

Modernism's Last Post

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“The remedy for decadence is a journey to the frontier.”
DAVID TROTTER, “Modernism and Empire”

PERHAPS THE ONLY point of consensus in the debate over “post-modernism” is that the defining term of this apparently contemporary phenomenon inherently posits for Euro-American culture some kind of “radical break” from the discourse of “modernism” as it developed at the end of the nineteenth century (Jameson 53). The accuracy of this hypothesis in nomenclature, the cultural specificity of this semiotic “break,” the discursive and ideological purchase of this new social episteme — these, of course, are immense issues, and they furnish an exciting theatre for the spectacle of critical disagreement within Western intellectual practice. An important consequence of this debate, however, is that the narrow and prevailing idea of “modernism” itself is at last being systematically reworked to reveal a foundation for contemporary First World representation not simply in a radically vanguardist and anti-bourgeois movement (Wortman 175), but rather in the wholesale appropriation and refiguration of non-Western artistic and cultural practices by a society utterly committed to the preservation of its traditional prerogatives for gender, race and class privilege. In its debate over the genealogy of the postmodern problematic, Western culture is coming to understand that — as Ashis Nandy puts it (xiv) — the “armed version” of modernism *is* colonialism itself, and that modernism’s most heroically self-privileging figurative strategies — its “fragmentation of textual unity,” its “play of contradictory genres,” its anti-normative aes-

theticising impulse (Frow 117) — would have been unthinkable had it not been for the assimilative power of Empire to appropriate the cultural work of a heterogeneous world “out there” and to reproduce it for its own social and discursive ends.¹

It would seem natural, therefore, that the two critical discourses which today constitute themselves specifically in opposition to this historical conjunction would have forged for themselves a strong affiliative network of methodological collaboration. But except for the general project of anti-colonialist critique as it is taken up by post-structuralist or new historicist theorists — the most well known of whom are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Peter Hulme, and Stephen Greenblatt — post-modernist theory and post-colonial criticism have remained more or less separate in their strategies and their foundational assumptions. Why these two critical projects should remain asymmetrical is thus a matter of great interest, and what I would like to do in this short paper is attempt to situate at least one of the major fault-lines that runs between them. Needless to say, the astonishing variety in critical activity taking place *within* each of these two projects means that any such attempt will necessarily overreach itself. But the central question of this special issue of *ARIEL* is a crucial one for students of post-colonial literature, and like all the contributors to this collection I proceed in the understanding that what follows is at best a form of critical piece-work: provisional, interrogative, and most of all, motivated within an ongoing critical struggle over the political terrain of textual interpretation.

As almost all commentators like to point out, definitions of post-modernism tend to situate the “phenomenon” somewhere between two absolute positions, the first of which understands postmodernism as a culturally specific historical *period*, and the second of which understands it as a *style* of representation that runs, albeit with important differences, across various artistic media. In the first camp are theorists such as Fredric Jameson, for whom “post-modernism” signifies the pastiche energetics of Western society under late capitalism, where a “new depthlessness” in representation — one grounded in the fetishization of the image as simulacrum — marks off a profoundly ahistorical drive which seeks to efface the past as “referent” and leave behind itself nothing but

“texts” (53-66). In the second camp are theorists such as Ihab Hassan or Michael Newman, for whom the “postmodern” can be captured in a catalogue of figurative propensities (indeterminacy, multivalence, hybridization, etc.) whose ludic celebrations of representational freedom — as J. G. Merquior points out (17) — are grounded in a “dubious analogy” between artistic experimentation and social liberation. My reading in the postmodern debate is limited, but to my mind the most interesting theorist to take on the conjunction between these two general approaches is Linda Hutcheon, who rejects not only the assumption that postmodern representation provides in any simple sense “the background hum for power” (see Kariel 97), as the first camp would argue, but also the assumption that postmodernism can accurately “describe an international cultural phenomenon” (4), as the second camp seems to imply.

