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Anti-Post (In This Case) Colonial

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ANTI-POST (IN THIS CASE) COLONIAL Elaine Freedgood

War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma by Christopher Herbert. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. 334. \$35.00 cloth.

The First War of Independence, the Sepoy Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny: the lack of consensus about what to call the uprising that began as a mutiny of *sepoys*—South Asian soldiers in the East India Company's army—in 1857 suggests the ongoing conflict over a battle the causes and consequences of which remain fraught in several national imaginations. This war spread beyond the soldiers with whom it began to the civilian population and took more than a year to fully suppress. Christopher Herbert's *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* is only partially about this conflict. It seems to want to also address another "mutiny": that of postcolonial critics against Victorian culture. This is indeed a pity.

Herbert claims that he has written an account of Mutiny literature that is "sharply at odds with the standard formulations of postcolonial scholarship." In the literature on the Mutiny, I found only one book-length study that might be deemed postcolonial, a book that makes Herbert very angry throughout *War of No Pity*: Gautam Chakravarty's *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*.¹ Chakravarty points out, citing a much larger corpus of postcolonial criticism than does Herbert, that the Mutiny novel has been largely *absent* from this theory. And, indeed, Chakravarty has many reservations about postcolonial theory himself, citing its tendency to "run aground at times in shallow channels of . . . speculations"

rather than rooting itself deeply in history (14). But Herbert takes Chakravarty's book and suggests that it is a culmination of hostile postcolonial Mutiny scholarship, one that summarizes and epitomizes a "postcolonial assault on 'the Victorians,'" which has "its own significant history" (17). No footnote follows this claim. Indeed, a look at the bibliography of *War of No Pity* reveals a very scant attention to postcolonial theory. In any event, the upshot is that this academic intrigue tends to repeat some of the structures of the Mutiny, but this time as farce. But this is a painful farce, given that fanning the flames of conflict between Victorian and postcolonial studies is a small but still very meaningful version of so many other ugly conflicts in the early twenty-first century.

Herbert argues that the fiction and historiography of the decades following the Mutiny reveal the ambivalence and guilt that the British suffered in regard to their admittedly brutal response. At moments Herbert discusses Victorians as shocked out of their own self-delusion about the values that defined their culture; at others he seems to join the Victorians he analyzes in his sense that their "real" values were betrayed in the Mutiny. In other words, Herbert seems to awaken to the realization that "a culture in which racism was widely regarded as repugnant had fostered an imperial society drenched in an especially virulent and violent form of racism . . ." (16). Surely Caribbean

slavery and aboriginal genocide on several continents might have suggested, prior to 1857, such a possibility? Those of us who study Victorian culture can admire it and be critical of it, I hope. To defend it vigorously, as Herbert seems to feel compelled to do here, leads to positions that simply make no sense to me, given his own brilliant work on the idea of culture and the problematic ways in which the concept has been deployed. It is almost as though, in his identification with Victorians, he is now using the culture concept as Victorians might have used it, as a kind of bulwark or protection against something out there that is not well defined, but is vividly imagined.

War of No Pity is haunted by a problem of what seems like free indirect discourse. It is difficult to tell when Herbert is "quoting" the language of the texts in which he has immersed himself and when that language has somehow become his own. In the very first pages, "the briefest possible narrative of the . . . Indian Mutiny" is described in the following language: "The rebellion, smoldering for some months previously, broke into flame on May 10, 1857, when Hindu and Muslim sepoy ('soldiers') of native regiments . . . panicked at being required to bite off the ends of newly issued paper rifle cartridges greased with beef and pork fat . . . and also by wild rumors that British forces were coming to attack them, murdered their British officers and many of their wives and children"

(3). Describing as “panic” the response of Hindus and Muslims forced to eat a taboo substance suggests a set of sympathies and identifications that persist throughout this study, in which Herbert sees the need to recuperate and defend specific Victorians and Victorian culture at large as though they are under sustained attack. This time, the panic and rumors are about the demise of the probity of Victorian culture at the hands of hostile scholars.

