “we” vs. “they” opposition an identification based on the differences can come into existence in literary, culture or social studies – as described in the spectrum-like method above.

Summing it up, through the motive of bordercrossing my main aim was to take a step towards a critical approach appropriate enough for the challenges of our present time: on one hand, thematically, i.e. with the help of the different areas – the genres, the gender roles and the actual borderlines between colonizers and the colonized – that were analysed in the dissertation, on the other hand, also methodically, by means of the spectrum- or scale-like method. By this, again, I understand the introduction of the principle lacking the classical, strict way of categorization as well as a new type of neutral counter-colonization. Stuart Hall, in connection with the question “When was the post-colonial?” says that the essence of postcolonialism was – and it is important to use the simple

¹⁰ In my dissertation I go into details regarding the usage of this term in the early 20th century (e.g. Moritz BONN, *The Age of Counter-Colonisation, International Affairs, (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)*, vol. 13, no. 6, 1934, 845–847.) as well as in contemporary French socio-political discourse (see the internet blog of the French writer Renaud Camus at <http://www.innocence.org/index.php?comdeb=681&cominter=50&page=communiques>).

¹¹ MCLEOD, 13.

past here – that it objected to the usage of “here” and “there”, “then and “now”, or “home” and “abroad”.¹² So, as Hall suggest, instead of the traditional binary opposition and the categories of core vs. periphery, the focus should be put on “lateral and transverse cross-relations”, where “the local and the global mutually reform each other”.¹³ The only premise for this change, as we have seen, is nothing else, but the crossing of the borders.

4. List of relevant publications

„Wintle, C. (2013). Colonial Collecting and Display. Encounters With Material Culture From the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.” New York: Berghahn Books, 2013. 978-0-85745-941-1 (Book review) in *ASEAS - Österreichische Zeitschrift für Südostasienwissenschaften*, 7(2014)1: p. 133-136, 2014. Available at <https://aseas.univie.ac.at/index.php/aseas/article/viewFile/285/101>

“Intertextualitás mint kanonizációs tényező” [Intertextuality – a method of canonization] in *Spring Wind [DOSZ] 2013 Conference volume*

„A Victorian Lady Traveller. Isabella Bird in South East Asia” in *Spring Wind [DOSZ] 2012 Conference volume*. Budapest, 2012

“Párbeszéd a kánonról, kanonizációról, kánoncsinálóról – Rejtő ürügyén” [Dialogue about canon, canonization, „canonmakers” – about Hungarian writer Jenő Rejtő] in *Kultúra és Kritika* (Sept. 2012) Available at <http://kuk.btk.ppke.hu/hu/content/p%C3%A1rbesz%C3%A9d>

¹² HALL, *i.m.* 247 „Its theoretical value lies therefore precisely in its refusal of this ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘then’ and ‘now’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ perspective.” Az angol mondat jelen ideje ellenére a magyar fordítás múlt ideje nem csak a címben használt ‘was’ miatt, hanem az idézett mondatot megelőző szakasz befejezett jelene (Present Perfect) miatt is indokolt. (“the histories of imperialism *have thrived*”, “the concept of ‘post-colonial’ *has done* so much”)

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