



## Contradictory Distinctions of Self and Other in the Literature of the British Empire

Jack Rusted

Through a chronological analysis of three texts written by British authors during different stages of the British empire, this essay will examine moments when colonial literature contradicts its conceptualisation of Self and Other in its portrayal of foreigners and the consequent treatment of British selfhood. The notion of Other will be regarded as an amalgamation of the British colonial psyche's views of the races and nations encountered throughout the empire, whereas the Self relates to how an understanding of Britishness is configured in contrast to the Other. In the context of a British empire that sought to expand and dominate, colonial discourse habitually reproduces a hierarchical conceptualisation of Self and Other in which the British Self is superior, often based on conceptions of racial and cultural difference. However, the principles by which the Self and Other are distinguished often contradict themselves in ways that blur the separation of Self and Other. Edmund Spenser's *A View of The Present State of Ireland* (\*View) (1970 [1633]) seeks to justify harsher methods of subjugation in Ireland by configuring the Irish as an inherently savage race, however Spenser's judgment struggles to substantiate a consistent separation of the Irish Other and the English colonial subjects in Ireland. Similarly, Buchan's propagandistic novel *Greenmantle* (1994 [1916]) asserts that the negative attributes assigned to foreign characters are intrinsic in members of their race/nation, and heroizes the British characters who oppose the supposedly threatening attributes of Others. In their opposition, however, the notions of Self embodied in the imperial heroes are transgressed in ways which complicate Buchan's depiction of the relationship between Self and Other. H. G. Wells' science fiction novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (\*TIDM) (2005 [1896]) concerns itself with the sociocultural evolution of humanity from instinctual beasts to rational men, but its allegorical representation of the British colonial Self's relationship to colonised races reveals a flawed racialisation in the comparison of Self and Other. An analysis of these texts aims to illuminate the potential reasons for the contradictions that pervade concepts of Self and Other in colonial discourse.

This analysis will incorporate the principles of several colonial theorists who address the formation of Self and Other. Even though *View* and *TIDM* portray colonial encounters outside of the Orient, I argue that along with *Greenmantle* they fall into Edwards Said's hypothesis of *Orientalism* (1977), defined as a 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (3). Specifically, this essay will incorporate Said's notion of 'Knowledge' that characterises British perceptions of colonial encounters (1977: 32). British 'knowledge of Orientals [and Others], their race, character, culture, history, traditions, society, and possibilities' (Said, 1977: 38) was developed over centuries of cultural interaction and reinforced as objective truth despite its basis in prejudice and lack of understanding. Homi Bhabha (2004) links the assumed veracity of colonial knowledge to the 'fixity [of stereotype] in the ideological construction of otherness' (94), as national character was consistently conflated with racial origin. The stereotypes of nations and races that Bhabha conceives were cemented in British perceptions of Others by the acceptance of the

'knowledge' that Said observes (1977: 32). Ania Loomba's (1998) assertion that 'oppositions [between races] [...] are crucial not only for creating images of the outsider but equally essential for constructing the insider, the (usually white European male) 'self' (105) is pertinent in its recognition of the duality of portraying otherness in literature – any contentions about the Other has implications for the configuration of the Self. Loomba identifies intersections in the portrayal of Self and Other as examples of a 'hybridity' that recurringly features in colonial literature – transgressions against supposedly fixed national stereotypes that create ambiguous comparisons between the British Self and foreign Other.

Given Spenser's attempts to justify renewed efforts to subdue the Irish nation by positioning the Irish as racially inferior, *View* corresponds to Bhabha's (2004) identification of the British tendency to 'construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin' (101). The 'savage', 'stubborn and untamed' (Spenser, 1970[1633]: 1; 4) nature of the Irish population is proposed as being inherited in 'their first nature' (63) from birth, implying an ancestrally transmitted barbarism which racially distinguishes the Irish Other and seeks to validate the superiority of the English. This idea of the physical body as the root of behavioural difference stems from contemporary humoral science, in which the proportion of blood, bile and phlegm in the body 'transformed the vital and animal spirits on their way to the soul, literally leaving the imprint of vice or virtue on that soul' (Feerick, 2002: 91). As humoral constitution was supposedly shared among members of the same race, Spenser's application of humoral theory supported 'a racialized image of the Irish as a humorally imbalanced or distempered national group' (Feerick, 2002: 93). Here, Bhabha's recognition of the 'fixity' (2004: 94) that typifies colonial perceptions of Others is relevant, as Spenser endorses his violent proposals by suggesting that the 'delight of licentious barbarism' (1970[1633]: 11) is embedded in the character of the Irish.