This defensiveness leads to confounding errors of judgment. Herbert contends, for example, that “[t]he massive cry of ‘blood for blood’ was only to be expected in the wake of the mass killings of defenseless British men, women, and children that occurred in India in the spring and summer of 1857. Censorious academics who write about it as a reprehensible thing might as well complain about the immorality of hurricanes and floods or of the grizzly bears that attack those that come too near their cubs”(47–48). Herbert contends that Victorians suffered “painfully high levels of cognitive dissonance” from their hurricane-like and grizzly-bear-like responses to the Mutiny. The British response to the Mutiny (unstintingly surveyed and described by both Herbert and the Victorian writers whom he discusses) caused, in Herbert’s argument, the British to inflict on themselves and their culture an unprecedented trauma. The trauma of the traumatizers becomes a cause for great compassion, and

their honesty about their participation in it a cause for tremendous admiration and, indeed, forgiveness.

There is important and compelling analysis in this book. The third chapter, “The Culture of Retribution,” suggests that a passionate—and Christian and biblical—vindictiveness “sprang back to life” after the mutiny, forcing Victorians to reconcile the “sanctification of revenge” with the idea of “a world transformed by the progress of humanitarianism and ‘civilization’” (121). Herbert credits a group of Mutiny novels for exposing this psychotic split in Christian discourse and making it available, as it were, for consideration. There follows a powerful examination of colonial bad conscience, and Albert Memmi enters the discussion very briefly. Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha would have been wonderful theoretical helpmeets in the examination of this difficult material, which Herbert analyzes unsparingly. The advantage of the psychoanalytic work of Fanon and Bhabha would be the curtailing of victimology and the opening of Herbert’s reading to the ambivalences and violences of human relations across the impossible political divides created by the East India Company specifically and the British Empire generally. In the chapter on Victorian historiography of the Mutiny, Herbert attributes this same unsparingness to British historians contemporary with the Mutiny, who, despite their professed loyalties and political affiliations, described

the actions of their fellow Britons in such detail and at such length that one cannot help but be horrified by the British response to the Mutiny.

Herbert's integrity is such that, very much like the Victorian novelists and historians he describes, he gives us, again and again, the evidence that undermines his claim that the people carrying out the post-Mutiny British attacks were generally antiracist, humanitarian, and interested in bringing "civilization" to India (I take up his use of scare quotes here). It was the British East India Company, after all, that was running India at this historical juncture, and it is not postcolonial theory that introduced the idea that such a group was responsible for a number of atrocities before the Mutiny. Indeed, Herbert's thorough reading of the early historiography makes it clear that Victorians were already analyzing the racism and corruption of the East India Company, and of course the major reform post-Mutiny was the company's replacement by government officials.

In the epilogue, Herbert charts the making and breaking of realist form in the novel and in historiography when trauma seeks an outlet. Noting that "it is not . . . repetition per se but phantasmatic or hallucinatory repetition that expresses the emotional injury of trauma," Herbert suggests the extent to which history becomes sensation fiction in the mutiny novel: "[T]he Mutiny had altered reality

itself and obliged realism to reinvent itself accordingly" (278). Herbert suggests a process in which history, and indeed reality, are unimagined. We often think of the way in which realism reifies that which it represents. Herbert shows how history can also be de-reified, de-realized, and rendered usefully unrepresentable in its "horror"—a watchword for a representational impasse that cannot be questioned or investigated. Herbert's investigation of this barrier word suggests how much work it does in fending off history in the political consciousness of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Christopher Herbert has done postcolonialists, Victorianists, and indeed anyone interested in modern violence a remarkable service in reading a vast amount of Mutiny literature and returning to tell the tale of it. *War of No Pity* explicates the kind of violence that can ensue between any us and any them, given the recurrent conditions of empire, in all of its forms and fictions. And it may be the form and fiction of the rumor that this study will have us ponder most profoundly: the genre of "hallucinatory repetition," a form of injury but not of history.

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NOTES

1. Gautam Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).