

Decolonize practical criticism?

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Decolonize Practical Criticism?

For some, the first principle for decolonising literary studies is *always contextualize*. This imperative does not come out of the blue but responds to the hard experience of a circular logic that continues to underpin curricula in many English departments. Upon beginning their degrees, students for several generations have been instructed in practices of literary analysis and interpretation through the close reading of highly valued texts.¹ This instruction has tacitly encouraged them to appreciate and venerate the very same texts. In this way, the perspectives and tastes of the makers and consecrators of these texts have become norms and a literary studies established within empire's horizon has been reinscribed and consolidated throughout its former expanse. In order to break the loop, it becomes essential that these canonical texts and critical practices be recognized as the creatures of particular circumstances and ideological positions. If students come to understand authors' standpoints and situations, they will perceive the worldly interests that underpin their aesthetic decisions. They might also perceive how the conventions and expectations of criticism itself have been forged in ideological alliance with such

¹ This began with I. A. Richards's first set of selections for his experimental courses in practical criticism: Christina Rossetti, Philip James Bailey, Donne, Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, Byron, St. Vincent Millay, Gerard Manley Hopkins, J. D. C. Pellow, and D. H. Lawrence. A few of these may have been considered 'minor' (and apparently provoked dismissive commentary from students and teacher), but in general Richards seems to have applied the filter of canonicity when making selections. See Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 73.

texts. Understanding that these canonical writers are the creative exponents of certain hegemonic norms, they will now be well-placed to resist their influence and to discover the power of works by authors whose standpoints exist beyond or in opposition to these norms. This will mean opening themselves to quite different aesthetic priorities and approaches.

On this understanding, to decolonize literary studies is to do away with the precepts of a practical criticism bolted onto the Western canon and to adopt those of a standpoint epistemology attuned to historical and ideological contexts. For this reason, much is made of the identity of the authors whose books university teachers and higher education professionals routinely read with their students, and in calls to decolonize literary studies the most familiar strategy of redress is to legislate that all programmes, and even particular modules, include books by authors from a diversity of backgrounds (if not always from diverse regimes of aesthetic value). Sometimes, however, serious attempts to rewire the hardware of curricula are undertaken in the spirit of corporate brand management. The end sought is not liberation from colonialism's legacy but the avoidance of censure. (Olúfémi O. Táíwò helpfully distinguishes such defensive catch-all wielding of identity categories from the radical aspirations that impelled the formation of standpoint epistemology, calling the former 'deference epistemology'.²) And the managers of marketized universities are all too happy to extol diversified programmes in the

² Olúfémi O. Táíwò. 'Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference', *The Philosopher* 108.4 (2020). <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo>

name of consumer choice. Thus are anti-colonial principles and slogans folded into a corporate liberal diversity agenda.

Such institutional co-optation risks parodying the seriousness of the principles that were central to inaugural attempts to decolonize curricula. These efforts responded to the demands made on particular educational environments and their institutions by particular literary communities as part of an interconnected global decolonisation movement. When, five years after Kenyan independence, three lecturers in the English Department at the University of Nairobi—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Owuor Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong—famously called for the Department’s abolition and the reorganisation of the literary curriculum, they began by asking: ‘from what base do we look at the world?’ Their answer was to place ‘Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre’, with the new curriculum ‘radiating outwards’, beyond Africa and onto literatures of the broader Third World before ever contemplating those of Europe or the United States.³ As Ngũgĩ later reflected, the fierce debate their demands sparked ‘was not really about the admissibility of this or that text, this or that author’. It was driven by different questions: ‘What then are the materials that [students] should be exposed to: and in what order and perspective? Who should be interpreting that material to them: an African or non-African?’⁴ Inevitably, this

³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 1986), pp. 94-95.

⁴ *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 101.

also meant asking about the pedagogue's 'attitude to the material' and the 'critic's world outlook'.⁵

Following the logic that underwrote such inaugural acts of decolonisation, were one to reorganize English literary studies in Birmingham or Western Sydney today, it would not be sufficient simply to add Anglophone authors from Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, or any other nation in the 'Global South' to already constituted modules and programmes. Nor could one simply adopt the past or present curricula of the universities of Nairobi, Delhi, or the West Indies. A decolonized literary studies does not come off-the-peg, and making decisions about what or who we read requires that we think concertedly about the colonial legacies and entanglements of particular places and literary communities at particular historical junctures. It requires, in other words, that we think seriously about what exactly 'context' means.