This permanence of Irish manner is undermined by an apparent malleability in the innate behaviour of English people, as Spenser's concession that 'the English were at first as stout and warlike a people as ever were the Irish, and yet you see are now brought to that civility' (11) implies that the past barbarity of the English was overcome under the influence of education and civilisation. This apparent fluidity of a race's nature destabilizes Spenser's rendering of the inherently savage Irish Other, contradicting Bhabha's notion of the Other as a 'degenerate' (2004: 101) race characterised by natural inferiority. Feerick (2002) suggests that for Spenser the term 'degenerate' not only referred to this racial inferiority, but also 'described transformations experienced by colonizers themselves' (85), a concept noticeable in Spenser's observation of English settlers who 'degenerate from their first natures as to grow wild' (1970 [1633]: 63). Spenser's explanation for the behavioural degeneration of colonial subjects from English 'sweet civility' to Irish 'barbarous rudeness' (1970 [1633]: 48) is twofold, contradictorily based on both humoral science and language acquisition. Initially Spenser disrupts his construction of racially and behaviourally distinct notions of English Self and Irish Other by suggesting that English children learning the Irish language learn 'not only of the speech, but of the manners and conditions' (1970 [1633]: 67). Here, the undesirable behaviour of the Irish is not transferred through inherited blood as would be expected in humoral theory, instead it is acquired through the influence of language and culture in upbringing. Feerick's argument that Spenser bends 'the laws of humoralism to suit his racist project' (2002: 116) is confirmed by Spenser's subsequent reinsertion of humoral theory when he suggests that children 'draw into themselves together with their suck, even the nature and disposition of their nurses, for the mind followeth much the temperature of the

body' (1970 [1633]: 67). In its combination of antagonistic theories of behavioural acquisition, Spenser's *View* demonstrates a significant bias in its conception of Self and Other. Spenser does not allow the savage Irish Other the same civilising potential that he commends in the English Self, and his anxiety about Irish influence on English children reveals that *View* is based more on racial prejudice than on a balanced assessment of colonisation in Ireland.

The application of scientific principles in colonial discourse is also observable in *TIDM*, in which the views of Doctor Moreau conform to 'the sociocultural evolutionist discourses of Wells' contemporaries' (Christensen, 2004: 583); he regards race as the representation of different stages in the evolution of human civilisation, contrasting images of a civilised white Self with a primitive black Other. This racial hierarchy is encoded allegorically through the shortcomings of Moreau's beast folk in relation to his objective of creating 'a rational creature of my own', free from the 'Cravings, instincts, desires that harm humanity' (Wells 2005 [1896]: 78), an impossible creature which symbolises Moreau's fantasy of the civilised Self. The 'ideal of humanity' (Wells, 2005 [1896]: 77) that Moreau's rational human represents is contrasted with Moreau's earliest creation, which he considered 'a fair specimen of the negroid type' (Wells, 2005 [1896]; 76). As Moreau refers to his primitive creation in racialised terms, he aligns the beast folk's animality with the perceived lack of development in colonised black races. This view of colonised races exhibits Said's (1977) concept of colonial 'knowledge' (38), as the image of black Other in the colonial imagination was unreasonably characterised by primitivity due to perceived differences in development and civilisation observed in colonial encounters. The tendency of colonisers to 'strip humanity down to such ruthless cultural and racial essences' (Said, 1977: 36) founded the justification for colonial control, as rationale such as Moreau's socio-biology substantiated ideas of an uncivilised Other in need of the positive civilising influence of the educated white coloniser. This power dynamic is evident in Prendick's awareness of Moreau's 'deification of himself' (Wells, 2005 [1896]; 58) that he has instilled in the beast folk's minds, which evokes a master-slave relationship in which the white coloniser rules over the uncivilised, racialised population. As the beast folk are racialised, Moreau's domination of the island allegorically represents the colonial fantasy of a rational white Self ruling over an animalistic, primitive Other.

