Reading for Resistance in the Post-Colonial Literatures

STEPHEN SLEMON

It is scarcely 'news' to anyone who undertakes comparative studies in post-colonial literatures that names function as articulate figures in discursive systems of power. Ours is an especially troubled discipline in this regard, for what we actually do in our critical practice is never quite coincident with those names we use to apportion our 'field' or our 'methodology'. This was brought home to me most dramatically in December of last year when I gave a paper at the MLA Convention in 'New' Orleans in a session entitled 'New Approaches to the New Literatures' organised by MLA Division 33: 'English Literature Other than British and American'. I started to realise there that no matter what patterns of differential naming we might want to use to characterise our separate critical practices – Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist, new historicist – the *site* from which we speak when we address the 'English' literatures of the Commonwealth' is always already constituted within institutional and generic constraints whose work it is to package and displace the counter-discursive force of both our literary and our critical texts under a sign of secondariness, derivation, simulacrum, or mimicry.

'New'. 'Other'. For the orthodox educational institutions in which most of us work, words like these remain the litmus paper for all of the experiments we undertake with language, and as discursive tools they function not only to annihilate important *differences* within our 'common' post-colonial field of reading and writing but also to obfuscate some of the subterranean, or less obvious, *similarities* that underpin the various practices of Commonwealth criticism. We become, *de facto*, a 'new' set of literary/critical 'others' whose institutional subjectivity is interpellated by a double sign of contiguity (our filial 'newness') and rupture (our disjunctional alterity); and what sometimes happens here is that in the face of this ambivalent institutional positioning we overlook some of the most enabling possibilities for disciplinary self-empowerment and pedagogical repositioning.

I want to address one of these possibilities for empowering – or for re-historicising – a post-colonial critical project, and in order to do so I want to focus on one of the seemingly 'new' approaches to critical practice which is at present energising post-colonial literary studies in an especially fruitful

way. 'Theory', it is increasingly being argued,[1] has found its way into post-colonial literary studies under the shadow of an always articulate ambivalence; for although theory offers us an adept vocabulary for locating both the semiotic and the narrative slippages of colonialist settlement and post-colonial decolonisation, it also comes freighted with the cultural baggage of dominant Western culture.[2] And this means that when we 'use' theory – by which I mean a kind of language which necessarily claims an affinity with, or an allegiance to, a modality of disciplinary activity whose most immediate referent is the institutional apparatus of Western tertiary education – we necessarily subsume our immediate critical interests under a ludic, travelling aesthetic whose universalising drive belies the geographical and historical specificity of the texts and contexts we collect together under the sign of post-coloniality.

Nevertheless, the incursion of Western literary theory into the sphere of post-colonial critical reading *has* effected some profound changes in the modality of Commonwealth studies, and one of the most salutary outcomes of this incursion has been the emergence of an especially cognizant form of reading for figural *resistance* in various kinds of post-colonial literary texts. The basic manoeuvre in this approach is to focus on some pattern of textual echoing or repetition in post-colonial literary documents and to examine the way in which those texts 'work' the linguistic and narrative patterns of the imperial centre through a complex rhetoric of intertextual *quotation*. In the fictions of writers such as Wilson Harris, Susan Swan, J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Keri Hulme, and Randolph Stow, for example, an insistently reiterative language and fictional structure can be seen to underscore what in another register would appear to be a mimetic rendering of post-colonial experience; and what 'theory' has brought to this observation is a mechanism by which the post-colonial text can be seen to advance its own oppositional 'reading' of English cultural imperialism not simply on its thematic level but also within the rhetorical or tropological apparatus of its figural language itself. Richard Terdiman's term for this kind of rhetorical operation is 'counter-discourse',[3] and the term is an apt one. For in the specific form of textual repetition at work here, post-colonial literary writing seems to take hold of the *discursive* machineries of imperial or colonial power and to drive them outwards, beyond the space of their containing impetus and into a theatre of textual supplementation. This supplementation, in turn, functions as a form of figural displacement or supplantation whose effect is to dislocate the discourse of imperialism, and perhaps even to raise it, dialectically, to a new order of reference. What theory offers here, then, is not only a powerful methodology for a critique

of Empire and its continuation into present-day forms of neo-colonialism but also a script for identifying some of the *figural* ways in which post-colonial writing opens a doorway into genuine changes in social organisation and in cognitive dispensation.