For Hutcheon, postmodernism is a “problematizing force” in Western society (xi) which, far from expressing a straightforward “incredulity with regard to the master narratives” of dominant culture, as Lyotard would have it (Jardine 65), paradoxically inscribes *and* contests culturally certified codes of recognition and representation. Postmodern culture, art, and theory, for Hutcheon, is inherently contradictory, for it both “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts,” the “conventions of discourse” which it sets out to challenge (xiii, 3). As it does so, postmodernism discloses a “contradictory dependence on and independence from that which temporally preceded it and which literally made it possible” (18). Postmodernist discourse, that is, *necessarily* admits a provisionality to its truth-claims (13, 23) and a secondary (or allegorical) foundation to its referential sweep. As Hutcheon sees it, this inherently quotational or reiterative grounding of postmodernism issues into a dominant signifying practice whose central rhetorical strategy is intertextual parody. Postmodern parody, Hutcheon explains, functions “as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (26). It “paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity” (26). And as it *uses* the strategies of dominant culture to challenge its discursive processes from within (20), postmodern

parody *also* reveals its “love of history by giving new meaning to old forms” (31).

Hutcheon’s framing of the postmodern field is important, for the general textual practice she defines here resembles — at least on the surface — the kind of reiterative textual energy which for a number of critics marks out an especially interesting moment within a broadly post-colonial literary activity. Definitions of the “post-colonial,” of course, vary widely, but for me the concept proves most useful not when it is used synonymously with a post-independence historical period in once-colonized nations but rather when it locates a specifically anti- or *post-colonial discursive* purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations. A post-colonial *critical* discourse is therefore never wholly absent from colonial culture: there is always at work in the discourses of the colonized a network of disidentificatory traditions which J. Michael Dash has eloquently labelled a “counter-culture of the imagination” (65). But this critical discourse is never fully present as unmediated resistance. Simon During suggests that the “post-colonial” can be located in “the survival of residual forms of economic life” in colonial societies, the “need for an identity granted not in terms of the colonial power, but in terms of themselves” (369); and to the extent that During’s definition identifies for colonial subjects what Richard Terdiman has called a “counter-discourse” I agree with it. But whereas During posits a radical split between “post-colonizing” and “postcolonized” forms of a heterogeneous discourse and argues that unreconstituted white settler cultures have no recourse to an “effective post-colonised discourse” (371), I would want to preserve for “post-colonialism” a specifically anti-colonial counter-discursive energy which *also* runs across the ambivalent space of what Alan Lawson has called “second world” societies — a discursive energy which emerges *not* from the inherent cultural contradiction that necessarily marks transplanted settler societies but rather from their continuing yet subterranean tradition of refusal towards the conceptual and cultural apparatuses of the European imperium.²

As During points out, a postcolonial “affect” needs always to be specified in relation to, and within, each post-colonial society (369). But in general terms, a post- or anti-colonial critical or dis-identificatory discourse can be seen to energize an enormously heterogeneous set of social and representational practices from within a large number of post-colonial (and sometimes, latently, within colonialist) social configurations. *Part* of this larger, differential post-colonial discourse, I would argue, resides in the contemporary post-structuralist project of anti-colonialist critique; another part — the part that concerns me here — operates within post-colonial literary activity. And *one* of the heterogeneous modalities of this post-colonial discourse within post-colonial literary writing is the figuration of a reiterative quotation, or intertextual citation, in relation to colonialist “textuality.” This counter-discursive intertextuality in post-colonial literary writing is in some important ways different from the writing practice that Hutcheon usefully locates at the centre of the postmodernist project; and in order to specify that difference I want now to turn to post-colonial critical practice, and to how it seeks to establish a specific matrix of cultural resistance within the rhetorical play of the post-colonial text.

