Chapter 8

Conclusion: Constitutive Contradictions

It has become a commonplace of post-colonial criticism today that the notion of imperial edifices being either impermeable or monolithic was but a convenient myth. The shades of ambiguity found among contemporary colonial representations of India indicate that a monolithic structure did not exist. However, it does appear as though post-colonial criticism has on occasion overvalorised ambivalence, made it into the distinct feature of the imperial edifice and thrust practically the entire burden of "weakening" the edifice on these ambivalences. In Section B of this chapter, the line of argument indicated above is pursued further. In Section A below, I shall briefly go over the earlier chapters, emphasising the ambivalences traced.

A

In Chapter 1 (the Introduction) the importance as well as existence of ambivalence was practically "taken on trust." The analysis to follow, it was indicated, would consciously search for ambivalences, ambiguities and instabilities within colonial representations. Certain attitudes towards India were identified as the parameters within which the analysis would function. The texts taken up for detailed examination were those produced by Englishmen and women between 1757 and 1857. Chapter 2 provided a background by surveying several earlier Western (not necessarily British) representations of India. The political process whereby British power in India (wielded at this stage by
the East India Company) was consolidated up to 1857 was also examined in some detail. The major ideological trends of Conservatism, Utilitarianism, Evangelicalism, Imperialism, Commercialism and Romanticism which naturally influenced representations of a colony were sketched in outline.

In Chapter 3 the pictures of India set up by the Conservative rhetoric of Burke and the Indologism of William Jones were examined in detail. The discursive networks here were seen to be extremely ambivalent, with many illogical pronouncements and self contradictions enabling diverse alternative interpretations. As the occasion demanded, India's position swung from victim to corrupter. Indians were simultaneously innocent and devious; the Empire boon and curse for England at one and the same time. All these could be traced in the public rhetoric itself; the dichotomy between public pronouncements and utterances considered private was even more marked.

Chapter 4 undertook a study of James Mill's History of British India as a representative text for the Utilitarian perspective. Despite Mill's "admirable" steadiness of purpose in belittling India, his discourse is in no way free from its fissures. India was necessary as a laboratory for Utilitarian experiments, but going by keen economic commonsense, the notion of Empire was problematic. The pressures of championing representative rule at Home and logically advocating complete subjection abroad can be seen in Mill's writing which betrays both overkill and a reluctance to explain or substantiate his statements.

Chapter 5 surveys the works produced by certain British travellers in India, male and female, from different social and professional strata. These differences of gender and class produce their own types of ambivalence across and also within individual texts. The ambiguous representations of Sati are taken as a primary example of this trend. The questions of the "femininity" of the native, of religion and conversion—all these reflect the same trend in varying ways.

Chapter 6 takes up three texts, specifically located in India for individual analysis—The Curse of Kehama, Lalla Rookh and The Surgeon 's Daughter. Perhaps it is not very remarkable that the Gothic and idealised versions of India co-exist in these texts.
Of greater significance is the contradiction the representation of India entails with separately avowed liberal attitudes and the fear which borders the exoticisation. Also, the question of whether Indians are the victims or the devilish tempters is far from being resolved. Romanticism calls for praise to be bestowed on Hyder Ali, while Imperialism insists that his downfall should be not only portrayed but justified and welcomed. The tension set up by this and similar contradictory demands pervade the texts.

Chapter 7 undertakes a survey of Imperial attitudes and reflections in the works of five "major" Romantic poets—Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. The main reference is of course to representations of India, but any statement which aids in understanding attitudes towards Empire are taken up for consideration. It is seen that in a majority of cases, Empire is the one area where constantly articulated political or even poetical principles do not hold. It is a territory, (where sometimes in blatant and illogical self contradiction) different standards, rules and principles apply. [Exceptions, if they exist, may seem suspiciously dependent on overarching mysticism and aestheticism. That there could be some other, maybe more positive explanation is only hinted at very tenuously in the chapter, much more as a hope than as a conviction.]