This 'theoretical' technique of reading for resistance needs further explanation; but before I trace some of the ways in which it is informing contemporary post-colonial literary studies I want to outline, and in a sense reiterate, two of the major problems this critical practice needs now to negotiate. The first is the problem of disciplinary affinity or allegiance: how can this critical approach – in its language, its methodology, and its assertions – *not* implicitly position itself in secondary relation to a dominant Western critical practice whose socio-political effect – as Helen Tiffin argues in this volume – marks in many ways a return to imperialism? The second problem is one that has recently been raised by Diana Brydon, who questions exactly what it is we do when we commit both our critical objectives and our methodological 'beginnings' (the term, in the special sense Brydon means for it, is Edward Said's[4]) to locating a wholesale literary practice – even if differentially – *within* the discursive orbit of dominant Western power. When reading for resistance, Brydon points out, the colonised is always 'somebody's Other'.[5] And when reading for *textual* resistance, the colonised is always pre-positioned as some kind of continuing textual *function* of colonialist discursive containment. 'New'. 'Other'. These words return again to characterise not only this post-colonial critical methodology but also the way in which it implicitly positions its object of study. How can this activity of reading for resistance offer a positive contribution to post-colonial literary studies, then, given the dual irony which resides at this moment of its critical 'beginnings'?

I want to suggest here that the way in which we address these problems is also a question of how we choose to historicise a 'Commonwealth' critical discipline. The first of these two problems raises the question of what kind of critical or disciplinary genealogy a 'theoretical' reading for post-colonial resistance might seek; the second problem goes straight to the question of textuality and reference and their discursive 'history' within the history of colonialism and its aftermath. In order to arrive at that point where I can begin to outline how a less-compromised 'history' of a theory-based, post-colonial reading for resistance might proceed, I want to discuss, in what I hope will be clearer terms, exactly what it is that comprises this apparently 'new' moment in post-colonial criticism. And the 'beginnings' of *that* story are grounded in the question of *textual* power, and *how* it positions both post-

colonial literary writing and post-colonial criticism in the material sphere of social struggle.

'Remember first to possess his books', Caliban tells us, for without them Prospero – that paradigmatic emblem of European colonisation – 'hath not one spirit to command'. Caliban's exhortation to look to the *text* behind the scene of colonial power reminds us that discourse always operates through material agents, and that in the settling of Empire upon the world 'out there' colonialism's chief technology – mediated primarily through the State apparatus of colonialist education – has been the canonical texts of European literature. The essentially *textual* function of imperialism's power has been remarked upon often, but nowhere so forcefully as in Gauri Viswanathan's stunning inquiry into the 'construction of English literary education as a cultural ideal' in nineteenth-century India.[6] Viswanathan's argument – specific to India but relevant, I think, to other colonised sites – is that it is the English 'book' which becomes the foremost machinery for forging that form of obedience in colonial subjects which Gramsci calls cultural domination by consent; and if Viswanathan is right it is scarcely surprising that the *book*, the *text* should also become the material site in and against which so much post-colonial counter-discursive activity comes to direct its transformative energies.

This recognition of ideological valency in canonical English literary texts lies at the 'beginnings' of those critical readings that stress the centrality of post-colonial *texts* in the sphere of cultural work and in the promulgation of anti-colonial resistance. The undefinable but always recognisable dimension of 'literariness' which inhabits the text is seen here to be freighted with history and implicitly positioned within a dialectic whose initiating term is imperial power and its mobilisation of textuality. This social emplacement of the literary text thus affords post-colonial criticism a material referent in social struggle; but it is important to note that a secondary motivation underscores the 'beginnings' of post-colonial reading for resistance – a motivation which helps explain why it is that a specifically oppositional imperative has *always* played a formative, if at times occulted and unintended, role in the practice of post-colonial criticism.