Despite his titular character's views on the racial hierarchy of human civilisation, Wells encodes in *TIDM* a less racialised, more universal view of humankind. Edwards (2016) has noted that Moreau's aim of creating the perfect human is 'idealized entirely out of the ballpark of being human' (141) in its rejection of fear and instinct as components of humanity, which is why the doctor fails to appreciate the undeniable humanity of his creations. This humanity is observed by Prendick, as he struggles to distinguish 'one of the bovine creatures' from 'some really human yokel', and as he sees one creature's 'imperfectly human face distorted with terror, I realized again the fact of its humanity' (Wells 2005 [1896]: 84; 94). Prendick's appreciation for the human aspects of the Beast Folk conflicts with Moreau's unrealistic omission of animalistic human instinct from his idealised conception of the human Self. Moreau's association of the Beast Folk's animality with a racialised lesser-developed stage in humankind's evolution is therefore undermined by a more realistic view of humanity extant in the Beast Folk. Wells' contradiction of the allegorical racial hierarchy on the island continues when Prendick returns to London, a city symbolic in its status as the heart of the colonial regime. Prendick begins to see the 'bestial mark' of the Beast Folk in 'prowling women' and 'a ragged tail of gibing children' (Wells 2005 [1896]: 130-131), which

challenges Moreau's racialisation of the bestial and savage nature of the Beast Folk through appreciating the universal animality observable in the white British Self. Christensen (2004) notes that while Prendick hopes for 'a site of objectivity at the centre of the civilised world' he instead encounters an 'intensified version of his horrific experience on the island' (591), however I argue that Prendick's horror is the site of the culmination of Wells' exploration of Self and Other. The realisation of animal instincts shared by all of mankind, even in the heart of imperial civilisation that London represents, undermines any racial basis for perceived differences in civility in British conceptions of Self and Other. Wells unites his constructions of Self and Other under their human inability to live up to the idealistic standards of rational civility upheld in colonial discourse.

Buchan's *Greenmantle* exhibits a regression from Wells' progressive conceptualisation of Self and Other, as its depiction of foreigners outwardly conforms to a more typically Orientalist combination of Said's (1977) concept of an imperial culture's 'Knowledge' (32) and Bhabha's (2004) concept of how this knowledge cements stereotypes to races and nations in British perceptions of otherness. This is exemplified by Buchan's claim that the British character Sandy 'know[s] the East about as well as any living man' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 24), a claim which asserts British omniscience of the East, allowing Buchan to give the impression of objectivity to any statements made about Oriental or foreign people. Therefore, observations of the 'weakness of the German', 'the wrathful Oriental', and 'the true oriental way' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 61; 99; 119) generalise entire nations and races and assign them negative traits with an air of authority. Buchan's disparaging generalisation of Others is explained by Al-Rawi's analysis of the context of the novel (2009), which examines *Greenmantle* along with Buchan's other novels as World War I propaganda with dual significance: 'they are used as tools to influence the beliefs of a whole generation, and they echo the prevalent cultural and political views of Britain at that time' (1). Al-Rawi claims that Buchan's denigrating portrayal of foreigners reflects mainstream British opinions, and that Buchan sought to strengthen these societal prejudices. Therefore, I interpret the statement that 'Islam is a fighting creed' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 13) as an attempt to appeal to existing negative opinions of Eastern Muslims, and potentially incite desire to fight against the Ottoman empire, of which Islam was the official religion. This negative portrayal of the threatening Others that constituted Britain's wartime enemies is accompanied by a creation of British selfhood characterised by an aversion to these foreign stereotypes. When Hannay encounters the typically crooked 'oriental methods of doing business' in the form of a Turkish officer's bribe, it causes his honest British sensibility to 'boil up like a geyser' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 99), which ascribes an innate honesty to the British Self in contrast to the natural dishonesty of the oriental Other. In the context of wartime propaganda, Buchan presents characters who embody disparaging national stereotypes in order to clearly position these races and nations as opposed to the British Self.

Despite the overt bias of Buchan's portrayal of Britain's enemies, *Greenmantle* transgresses the clear separation of Self and Other that could be typically assumed in Orientalist discourse through the character of Sandy. While Sandy bears the hallmarks of a typical British hero such as serving in the army and being 'educated at Eton and New College' (Buchan 1994 [1916]: 21), he is also associated with the Eastern Other in descriptions such as 'He had always a more than oriental reticence', and the fact that due to his implied darker skin-colour he 'can pass anywhere as a Turk' (Buchan 1994 [1916]: 17;

