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BOOK REVIEWS

Nicholas Harrison, *Our Civilizing Mission: The Lessons of Colonial Education*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019.

Asking tough questions about the foundations and fate of the humanities is all the rage these days. But what makes Nicholas Harrison's *Our Civilizing Mission* remarkable is where he goes in search of answers: colonial education. In practical terms, the book "focuses on a generation of Algerian writers, most but not all from Muslim backgrounds, who were educated under French colonialism and were intensely exposed to France's civilizing mission" (10). Harrison explores how writers including Assia Djebar, Mouloud Feraoun, Mohammed Dib, Albert Memmi, and many more experienced colonial schooling and what they did with it. Along the way, the book supplies an overview of education in colonial Algeria that is very generative despite its author's protests that it is not meant to be comprehensive. This book's central contribution, however, which really ought to be of interest not only to scholars in the fields of colonial/postcolonial/decolonial studies but to literary scholars more generally, is to ask a series of difficult questions that cut to the core of our profession: What justifies our work as teachers of literature, above all in times of crisis? What grounds do we have, really, for remaining in the classroom and teaching literature as the world burns around us in its various and ongoing ways?

Harrison invites readers to think critically about what was really at stake in colonial education for the many colonized students and teachers who passed through its classrooms, some of whom remained surprisingly ambivalent about the transformations that these experiences wrought in their lives. *Our Civilizing Mission* is in no way, shape, or form a defense of colonial education, but it does want its reader to ask what was colonial in colonial education and what was not, and what it did for colonized subjects who participated in it as students and as teachers. By taking seriously Algerian writers' often contradictory experiences of colonial education, Harrison unfolds a thought-provoking reflection on the humanities today.

The introduction begins on a generalist plane with a discussion of Edward Said that then spills over into chapter 1, "Lessons from Said." Over these two sections, Harrison treats Said's thought as paradigmatic in its equivocal relationship to education and the humanities in general, on the basis of their relation to colonialism. Harrison focuses not only on his subject's criticism and theory, but above all on the ways in which Said's thought refracted his own experiences of education in colonial contexts. Writing in *Out of Place* of his time at the Gezira Preparatory School, Said recalled, "Our lessons and books were mystifyingly English: read about meadows, castles, and Kings John, Alfred, and Canute with the reverence that our teachers kept reminding us that they deserved" (Said, *Out of Place* 5). Harrison suggests that Said's attitude toward literary education remained productively ambivalent—he had an obvious "life-long commitment" toward literary studies, but this was mixed with skepticism about the discipline's foundations and purposes. (10) This "uneasy status of education" in Said's work, Harrison argues, stemmed from an awareness (both scholarly and personal) that education was an important site for the exercise of colonial power. Harrison invites us to consider how Said's attitudes and assumptions regarding literature and colonial education chime (or don't) with our own attitudes toward literary studies today.

Across this extended engagement, Harrison also queries Said's ambivalence toward the literary throughout his work, especially as it relates to coloniality. On the one hand, a Saidian

reading of a literary text could be quite symptomatic—as one can say these days—while on the other hand Said was also given to asserting the agency of literary texts in relation to their ideological entanglements. For example, Said famously suggests in *Orientalism* that the works of Flaubert and Nerval “depend upon” Orientalism while also asserting that they “remain independent” and even “exceed the limitations” of orthodox Orientalism since in such works the Orient was not fully “grasped” but rather “exploited aesthetically and imaginatively as a roomy place full of possibility” (Said, *Orientalism* 181). This reading is one of those moments when Said seems to hesitate. Harrison suggests that we ought to pause here, too, and let the full tension land—and to let this pause fill up with questions about what it is that we, as teachers and critics of literature, think we are doing. Harrison wonders whether “Said had better reasons than he recognized in *Orientalism* to remain attached to the literary as such, and to a notional space—which may be called ‘aesthetic,’ . . . of which it is no criticism to say it is political only in certain respects” (Harrison, *Our Civilizing Mission* 36). Harrison wants to link this notional space of the aesthetic to the classroom, as Said also did. The classroom was another feature of the profession about which Said was frequently ambivalent. Sometimes Said could be reverential about the classroom as a “sacrosanct” space, while at other times he seemed almost disdainful of its splendid isolation. From Said, Harrison accumulates a constellation of productive questions about the aesthetic and the classroom, which he explores as “roomy places” of possibility that exist in spite of but also in relation to colonial education.