It has often been noted (see, for example, Viswanathan) that one of colonialism’s most salient technologies for social containment and control is the circulation within colonial cultures of the canonical European literary text. Mediated through the colonialist educational apparatus, the European literary text becomes a powerful machinery for forging what Gramsci called cultural domination by consent; and in recognizing this, post-colonial critical discourse seeks to position the oppositional and reiterative textual responses of post-colonial cultures in dialectical relation to their colonialist precursors. Far from articulating a simple “anxiety of influence,” however, this post-colonial textual reiteration is heard to be speaking directly to the struggle within colonialist ideology. Post-colonial criticism’s key beginning point here, then, is that a “parodic” repetition of imperial “textuality” sets itself specifically in opposition to the interpellative power of colonialism — a power which interweaves itself throughout colonial societies, making the imperial culture appear referentially seamless and the colonial cul-

ture appear radically fractured — outside the scope of literary “realism” (Bhabha) and incapable of being “represented” through the imported or imposed structures of transplanted European language. Post-colonial literary reiteration — or parody, or intertextuality, or quotation — is thus seen to be challenging directly a colonialist “textual” function; and this colonialist textual function is *not* seen as being coterminous with the circulation of textual images in other cultural locations, which are of course in their own ways produced and consumed ideologically.

There is no single mode for signalling this counter-discursive energy within post-colonial literary writing. In fact, as post-colonial critical work continues, it is discovering an enormously differential and thorough infusion of disidentificatory reiteration across the various national post-colonial literatures. The most visible area of this reiterative practice takes place in the post-colonial project of rewriting the canonical “master texts” of Europe — most notably *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* — in ways that expose their residual colonialist politics and that refigure their narratives to a new ideological vector.³ Another highly salient practice of this kind involves the figurative invocation of colonialist notions of “history” — as in texts such as George Lamming’s *Natives of My Person* or Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* — and the juxtaposition of the imperialist “pretext” with a dis/placive “historical” narrative that, as Helen Tiffin points out (31), functions both to interrogate the politics of narrative production within colonial society and to effect a purgative energy (reiteration as a modality of expulsion) against that version of history which implicitly inscribes European hierarchical values into colonial and post-colonial codes of recognition. Christopher Miller has recently brought to light a much less visible mode of this post-colonial counter-discursive activity at work in Yambo Ouloguem’s *Le devoir de violence*. Here, Miller argues, Ouloguem’s excessive plagiarizing strategy operates as an anti-colonialist assault on European assumptions about originality and mimicry, working against the pretextual domain of “authorial” European writing to raise questions about why, when a unified Western voice is said to “own” language, the colonized subject becomes implicitly constituted within the fracturing semiotics of Empire as a multiple,

dispersed copyist, a *négre* or “ghostwriter.” And to offer a final example: Ketu H. Katrak has recently argued that a counter-discursive “tactical” assault on colonialist assumptions about representation is at work in the Sistren Collective’s use of a West Indian creole or nation language. The linguistic assault in this practice, Katrak argues, needs to be explained in a comprehensive theory of linguistic decolonization; and decolonization, as Fanon has pointed out, needs to be grounded in a practice of *violent* discursive resistance.

It is not hard to see that these post-colonial textual strategies bear a close relation to the principle of intertextual parody which Hutcheon defines for postmodernism. But the first difference here, as I have been arguing, is that the location of textual power as an especially effective technology of colonialist discourse means that post-colonial reiterative writing takes on a discursive specificity. This specificity is important for how we attempt to “theorize” the work of the text, for it leads on to a second difference between a postmodern and post-colonial reading of the text. Whereas a postmodernist criticism would want to argue that literary practices such as these expose the constructedness of *all* textuality and thus call down “the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another” (Johnson 5), an *interested* post-colonial critical practice would want to allow for the positive production of oppositional truth-claims in these texts. It would retain for post-colonial writing, that is, a mimetic or referential purchase to textuality, and it would recognize in this referential drive the operations of a crucial strategy for survival in marginalized social groups.