This is not to suggest that the drive to include a diversity of authors has been naïve about context. A key assumption that guides standpoint epistemology is that works speak out of, to, and for the communities to which their authors belong, giving voice to the experiences and orientations specific to those communities. But, while knowledge of authors' social circumstances and material conditions of production are powerful ways of entering into an understanding of their works, even materialist versions of standpoint epistemology may subordinate literary interpretation to sociological criteria. Literature begins to look like one

⁵ *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 105.

cultural practice among others, all expressing external material conditions and constraints. This misses the particularities of literary practice and its distribution and reception, and the distinctiveness of literary *materials*, which make their own demands on writers as they attempt to address their world by harnessing the conventions of inherited forms and techniques.

We are confronted, then, with the problem of deciding not only what or whom to read, but also *how* to read – and, more precisely, how to read in a way that responds to the distinctive dimensions of literary works and literary experience. These questions of the ‘how’ concern approaches to reading that may find use across various decolonising initiatives in literary studies, providing a focus or node for projects that are clearly related but subject to different contingencies. But they also present challenges. This is not least because the notion that literary works *are* in fact distinctive, that they have a kind of autonomy (belonging to relatively discrete fields defined by their own know-how or *techne* and their own laws and principles of value) and that they therefore demand practices of reading attuned to this distinctiveness, might smack of a Eurocentric and perhaps even colonial set of values and ideas about aesthetic objects.⁶

As an embodiment of these values and ideas, and of the conviction that literature is made, experienced and appreciated according to its own laws and principles of value, one could hardly do better than *practical criticism*, a method of reading and interpretation that has long been

⁶ For a discussion of ‘*techne*’ in this sense, see Henry Staten, *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), and especially chapter one, ‘The *Techne* Standpoint’, pp. 3-15.

central to literary studies, providing many of its pedagogical tools and concepts. And it is precisely because its early exponents removed context from the practice of interpretation, denying its relevance to the making of works and assuming a universal standpoint for literary analysis centred on the sensibilities of young British men of the upper and middle classes, that practical criticism may seem especially irremediable. It would make as much sense to talk of ‘decolonising practical criticism’ as it does to talk of decolonising the IMF or World Bank: how can one ‘decolonize’ that which was complicit with colonialism’s universalising habits of mind? ⁷ It has the hollow, satiric ring of calls to decolonize consumer goods, from yoga lessons to pumpkin spice lattes.⁸

But if we view practical criticism as one amongst several ways of meeting the challenge of the literary work’s distinctiveness, we needn’t dismiss this challenge along with practical criticism’s cauterising, puritanical solution. Instead of countering practical criticism through strategies of inversion – prioritising context over text by reading the text as an expression of its context – there is a different, immanent route to context, which is to understand close attention to literary particularities as being about reading *context in text*. That is, intensified rather than reversed or

⁷ We refer here to an article by [Jason Hickel](#) that calls for ‘the institutions of economic governance’ to be decolonized. Jason Hickel, ‘It is Time to Decolonise the World Bank and IMF’, *Aljazeera*, 26 November 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/26/it-is-time-to-decolonise-the-world-bank-and-the-imf>

⁸ See <https://decolonizingyoga.com/> and <https://www.bgdblog.org/2015/09/heres-why-we-need-to-stop-calling-pumpkin-spice-a-white-people-thing/>

annulled, a critical pedagogy centred on practices of close reading (and close listening) does not have to be about decontextualizing the text or inculcating a set of canonical norms. Instead, it could be about looking to the work of verbal art as the principal guide to understanding how the practice in question is acting in the world through its creative manipulation of its materials. More specifically, how it is acting within its *literary* circumstances and how it acts on those circumstances.

In making 'context' one of the 'cardinal categories' of his materialist and dialectical theory of African literature, Chidi Amuta was careful to specify that a work's literary circumstances – 'the philosophical and aesthetic traditions within which the work is created as well as its paradigmatic relationship with other works in the same tradition or in preceding traditions' – are even 'more important' than the consideration of 'the totality of its historical ambience'.⁹ This is not because the former trumps the latter but because the formal and technical mediation of history in verbal arts cannot be meaningfully understood except through a consideration of how their creative materials have been taken up and worked upon. It is not a surprise, then, that Amuta's polemic carries the subtitle *Implications for Practical Criticism*. As he turns from setting out his theory of criticism to interpreting exemplary texts, Amuta makes it clear that his anti-neocolonial and anti-bourgeois criticism need not be antithetical 'to a rigorous consideration of matters of form'.¹⁰ The work is the guide that leads us to the relevant literary context, which will, of course, take in

⁹ C. Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 84.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

broad and specific social and historical conditions; but will also include the ways in which the work positions itself in a literary field and engages with materials as they belong to particular traditions of practice.