A significant 'beginning' point of almost every comparative or cross-cultural form of post-colonial criticism, whatever its historical moment or implicit methodology, has been the recognition that European language comes to colonial space through a process of deracination and disruption;[7] and if the mainstream Western critical industry has at last discovered its theoretical ground for challenging the mimetic or reflective status of the

literary text, the presence of a 'crisis in representation' is by no means a recent discovery to those who comprise the Others of Empire. In the linguistically fractured space of colonialist transplantation and intervention, the smugly confident, astonishingly privileged belief that language can ever actually capture and contain the world has never been allowed to take root;[8] and as Fanon so clearly understood, colonised societies have always been consigned to a modality of interpretation, comparison, and representation that registers immediate experience not through an unproblematically reflective language but rather *against* the pattern of an-other culture, an-other sign.[9]

This recognition of the historical 'unsettlement' in linguistic reference within colonial and colonised cultures articulates an inescapable 'pre-text' for post-colonial writing and establishes post-colonial representation as necessarily marked by its status of *conditionality*. Reading for post-colonial resistance, then, tends to involve not only a focus on the question of textuality and power but also – and ambivalently – an assumption of a new kind of *mimeticism* at work in the post- colonial reiterative text. Writing that gestures towards its own reflexive status, its arbitrary cast, and its ultimate indeterminacy, it is argued, amounts to an excruciatingly exact description of the post-colonial condition, for in the linguistically 'unsettled' spaces of colonised culture an imported language can never come into full referential 'presence'. Acts of writing that signal this inescapable conditionality are always – and radically – acts of post-colonial explanation *and* acts of 'writing back'.[10]

This double movement or ambivalence in post-colonial reading for resistance, I want to argue, constitutes a defining characteristic of this 'new' approach in Commonwealth studies. It also marks off this practice from post-structuralist readings in intertextuality or textual quotation, for in that archive the assumption of a culturally specific mimetic dimension to this reiterative *play* of language is anathema: a sign of theoretical unsoundness. I would not want to suggest that both movements in this post-colonial critical practice are always intended or equally weighted, but in the three examples I want now, briefly, to consider, it is possible to see both of them at work, and both of them *necessary*, despite the methodological 'disobedience' this articulates in relation to the foundational movements of Western critical practice and literary theory.

In Diana Brydon's work on English-Canadian rewritings of *The Tempest*, for example, a sense of difference in relation to Caribbean rewritings of the same text is mobilised in order to locate the specifics of a gendered subjectivity within a nation-based problematic.[11] Brydon's 'beginnings' are

thus ambivalently positioned in two ways, for here Canadian literary texts are assumed to be capable of reflecting a specific lived experience, and yet they are seen to do so through a cross-cultural and comparative framework that registers their *difference* not only from the imperial pre-text but also from their reiteration in another post-colonial culture. Two rather disparate critical methodologies are thus at work here, and yet both are necessary for Brydon to arrive at her important discovery that colonial and post-colonial English Canada has been to thoroughly – and in relation to another post-colonial territory, so *differentially* – invested with imperialist/patriarchal interpellations that the ground for opposition between dominator and dominated has in many cases shifted inward, inside the social identities of the post-colonial individual subject.

In a similar vein, Helen Tiffin has focused on how George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* and Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* textually inhabit a narrative and a figural space generated by European discourse. The effect of this reiterative inhabitation, in Tiffin's reading, is to evoke the continuing presence of Empire so that the literary text can work against, and thus unseat, imperialism's characteristic modes of cognition. For Tiffin, the effect of this reiterative process is double: as a reflective of mimetic practice, it productively enables possible 'ways of knowing' specifically grounded in post-colonial experience; but as a counter-discursive practice, it also works differentially to contest the closures of imperialist textual containment. *Two* metaphors are therefore necessary to describe this process, the first reflective and the second differential. But for Tiffin, *both* are forms of reading for resistance, and both are needed if we are to understand how post-colonial reiterative texts are to be understood in their full materiality as post-colonial agents:

> Two particular counter-discursive strategies of the post-colonial traditions will be considered here.... These involve two distinct metaphors yet their operation in subverting the dominant discourse is complementary. The first adapts Harris's concept of 'infinite rehearsal', whereby the constant 'rereading' of a particular cultural archive or text interrogates and revolutionizes the terms of its production and continuing existence. The second draws on a biological process, the response of particular leucocytes or white blood cells to invasive organisms within the human body.... These cells lock onto the intruder, reading its chemical composition, and producing a sort of mirror image of its inner structures. Antigens, based on this template, are then produced, and these move in to neutralize and destroy the invader. The most intimate energizing processes of the intruder are thus studied with a view to their replication and expulsion. Though they may be chemically similar, the antigens are radically different from the intruder in function and direction.[12]