This referential assumption would appear to make what I am calling a post-colonial criticism radically fractured and contradictory, for such a criticism would draw on post-structuralism’s suspension of the referent in order to read the social “text” of colonialist power and at the same time would reinstall the referent in the service of colonized and post-colonial societies. The especial valency of textuality within colonialist discourse, however, means that the “referent” simply cannot be totalized; for if the question of representation really is grounded in a “crisis” within postmodern Western society under late capitalism, in post-colonial critical

discourse it necessarily bifurcates under a dual agenda: which is to continue the resistance to (neo)colonialism through a deconstructive reading of its rhetoric *and* to retrieve and reinscribe those post-colonial social traditions that in literature issue forth on a thematic level, and within a “realist” problematic, as principles of cultural identity and survival. Here is how Craig Tapping describes the second principle in this dual agenda:

despite theory’s refutation of such absolute and logocentric categories as these — “truth” or “meaning”, “purpose” or “justification” — the new literatures . . . are generated from cultures for whom such terms as “authority” and “truth” are empirically urgent in their demands. Land claims, racial survival, cultural revival: all these demand an understanding of and response to the very concepts and structures which post-structuralist academicians refute in language games, few of which recognize the political struggles of real peoples outside such discursive frontiers.

This dual — and perhaps “theoretically” contradictory — agenda for post-colonial criticism is grounded, I would argue, in the dual function of post-colonial reiterative texts themselves in the area of cultural work, and in order to establish this point I want to turn briefly to a text which articulates this duality with unusual clarity: *The Death of Tarzana Clayton* by the Jamaican writer Neville Farki.

Postmodernism’s catalogue of rhetorical features describes a good deal of Farki’s tropological pyrotechnics in this novella, which as the title makes clear is a parodic retelling of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s paradigmatically racist fable. *Tarzana Clayton* is fundamentally fragmented and hybridized; it engages overtly in a decentring and decanonizing labour; it is enormously self-reflexive and ironic; it draws obviously and excessively on the devices of “fiction” to demystify imperialist versions of “history”; it “uses and abuses” the received codes of popular culture in order to effect a serious intervention in the production and circulation of majority opinion.

But at the same time — and here Farki’s text departs from the postmodernist paradigm — *Tarzana Clayton* retains a recuperative impulse towards the structure of “history” and manifests a Utopian desire grounded in reference. The reiterative portion of

the novella is framed by the narrator's account of how the Tarzan story in fact predates its historical moment of fictionalization by Burroughs, and how the struggle against colonialism — the ideology that is embedded within Tarzan aesthetics — has been continued by historical figures such as Kwame Nkrumah and thus carried forward into the present. And within the reiterative portion of the text, much of Farki's energy is directed towards the re-insertion into history of those acts and figures of anti-colonialist resistance that imperialist forms of representation have systematically left out — at one point in the narrative, for example, Hamum, Farki's exemplary colonial "subject," travels to New York where he hears Marcus Garvey speak. Far from calling down the idea of "history" itself, then, Farki's text works to map over colonialism's false historicism with a reconstituted, "decolonised" sense of historical event, the result being that the apparently anti-referential display of tropological excess in the narrative is grounded to what I see as an underlying post-colonial realist script. Farki — in opposition to the anti-foundational claims of postmodern logic — is concerned with the production of an alterior "knowledge" for post-colonial cultures, a knowledge of historical agency in colonized subjects and an awareness that the lived experiences of the Others of Empire offers a thematic touchstone for a continuing resistance to colonialism's power. And so, as the following passage makes clear, the project of reiterating the colonialist "pretext" not only involves the figuration of textual resistance but also the recuperation — the remembering or relearning — of "the role of the native as historical subject and combatant, possessor of an-other knowledge and producer of alternative traditions" (Parry 34). Needless to say, the encounter taking place on the character level in this passage is an allegory of the struggle between colonizer and colonized. And the "fiction" being constituted here is both a figuration of a recovered realism and a gesture towards the question of how a "history" of the colonized past might come to be rewritten in the future:

Tarzan inflicted many wounds on Hamum with the dagger and when he threw the wounded Ashanti to the ground, he bared his teeth as he moved towards his adversary for the kill. Hamum had learnt that an overly angry or confident attacker was apt to make

the fatal mistake of underestimating a cornered enemy. Hamum played limp and completely helpless as Tarzan raised his hand to plunge the long bloodstained blade into his enemy's chest. But Hamum . . . , moving with great agility rose, and like a fleetfooted gazelle, leaped and grasped Tarzan in a fatal hold around his neck. He held his neck with one hand and with the other he held Tarzan's hand with the dagger, thrusting it into the whiteman's stomach several times. As Hamum released his hold slowly, Tarzan's body fell on its face in the road. It was not to be buried and was left as meat for scavengers from the forest and the sky. This was the end of *Tarzana Clayton*. (62)

I want to stress the proliferation of this dual agenda within post-colonial literary reiteration, and its consequent bifurcation in referential strategy, for it is here, I think, that Western post-modernist readings can so over-value the antireferential or deconstructive energetics of post-colonial texts that they efface the important recuperative work that is also going on within them. As post-colonial writers and critics have always pointed out, the assumption of "natural" seamlessness within language has never taken hold within colonized territory; for when colonialism transports a language, or imposes it upon a differential world, a fracturing, indeterminate semantics becomes the *necessary* medium for verbal and written practice. Although Euro-American writing is at last waking up to the fundamental conditionality of language and is thrashing through the theoretical implications of this realization within a debate over the "crisis of representation," post-colonial cultures have a long history of working towards "realism" *within* an awareness of referential slippage, and they have developed a number of strategies for signifying through literature *an* "order of mimesis." *Tarzana Clayton* provides us with a highly visible site in which this reach for a positive (post-colonial) referentiality operates alongside a counter-discursive parodic energy — one which a postmodernist methodology would at least notice if not always specify. But in a number of post-colonial texts — especially those texts which postmodernism has managed to canonize for itself — the referential purchase is not always so visible, at least not to readers from outside the culture. And this can result, within the postmodernist problematic, in a critical reading which is radically skewed.

To give just one example: postmodernist explorations of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* have proved extremely useful in locating the way in which the novel problematizes the question of authorship and calls down the structures of "history." They have also been useful in establishing the way in which a dysfunctional, excessive typology infuses the text and thus puts the question of cultural coding itself into play. But postmodernist readings have not taken seriously the typologically obvious but "realist" suggestion that *Midnight's Children* positively reinscribes cultural coding through the Vedantic thematization of its "creator" as listener or "reader": that is, as Padma (or Laksmī), the lotus goddess, who embodies the creative power of *māyā* and who even at the text's moment of seemingly total cultural dissolution may be "writing" the text of a post-colonial future not through the indeterminacies of interpretive slippage and "freedom" but from a solid grounding in pre-colonized cultural and religious agency.

Meaghan Morris has made the point that feminist politics have no *necessary* argument with "postmodernism," but rather that the real problem in the intersection of these two projects is the postmodernist *debate*. She looks specifically at the bibliography of Jonathan Arac's introduction to his collection *Postmodernism and Politics*, and points out that although postmodernism *requires* the work of feminist writers of literature to "frame" its discourse, it has consistently erased the work of feminists from its "pantheon" of theorists (seven women out of more than seventy entries).

A similar erasure seems to be happening, I think, in the intersection between post-colonial cultural work and the debate over postmodernism. It seems impossible, for example, that a conceptual framework for postmodernism could have emerged without the assimilation of South American "boom" fiction. But as Katrak has noted (158), the First World debate over the semiotics of difference has systematically ignored the "theoretical" work of Third World and post-colonial subjects, often because that "theory" presents itself *in* literary texts and *as* social practice, not in the affiliative theoretical language of Western intellectual institutions. Even when post-colonial work actually presents itself *as* theory, it seems to be overlooked by postmodernists — as is very obviously the case with Wilson Harris's important work on the

question of representation. By excluding this post-colonial theoretical work from the debate, and by overlooking the cultural specificity of so many of the literary texts it has otherwise read with reasonable accuracy, the “postmodernist” phenomenon — for all its decentring rhetoric — has paradoxically become a centralizing institution, a Western problematic whose project in the cross-cultural sphere has become the translation of differential literary and social “texts” into philosophical questions and cultural attitudes whose grounding in Western culture is too rarely admitted, let alone significantly addressed.