In the final analysis, there is evidently no shortage of ambivalence, or incongruity in colonial representations. They can be found practically everywhere, in Conservative as well as Utilitarian pronouncements, in history and in poetry. However, after listing these ambivalences, one has to consider their actual effect which is a problematic area. It is tempting to expect that with all the gaps and fissures it clearly contained, the colonial paradigm should have collapsed in a few decades. (The reference of "collapse" here is to be understood in a rhetorical sense. The fact that rhetorical fragility in no way necessarily entails practical collapse is accepted.) But we know for a fact that it went from strength to strength for centuries. The presence of ambivalence is undeniable, but it would seen that its effect needs to be rethought—a process that I now briefly and tentatively attempt.
Rey Chow points out that the trap of ambivalence could confine us to perpetually "study/deconstruct" colonial texts; which would be seen as all the richer for that very ambivalence:

All we would need to do would be to continue to study—to deconstruct the rich and ambivalent language of the imperialist! ... In the masquerade of deconstruction and 'difficult' theory [is revived] an old functionalist notion of what a dominant culture permits in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium.

(my emphases; Chow 1997: 128)

"permits"—with this word, one feels that Chow has hit on the mot juste.

It is of course, evident that at an ontological or epistemological level, strategic textual discourses which aim at domination cannot totally succeed in being complete. But it does seem that the inconsistencies or ambivalences within the colonial paradigm were not extraneous "mistakes" which weakened the system. At a practical level, I argue, these contradictions were actually constitutive elements of the structure itself. Far from weakening the working force of the imperial network, they may have furthered its efficiency. They would have made it possible to accommodate divergent, even conflicting political and theoretical positions without any external, enfeebling incongruity.

In a way, the ambivalences were expected, in fact even provided for. It is not very likely that until under the tremendous impetus of an 'event' like the Mutiny, national greed or hatred would be aired openly. Ambivalence or euphemism can be seen to be almost inevitably present in practically any expression of national or class justification of self-aggrandisement, and that not just in imperial contexts.

For example, Malthusian economics, which in plain terms implies "the right of the rich to starve the poor" (Hazlitt 1998: 50) is, as we know stated as scientific and objective rationality. To take an example closely linked to Imperialism, the hardly altruistic scheme of shipping convicts and the starving poor forcibly to colonies is
presented as a welfare measure: "For the immediate relief of actual distress, there remains no remedy except an extension of colonialism" (Torrens 1998: 51).

A cry of "Exterminate the Brutes" in clear accents cannot be heard very often in the history of imperialism. Either acute shrewdness or unresolved conscience qualms would step in to mute the tones.

Also, when a Burke or a Shelley, who in most affairs championed justice, endorsed (however reluctantly) the colonial enterprise, would that not be a positive thrust for imperialism? The fact that Mill appears doubtful in regard to Britain's economic advantage from imperialism would make his plan of action seem all the more unselfish and rationally Utilitarian. When Wordsworth himself decries "nature" in India the need of immediate "civilization" seems to be underscored. At this stage of consideration, I find it difficult to maintain any serious belief in the "weakening" effect of ambivalence.

The value of ambivalence remains—but more in an internal sense. Obviously Byron cannot be equated with Southey or Jones and Mill unproblematically conflated. Indeed, ironically enough, the "richness" of these texts is enhanced by their ambivalence. There would be no point or interest in reading them if they all said the same things in the same way.

I do not suggest that imperialism should be credited with some uncanny prescience. At the same time, underestimating its discourse will not help matters. It is possible and even desirable in post-colonial analysis to deploy internal contradictions for unravelling purposes. But it has to be kept in mind that during the epoch of imperialism, during the period when these texts had their most significant presence (in an imperial context) these contradictions were precisely those aspects which contributed psychological coherence to the entire project.

The Colossus of Imperialism is cracked. And since they were not easily visible, due credit has to be given to those who pointed out the cracks. But these cracks in the Colossus did not, as we know cause any quick collapse. On the contrary, the Cracks and the Colossus stood together; may be they even stood because they were together.