Working on the literature of another language, but in much the same register, Christopher Miller reads the notorious display of plagiarism in Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence* as a strategic exercise in anti-colonialist resistance and as an assault on European assumptions about writing and originality. The identification of this resistance depends upon a mimetic assumption about the cultural specificity of this plagiaristic play – specifically, that within the discourse of colonialism the black African writer is *already* pre-positioned as *négre*: that is to say, as 'black' and as 'slave', but also, punningly, as 'ghostwriter'. And because of this, Miller concludes, Ouologuem's performative plagiarism works *differentially* as a mechanism for reversing the binary opposition of master-and-slave, because it upsets a conceptual distinction which is necessary to colonialist interpellation: namely, the distinction between originator and copyist; between the unified, coherent, possessor of language, and the multiple, dispersed mimic-men whose use of the coloniser's language is taken to be an enduring affirmation of colonialism's unassailable presence.[13]

Here again, then, a differential reading turns to an apparatus of colonialist fracture in the referentiality of language in order to ground a new kind of mimeticism specific to colonial and post-colonial cultures. All three of these critics afford – overtly or covertly – a measure of representative status and reflective capability to the post-colonial text; yet behind each of their critical practices lies a crucial positioning of European textual power at the primal scene of post-colonial writing. The affinity between this approach to reading for resistance and post-structuralist valorisation of textual reiteration is obvious; but what marks out the essential difference of this critical practice and thus opens it to *another* – and I think more important – critical history, is that the methodology of all three of these critics is grounded in a bifurcated and ambivalent genealogy: the paradoxical assertion *and* suspension of a referential capability in language. For if these kinds of reading proceed from an assumption that would place the object of their attention squarely within the orbit of imperial power, they also begin in a faithful recognition of semiotic doubleness in the material conditions of post-colonial representation. Not only do they enable a critical practice which locates post-colonial textual reiteration as a strategy for textual rupture and refusal – where repetition figures the production of semiotic difference, or supplantation, and thus resistance, but they also position post-colonial textual repetition as a culturally specific sign of what remains an ultimately unreachable post-colonial authenticity – this because the gesture towards referential doubleness in post-colonial writing *is itself* an act of mimesis.

Another way of saying this is that these 'new' post-colonial approaches to reading for resistance conflate two quite separate methodological strategies, both of which are necessary to the production or recognition of a post-colonial discourse, but each of which – from a purely 'theoretical' perspective – is antithetical to the other. The first of these strategies regards post-colonial textual repetition as a 'natural' reflection of post-colonial social reality; and here the production of a reiterative form of intertextual quotation emerges directly from the dual, inherently ambivalent condition of all representation within post-colonial culture. The second of these strategies, however, insists that post-colonial repetition is inherently a *reactive* mechanism which affords a productive and destabilising 'reading' of colonial discourse at the level of textual construction and performance. Here, post-colonial textual reiteration is seen to effect a radical differential within the textual machineries of colonialist discourse, and this production of figurative difference becomes a tropical mechanism for interfering with the interpellations of imperialism and for dispersing its hegemonic power. In this second methodology for critical reading, post-colonial writing is taken to be fundamentally ex-centric – not reflective – in its modality of representation, a writing off-centre which at the same time can only be a writing off *of* the centre as it drives the mystifications of colonial discourse into the actualising space of the social and political 'real'.

'Burn but his books', says Caliban; and in the critical apparatus of each of these 'new' approaches to reading for resistance, this textual gesture of refusal points not only to the textual armaments of colonialist discourse but also to the hegemonic pre- texts of Western literary *theory*. There is a paradox here: for although 'theory' has enabled us to locate counter-discursive energies in the figural (as opposed to thematic) performance of post-colonial writing, we can only see the *complete* operations of that counter-discursive practice when we posit, disobediently, a mimetic dimension to textuality *against* the foundational principles of that enabling and originary 'theory'. An inescapable ambivalence thus inhabits the 'beginnings' of this kind of post-colonial reading for resistance; but as I suggested earlier in this paper, this ambivalence can itself serve as an enabling mechanism, for it names a space in which *another* kind of methodological 'history' might be written for this kind of critical practice.