For as Kumkum Sangari has noted, “the postmodern preoccupation with the crisis of meaning is not everyone’s crisis (even in the West),” and “there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goals, and strategies for change in other countries” (184). The fact that a great deal of the work going in the postmodernist debate remains more or less unaware of these “different modes” is perhaps contributive to postmodernism’s overwhelming tendency to present itself — as During explains (368) — as a crisis, a contradiction, an “apotheosis of negativity.” But from a post-colonial perspective, notes During, postmodernism “can also be thought of as the apotheosis of cultural confidence and of economic strength. Power has become so centered, so organised that it no longer needs notions of organic totality” to effect the strategic containment of its Others when it appropriates their cultural work. The universalizing, assimilative impulse that carries itself forward in the name of postmodernism is certainly not the only political tendency within this broad cultural movement, but for many post-colonial critics and theorists it appears to be becoming the dominant one: and it is here, I think, in this residual impulse, that postmodernism joins hands with its modernist precursor in continuing a politics of colonialist control.

Like modernism, postmodernism *needs* its (post-)colonial Others in order to constitute or to frame its narrative of referential fracture. But it also needs to exclude the cultural and political specificity of post-colonial representations in order to assimilate them to a rigorously Euro-American problematic. This, it could be argued, is a typically self-sustaining postmodern contradiction;

and yet in this contradiction there could perhaps reside a fissuring energy which could lay the foundation for a radical change of tenor within the postmodern debate. For if the modernist ethos is coming to be re-read not simply as the manifestation of an historical period or style but also as the representational marker of a *crisis* within European colonialism — as Edward Said has recently suggested (222-23) — it may well be that the postmodernist debate can become one of the key sites upon which the Anglo-American West, if it is to unravel its own moment of cognitive and cultural aporia, finds itself *forced* to take the representational claims of the post-colonial world seriously (Said 223). At its best, the debate over postmodernism constitutes a theatre of exchange in which dominant Western culture attempts to understand artistic and intellectual activity as a militant set of practices in the project of social change, but too often the very real *crisis* of postmodernism is lost to a blandly self-reflexive methodology which forgets its own genealogy and its cultural and geographical place. As post-colonial discourse continues to negotiate the relationship between colonialist power and the possibilities for post-colonial freedom, however, it may yet come in for some serious attention within postmodernism and assist it in rediscovering its cultural location. Perhaps also, postmodernism may yet find a way to join with, not assimilate, post-colonial critical discourse in the necessary post-modernist work of decolonizing Western culture — decolonizing it, that is, from a residual modernism, which continues to mark for Western culture its relations with the world.⁴

NOTES

- ¹ For an amplification of this conjunction between modernism and colonialism, see Said (222-23) and Trotter, *passim*.
- ² Diana Brydon in "Myths That Write Us" makes an important argument against an overly binarized concept of colonialism and for preserving the cultural work of settler colonies within a contemporary post-colonialism.
- ³ The critical work on this body of literature is much too long to cite here, but a useful analysis of the refigurations of *The Tempest* in Canadian and Caribbean literature is provided in Brydon, "Re-writing *The Tempest*."
- ⁴ Discussions with various colleagues — among them Helen Tiffin, Diana Brydon and Bill New, members of the Research Unit on Post-Colonial Writing at the University of Queensland, and members in my study group at the University of Alberta — assisted my thinking on this topic. A hallway discussion with Robert Wilson contributed to the formulation of this paper's title. My thanks to all.

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