The title of chapter 2, “Nos ancêtres les colons,” “Our ancestors the colonists,” plays off of the story—familiar to anyone who has learned the first thing about French colonial education—that the history textbooks used in both the French metropole and the empire all began with the same phrase: “Our ancestors, the Gauls.” Like many anecdotes that take on a life of their own, this one is not strictly true. But it lives on because it captures something that feels right about the breathtaking chauvinism of French imperial education. Pedagogical Eurocentrism was (and still is) a reality. But the story is also misleading, insofar as it can lead us to overlook the diversity of educational practices and experiences that actual existed under colonial conditions and, most crucially for Harrison, to badly misrecognize the motivations and commitments of the many colonized individuals who were students and would even go on to become teachers in such classrooms. As Harrison observes, “In colonial Algeria there were significant variations in the relationship between education and the (other) projects of colonialism: educational institutions and practices varied widely; so did attitudes to colonial education . . . experiences of education amounted to more than colonial indoctrination and subjection, and that the work of education was less predictable in its relation to politics and in its effects” than might otherwise be surmised (43). Harrison argues that colonial education was never really pursued as widely, vigorously, or consistently as its propagandists maintained, and in practice there could be a surprising amount of room for maneuver for individual teachers. Writing against the tendency to see colonial education simply as a servant and tool of colonialism, Harrison highlights a variety of policies, attitudes, practices, and politics clustered around the classroom. It was possible to be pro-colonial and in favor of colonial education; or anti-colonial and hostile to colonial education; but it was also quite possible to be pro-colonial and hostile to colonial education; or even anti-colonial and/yet in favor of colonial education (83).

Chapter 3, “Teaching in a Time of Crisis,” focuses on a single writer, Mouloud Feraoun, and it is, to my mind, the strongest chapter in the book. Harrison carefully considers Feraoun’s decisions both to become a teacher in a colonial school and to remain in the classroom throughout the Algerian war of independence. Harrison is interested not only in how Feraoun justified his work to himself, but above all in what “we” teachers and scholars of literature today might stand to learn from engaging in good faith with his justifications for “not joining the FLN, not fighting, and continuing to teach” (88). Pivoting back and forth between biographical sketches and readings of the entirety of Feraoun’s work, Harrison

explores both how and why Feraoun remained committed to a version of the Saidian “sacrosanct” classroom even as the war raged around and eventually engulfed him—Feraoun was assassinated in his place of work by the Organisation armée secrète (OAS), the settler colonial paramilitary group that carried out a campaign of violent attacks in a vain attempt to stave off Algerian independence. As Harrison shows, Feraoun’s reasons for remaining committed to the classroom in a time of crisis were varied and complex. While Feraoun believed fervently in Algerian independence, he also viewed the FLN with a critical eye and was particularly suspicious of its dictatorial tendencies and propensity to manipulate what he considered to be “religious energies for political purposes.” Adding more nuance to the paradox, Harrison shows that Feraoun remained devoted not only to his teaching in a French classroom, but also to the study of his native Kabyle culture.

Noting that France’s so-called civilizing mission put less effort into education than is often assumed, Harrison asks, hypothetically and provocatively, “whether we think it would have been better and whose interests would have been served, if, in the colonial era, more Algerians or fewer had been offered, or subjected to, the educational projects of the ‘civilizing mission?’” (157). This question is linked to the central question of the chapter: whether Feraoun’s decision to continue to work in education in a time of crisis and war was justifiable. Harrison suspects that “as teachers, we have already chosen: we are already on Feraoun’s side, at a distance from the realm of heroism and the revolutionary act” (160). Harrison closes the chapter on a reflective note: “In postcolonial studies and other politicized fields of criticism, we are looking for role models . . . it is tempting to turn to intellectual activists who have adopted clear and radical political positions, which is one of the reasons, I suppose, why everyone in postcolonial studies has heard of Fanon, and relatively few have heard of Feraoun. But if we are looking for points of comparison with our collective work as teacher-critics, and an understanding of its fundamental justifications, the work of Feraoun as a teacher and writer seems a better place to start” (160). To see Feraoun’s choice as legitimate, Harrison argues, he needed to believe “as do we, that different notions of importance and different criteria of legitimacy can and should coexist, supporting and feeding different orders of activity, with different timescales and different goals—not all of them immediately political, and some not political at all. It is on that sort of basis, I think, that we can talk about the validity or importance of education, including a literary or so-called humanities education, even in a time of crisis” (155).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore related questions about colonial education in relation to a broader array of writers including Assia Djebar, Albert Memmi, Mohammed Dib, Kacimi-El-Hassani, Tahar Djaout, and Maïssa Bey. Harrison asks, “What it was, even in a colonial education, that made it fruitful, at least in part, at least for some students?” (221). What emerges from these readings is the argument that the colonial school was clearly an “alibi and instrument of colonial power” but in crucial respects and for some students it was also experienced as a “positive” even “educational” experience that “left them irreversibly transformed in ways they could not measure any more than the reader can, and could not simply regret” (284).

The book’s conclusion advances and synthesizes its central argument that literature and the classroom might both be viewed as “spaces” where “a kind of suspension of politics may be justifiable and may have value” (299). Many of “us,” Harrison suggests, “resemble Said in that we remain committed, by our work in the classroom if not by all our pronouncements as critics, to the value of literature as something to study and teach. Perhaps, in our socio-political context, we need to renew our vocabularies around teaching and the aesthetic. If so, asserting the constitutive and necessary distance of humanities education from certain socio-political demands seems a necessary, if paradoxical, first step” (318). As the above underlines, Harrison is unafraid to dwell on a problem and patiently let it unfold. Although the questions asked in this book about colonial education may be perceived in some quarters

as provocations, the overall tone of the argument is reflective and meditative rather than polemical. By thoughtfully exploring a context when literature classrooms would seem to be utterly in thrall to imperialism, *Our Civilizing Mission* manages to raise probing questions about what “we” teachers of literature are doing today, and why.

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