'Other'. 'New'. When this actuations of a counter-discourse are recognised not only in reiterative post-colonial literary texts but also within the intrinsic ambivalence and methodological slippage of a post-colonial modality of critical *reading*, another way of situating this 'new' approach to reading for resistance opens to us: a way of locating our critical 'newness' or

'otherness' not in the disciplinary boundaries which the institution of 'English' imposes upon our work but in an *intrinsic* re-construction of our critical 'history' as readers of post-colonial texts. This 'new' way of historicising our practice leads back into the formal structures that articulate our research and our pedagogy – and the argument I want to close with is that an enabling ambivalence in critical methodology has *always* organised Commonwealth literary studies, even when our avowed intentions have seemed very far from the counter-discursive. To make this argument I now want to turn, briefly, to an early moment in the 'history' of ACLALS, and specifically to the question of how we might locate the critical practice of some of its foundational members – which is, of course, precisely what this *Festschrift* for Derry Jeffares and for the organisation that he created is intended to celebrate.

A quarter of a century ago, when the fledgling Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies first set out to challenge the geographical bias of that pedagogical institution still, unproblematically, called the Department of English, the dominant mode of institutional reading was 'New' Criticism. New Criticism's great project was to re-orient the object of critical attention away from the author and back to the text itself; and having done this, to 'essentialise literary discourse' by making it – as Frank Lentricchia explains – a 'unique kind of language', 'a vast, enclosed, textual and semantic preserve'[14] which could be read and taught without reference to its social background or its function within society as a form of cultural *work*. New Criticism, that is, devalued 'history' and universalised the referent; and thus, as a discursive practice it exerted within tertiary education a disciplinary energy whose ends were in some sense coterminous with those of imperial power itself in its neo-colonialist phase. At the same time, however, New Criticism 'democratised' literary writing and revitalised pedagogy, opening critical inquiry to a mass audience[15] and bringing culturally specific texts into at least some kind of focus for readers who knew nothing about the societies in which those texts had been produced. For an incipient 'Commonwealth' criticism, then, New Criticism was already ambivalently positioned as a discursive force: it made the critical reading and teaching of post-colonial literatures possible within the university, but at the same time it depoliticised those literatures by transmuting post-colonial texts into unproblematically aesthetic objects. Then as now – I want to argue – post-colonial literary studies responded by *negotiating* that ambivalence which marked the 'beginnings' of its critical project, producing as it did so a 'disobedient' methodology which afforded

insights into post-colonial writing that would otherwise not have been possible.

In 1968 the first 'official' ACLALS conference met at the University of Queensland to consider the question of 'national identity' in Commonwealth writing. The ways in which this difficult question – taken up against an astonishing variety of languages, dialects, and translation activities – issued into a *productive* critical practice are documented in the published proceedings of the conference, edited by Ken Goodwin.[16] I want to focus on three specific areas in this early 'Commonwealth' criticism, with a view to establishing how a negotiation of ambivalence with respect to the originary principles of New Criticism marks out the productive 'beginnings' of post-colonial criticism and thus comprises a genealogy for the kind of reading for resistance I have been discussing in this paper.

The first of these areas concerns the relation between the various post-colonial literatures and the rarefied aesthetic 'domain' which in New Criticism is seen to circumscribe all literary writing. A.N. Jeffares' opening address to the conference – which in part reiterates an earlier piece published in the *Commonwealth Journal*[17] – offers a useful site for exploring Commonwealth criticism's productive ambivalence about the location of the literary text, for in it Jeffares calls for 'international standards of judgement' which reconnect the disparate moments of Commonwealth writing to 'the unity that our common education in classical English literature has given us' (p.x). Here, Jeffares clearly envisions post-colonial writing as a structural *variant* within a universal activity, a variant whose purchase is both historically specific (the shared grounding of post-colonial literatures in the British tradition) and transhistorically generalised – in the earlier piece Jeffares writes: 'the role of the author in the Commonwealth is, of course, the role of the author anywhere, at any time'.[18] But Jeffares also recognises that post-colonial writing is so heavily inflected by economic and political determinants[19] that its criticism must abrogate a purely *textual* focus and redirect its attention towards that complex social force which 'authors' a piece of writing. New Criticism thus allows Jeffares to *validate* Commonwealth writing, but it fails to accommodate that writing's material grounding and its social pressure; and what Jeffares' ambivalence towards this methodology in the end produces is a focus on post-colonial writing as a socially significant practice whose reading implicitly buys into a discourse on social power:

> We have to ask ourselves what the writers in the Commonwealth have inherited from the British tradition.... And what have the indigenous traditions, which were outside Macaulay's own tradition, contributed: and what has resulted from the subsequent

> fusions and from the independent developments in separate nations? The answers to these questions are best sought not in the writing of the sociologists, nor even of the historians, useful as the latter are to us, but in the actual work of the writers; and, in part, in the work of the writers' critics. (p.x)

Given this inescapable *variety* not only between the various post-colonial 'national' literatures but between 'the British' and indigenous traditions, post-colonial criticism, for Jeffares, moves 'naturally to comparative studies' which perforce 'will avoid the kind of bogus internationalism' (p. xiv) which lies at the founding moment of the New Critical practice. Jeffares doesn't reconcile the conflict between his loyal call for 'international standards of judgement' and his disobedient warning against 'bogus internationalism'; but implicitly, his discussion of the issues re-locates Commonwealth critical attention away from New Criticism's aesthetic preserve and towards the function of the text within the social sphere. The play of *difference* that post-colonial writing brings to the domain of the British 'tradition' thus marks out in Jeffares' critical practice what I would see as an incipient if unacknowledged counter-discursive energy within post-colonial criticism itself. And thus in his declaration that 'English is no longer the language of an empire' (p. ix), Jeffares implicitly reclaims political struggle as the horizon of reference for post-colonial writing in the same moment that he seems to deny the political valency of 'English' as a textual armature of imperialist hegemony. Jeffares, that is, implicitly fractures the sign of 'English'; and in doing so his work here can be seen to prefigure recent attempts to put a capital-E 'English' under erasure and to disperse its discursive power through a re-placive network of multiple small-e 'englishes'.[20]

This ambivalence in methodology knocks on to a second area of Commonwealth critical practice: pedagogy. One of the most formidable dimensions to the first ACLALS conference, it seems, was the amount of work its participants were asked to do; and in this regard the 'Report of [the] Working Party on the Teaching of Commonwealth Literature' represents an especially important post-colonial labour. 'The study of Commonwealth literature brings to the fore one of the basic tensions in English teaching', concludes the working part, for this study implicitly articulates a division between the liberal humanist assumptions of New Critical practice – 'the relevance of literature for the contemporary individual' – and the socially responsive critiques of that humanism which proceed form 'an organized study of an historical tradition' (p. 203). The special nature of Commonwealth literature, that is, takes its pedagogy straight to the question of its ambivalent institutional positioning; and the working party attempts to negotiate this ambivalence by placing the destabilising energy of

post-colonial writing squarely onto the curriculum itself. 'We cannot be as sure as we once were of what makes a work of literature significant', states the Report, 'and areas of Commonwealth writing may have a value which can no longer be observed in the "ancients" ' (p. 204). Hence the working party argues that an especially important curricular value of Commonwealth literature – and here the Report accurately prophesises post-colonialism's continuing pressure on the orthodox methodologies of Western criticism and pedagogy – 'may be that it *forces* [my emphasis] reconsideration of traditional approaches to the literature' (p. 203).

Whereas Jeffares's opening address to the first ACLALS conference implicitly – if perhaps unintentionally – grounds post-colonial literary *writing* in the field of social struggle, the Report of the working party implicitly carries post-colonial *readings* towards a counter-discursive contestation of traditional critical and pedagogical practices whose closures inherently invest in an imperialist universalism. Together, these two impulses underwrite a third area of Commonwealth criticism in which an ambivalent relation to New Criticism enables counter-discursive resistance; and here I want to turn to Wilson Harris's critical contribution to the conference included in Goodwin's volume: an address entitled 'Interior of the Novel: Amerindian/European/African Relations'.