27). His similarities with the Oriental Other afford him a talent for disguise which is framed as a distinctly heroic characteristic as Hannay claims that 'Sandy was the wandering Scot carried to the pitch of genius. In the old days he would have led a crusade or discovered a new road to the Indies' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 22). This celebration of the British talent for 'getting inside the skin of remote peoples' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 22) is surprising because it involves a partial adoption of the Oriental attributes that are maligned throughout *Greenmantle*. The heroic duplicity embodied by Sandy conforms to Beardow's conception of the empire hero (2018), a man who 'can operate successfully, both literally and metaphorically, in dangerous, liminal areas on the fringe of settled society where threats emerge' (68). Sandy's Oriental attributes are presented as heroic qualities only because his transgressive mingling with the dangerous Others in the East has benefits for Britain's war effort. The blurred differentiation between Self and Other embodied in Sandy's character thus exhibits Loomba's notion of 'hybridity' (1998: 105), as the comingling of definitively separate concepts complicates Buchan's ideological standpoint. Paradoxically, Sandy's adoption of an otherness that is disparaged in foreign characters is the basis for his heroism, so his transgressive characterisation still serves to reinforce the superiority of the British Self. The novel's conclusion illuminates the underlying significance of Buchan's merging of British Self with Oriental otherness, as Hannay observes Turkish soldiers seeing Sandy disguised as the prophet entering their city after victory: 'Then I knew that the prophecy had been true, and that their prophet had not failed them. The long-looked-for revelation had come. Greenmantle had at last appeared to an awaiting people' (Buchan, 1994 [1916]: 220). This passage implies that Sandy, a British man dressed in appropriated sacred Islamic garments, can extend his inhabitation of the Oriental Other to performing the role of the Turkish people's prophet saviour. Buchan uses the ambiguity of Sandy's character to give credence to the notion of a superior and experienced Britain rescuing Eastern cultures from the chaos assigned to them in the British imagination. The transgressions between Self and Other that Sandy represents are revealed as another component in Buchan's propagandistic narrative.

All three examples of colonial literature exhibit contradictory treatments of Self and Other, and the different ways in which the texts contradict themselves reveal their significance. I argue that the categorisation of *View* and *Greenmantle* as items of propaganda explains their inconsistencies, in that their double standards for approaching notions of Self and Other purposefully aim to reinforce a superiority of the British Self. Spenser's inconsistent application of humoral, racial, and behavioural theories construes the Irish Other as an inherently savage type in accordance with Bhabha's notion of 'fixity in the ideological construction of otherness' (2004: 94), whereas the plasticity of English behaviour is merely used to reiterate the notions of a civilised English Self and a barbaric Irish Other. *Greenmantle* displays similarly discriminatory reasoning, as the sneakiness and dishonesty that imperial 'knowledge' (Said, 1977: 38) automatically associates Oriental characters with is framed as cunning espionage in the British heroes. Any contradictions in these texts only serve to further the disparagement of Other and exaltation of Self that is typical of their propagandistic motivations. While *TIDM* does feature a racialised opposition of Self and Other through the views of Moreau, Wells contradicts this established colonial mindset by assigning the animalistic and primitive attributes that characterise colonial perceptions of the Other to the British citizens that represent the colonial Self. This universal animality eradicates the distinction between Self and Other, implying the irrationality of racial prejudices upheld in colonial discourse.

### **Bibliography**

- Al-Rawi, A. (2009). "Buchan the Orientalist: Greenmantle and Western Views of the East". *Journal of Colonialism & Colonial History* 10(2): 1-16.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/210658702?accountid=8018&pq-origsite=primo>  
 [Accessed 03/06/2021].
- Beardow, T. (2018). "The Empire Hero". *Studies in Popular Culture* 41(1): 66–93.  
[www.jstor.org/stable/26582197](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26582197) [Accessed 17/05/2021].
- Bhabha, H. (2004). *The Location of Culture*. Oxford: Taylor and Francis Group.  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=653022> [Accessed 20/05/2021].
- Buchan, J. (1994 [1916]). *Greenmantle*. London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
- Christensen, T. (2004). "The 'Bestial Mark' of Race in 'The Island of Dr. Moreau.'" *Criticism* 46(4): 575–595. [www.jstor.org/stable/23127247](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23127247) [Accessed 13/05/2021].
- Edwards, R. (2016). *The Edge of Evolution: Animality, Inhumanity, and Doctor Moreau*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/reader.action?docID=4413901> [Accessed 14/05/2021].
- Feerick, Jean. (2002). "Spenser, Race, and Ire-Land". *English Literary Renaissance* 32(1): 85–117. [www.jstor.org/stable/24463710](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24463710) [Accessed 10/05/2021].
- Loomba, A. (1998). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London, Routledge.  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=168653> [Accessed 04/06/2021].
- Said, E. (1977). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.  
[https://www.eaford.org/site/assets/files/1631/said\\_edward1977\\_orientalism.pdf](https://www.eaford.org/site/assets/files/1631/said_edward1977_orientalism.pdf) [Accessed 25/05/2021].
- Spenser, E. (1970 [1633]). *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wells, H. G. (2005 [1896]). *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.