The originating assumptions which drive Harris's exploration of some of the 'curious footnotes' in the history books of post-colonial cultures are, first, that literary writing is mimetic of a pre-textual – or 'authentic' – reality, and secondly, that any truly enabling piece of literature must therefore come into *complete* referential 'presence' as it inhabits that manifold semantic preserve which for New Criticism marks out the sphere of all literary writing. Anything less for Harris – any fracture in figural reference, or any evocation of muted possibility in fictional performance – reinscribes the discursive codes of 'realism ... which has led to – and continues to invest in – a behaviouristic and deterministic dead-end' (p. 142). And thus – in the third term of his syllogenism – only that literary writing which paradoxically evokes and yet 'dislocates' its pre-textual referent – its 'idolatrous plane of realism' (p. 142) – can articulate a conceptual 'breakthrough' in our codes of recognition; and here Commonwealth literature, as Harris sees it, is especially well-positioned as a medium for cognitive resistance.

The reason for this, Harris argues, is that post-colonial 'history' needs to articulate not only those visibly material referents comprised by recorded agents and events but also those 'peculiar "holes" ' in history whose refigural 'presence' itself constitutes a 'new creative necessity' for the post-colonial imagination (p. 139). The argument Harris initiates here has become a

familiar one in post-colonial thinking: 'history', as written by the coloniser, has actually written *over* those marks of resistance, those subterranean currents of connectedness and continuity within colonised cultures, which comprise the *proper* 'history' of post-colonial cultures – a history which, as J. Michael Dash puts it, is grounded first and foremost in a 'counter-culture of the imagination'. [21]

What happens in Harris's post-colonial critical practice, then, is that the referent acquires its conditions of possibility through a New Critical assumption of semantic enclosure – the assumption that 'fiction' generates its own world and inhabits its own aesthetic preserve. And yet the referent exceeds this condition through its articulation of a 'real' history of colonial and post-colonial experience, a history which remains 'obscure to an empirical foreign tradition' (p. 139). As Harris puts it, the literary sign comprises 'interwoven vessels of loss and gain' (p. 139) – 'a "vacancy" in nature' (p. 146) which is at the same time 'a "presence" within an "absence" ' (p. 147) – whose paradoxical doubleness or ambivalence provides a foundational dislocation upon which 'a new corpus of sensibility' (p. 140) can come into play. And although the domain of that sensibility is entirely *textual*, its discursive energy within the dialectic of Empire necessarily carries it into the social sphere and the post-colonial 'real', where it 'will begin to displace a helpless and hopeless consolidation of powers' (p. 140).

Harris's critical practice here is thus almost impossible to locate within the foundational movements of Western critical theory, for he grounds post-colonial representation *both* to the New Critical domain of literary aesthetics *and* to a material referent which, paradoxically, is always both present and absent within the world of representation as a pre-textual or prefigurative sign. On one level, Harris' critical practice anticipates Paul de Man's attempt to locate literary reference in the endless deferral of allegorical reiteration, where the sign necessarily refers to another sign that precedes it and with which it can never coincide.[22] But whereas for de Man this mode of figuration discloses an inability of literary representation to capture the experience it sets out to signify, for Harris it locates that experience precisely, and in a specifically post-colonial or 'Commonwealth' materiality whose 'history' has always been written through its 'holes' and by its semiotic fissures. And thus:

> ... within the new art of fiction we are attempting to explore (and I would like to think that this is the visualization of 'Commonwealth'), it is a 'vacancy' in nature within which agents appear who are translated one by the other and who (in a kind of serial illumination – if 'serial' is the right word) reappear through each other, inhabit each other, reflect a burden of necessity, push each other to plunge into the unknown, in

> the translatable, transmutable legacies of history. Their uniqueness lies in this curious openness to originality as well as change: a constitution of humility in which the 'author' himself is an 'agent' in a metaphysical dimension compounded of losses and gains: and behind him – as behind each character he creates in his novels – lies a fantastic, obscure, compelling necessity to express something to do with 'one' and 'agent'.... And this – as I see it – is ... the role of the author within his ancestral background: he is the complex ghost of his own landscape of history or work. (pp. 146-47)

Harris's focus on agency here is important, for it turns again to the question I posed in the first section of this paper: how can a post-colonial reading for resistance articulate an enabling current in post-colonial writing and yet escape conditinality or enclosure in relation to those hegemonic practices which mark out the domain of Western literary theory? Harris suggests – if I read him right – that there already exists within the discursive spaces of foundational Western theories a 'vacancy' in which a specifically post-colonial agency can reclaim for itself a material presence and a 'history' even as it effects a specifically counter-discursive drive against the continuing technologies of Empire. Ambivalence, in Harris, *is* an enablement; and it is one whose figural possibilities always hang upon the already *socialised* investments of the historical apparatuses of textual power.

These three areas of early Commonwealth literary criticism, then – the location of the literary text, the problem of pedagogy, and the question of representation – all mark out an enabling 'disobedience' to New Criticism; and each of them, whatever its ostensible intention or its level of cognizance, implicitly energises a counter-discursive impulse against colonialist power as it appears in critical practice. This counter-discursive energy, I want to argue, articulates the occulted 'history' of our post-colonial critical activity, and it carries with it a self- determined logic within which the names of 'new' and 'other' might be figurally reclaimed and discursively repositioned.

For names *do* matter; and if we are to constitute our work within the social sphere under the name of a post-coloniality – or as Diana Brydon has put it, under the name of our Common *Wealth*[23] – we need also to name for ourselves the social transformations and pressures which comprise our 'history' and locate our critical 'beginnings'. The incursion of Western literary theory into post-colonial criticism *has* transformed our discipline, and it must continue to do so; but as we take that theory on board we need also to 're-vision' our own genealogy to accord with the recognition that what has changed here is the *modality* of our critical practice, not its *key signature*. I would like to see a comprehensive 'second wave' of post-colonial studies, one analogous to the recuperative effort of feminist literary criticism, wherein that history which has made possible our work as post-colonial

critics is rewritten to show how Commonwealth critical practice has always been marked by a *counter-discursive* 'newness' and an 'otherness', and how its foundations have always been grounded in a productive ambivalence in relation to Western 'travelling theory'.[24] The formation of ACLALS, and specifically the critical practice of its first official gathering in Queensland in 1968, provides an important site upon which such a history might begin to be written: a history of reading for resistance both in post-colonial literature and in post-colonial criticism, over the past quarter century, and always into the future.

NOTES

1. For an extended discussion of this, see Helen Tiffin and Stephen Slemon, eds., *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Writing* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, forthcoming 1989).
2. See Helen Tiffin, 'Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXIII, 1 (1988), pp. 169-81.
3. Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985).
4. Edward Said, *Beginnings* (New York, Basic Books, 1975).
5. Diana Brydon, '*Orientalism* and the New Literatures in English,' paper given at the Modern Languages Association convention in New Orleans, December 1988. A revised version of this paper appears in this volume under the title 'New Approaches'.
6. Gauri Viswanathan, 'The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9 (1987), pp. 2-26.
7. See for example D.E.S. Maxwell, 'Landscape and Theme', in John Press, ed. *Commonwealth Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1965), pp. 82-97.
8. See Homi K. Bhabha, 'Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism', in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *The Theory of Reading* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), pp. 93-112.
9. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1967).
10. See W.D. Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, forthcoming in the Routledge New Accents series.
11. Diana Brydon, 'Re-writing *The Tempest*', *WLWE* 23, 1 (Winter 1984), pp. 75-88.
12. Helen Tiffin 'Recuperative Strategies in the Post-Colonial Novel', *Span*, 24 (April 1987), pp. 45-47.
13. Cristopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 216-50.
14. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. xiii.
15. See William E. Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 1-7.
16. K.L. Goodwin, ed. *National Identity* (London: Heinemann, 1970). Further references are given in the text.
17. A. Norman Jeffares, 'Role of the Author in the Commonwealth', *Commonwealth Journal*, 9, 5 (1966), pp. 205-10.

18. Ibid., p. 205
19. Ibid., p. 207.
20. This usage is followed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, cited above, and also in Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin, *Decolonising Fictions*, forthcoming from Dangaroo Press, 1990.
21. J. Michael Dash, 'Marvellous Realism – The Way Out of Negritude', *Caribbean Studies*, 13, 4, (1973), p. 65.
22. Paul de Man, 'the Rhetoric of Temporality', in Charles S. Singleton, ed., *Interpretation: Theory and Practice* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), p. 190.
23. Diana Brydon, 'Common wealth or common poverty?: the new literatures in English and the new discourse of marginality', forthcoming in Tiffin and Slemon, op. cit.
24. The term is Edward Said's, from *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983).