A compelling example of practical criticism that takes such an immanent route to context is found in a recent article by Harry Garuba and Benge Okot, on Okot p'Bitek's *Wer pa Lawino*/*Song of Lawino*. Garuba and Okot argue that we ought to treat these as two distinct works, not as an original and a translation, and this is not only because of the difficulty of determining which came first, or of theorising the relationship between oral and written modes. It is also because the meaning-bearing technical and formal elements of these two works are so different, and were articulated into quite separate 'regimes and institutions of recognition and value'.¹¹ *Song of Lawino*, first published in 1966 and a major contribution to African literature in English, is 'not really like an Acholi song',¹² not least because it cannot be sung. But, according to Garuba and Okot, it tries concertedly to give that impression, by simulating 'the authenticity and orality effect in ways that work within the English tradition'.¹³ And, at this specific moment in Anglophone African literature, it is simply by invoking or perhaps even emulating features of

¹¹ H. Garuba and B. Okot, 'Lateral Texts and Circuits of Value: Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Wer pa Lawino*', *Social Dynamics*, 43.2 (2017), 312-327 (p. 316).

¹² B. Lindfors, 'An Interview with Okot p'Bitek', *World Literatures Written in English*, 16 (1977), pp. 281-299 (p. 283).

¹³ 'Lateral Texts and Circuits of Value', p. 319.

Acholi song that *Song of Lawino* makes its contribution, achieving something distinctive and producing a powerful effect on its early readers.

But matters are very different for its Acholi iteration, the aesthetic dynamism of which lies in its deployment of 'two major poetic strategies [...]: the use of end rhymes and its heteroglossic use of a variety of dialects, lexical items borrowed from neighbouring linguistic communities, and age and class inflected registers'.¹⁴ In fact, the latter, according to Taban Lo Liyong, is an effect of the former: it is in order 'to use end rhymes' that p'Bitek 'had to stretch the Acholi language to its limits', drawing on a much wider range of dialects and registers that he might otherwise have done.¹⁵ This 'aesthetics of rhymed verse' is both an innovation for the Acholi material and 'a testament to the power of colonial English education', for end-rhymes were a norm introduced by that system.¹⁶

What inferences might we draw from Garuba and Okot's account? First, that even a technique as apparently basic as end rhyme – and *Wer pa Lawino* keeps to an ABAB scheme with little variation – may have very different effects and meanings in different literary languages and literary cultures, banal in some, forceful and innovative in others; likewise with the *avoidance* of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 319.

¹⁵ O. p'Bitek and T. Lo Liyong, 'From Where Did God Get the Clay for Making Things?' *Literary Review* 34.4 (1991), pp. 559-556 (p. 559).

¹⁶ 'From Where Did God Get the Clay for Making Things?', p. 319.

end rhyme: in *Song of Lawino*, neither this nor the irregular line lengths are evidence of the adoption of free verse, or markers of a 'peripheral modernism'. Instead, they are among the poem's means of achieving the orality effect: making the poem look and feel as if it were an Acholi song, an innovation of a very different order within the tradition of African poetry in English. Second, that any attempt at close reading that begins with a notion of literary analysis as a kind of Swiss Army Knife is likely to mistake the effects and meanings of any given technical element. Third, that the work's own capacity to know the world, itself grounded in technical accomplishment, would necessarily be traduced by acts of interpretation that misrecognized these grounds, whether by mistaking the significance of the particular techniques or by ignoring the salience of technique in general, the salience, that is, of questions of *how* to read.

Garuba and Okot point the way to a mode of critical attention that begins with the works, and with elements of technique that shape their effects and meanings, while opening up a distinct understanding of the conditions, cultural and literary but also linguistic, social, political, and economic, in which these works are first activated. This is a practical criticism that seeks a work's technical and formal *context of intelligibility*.¹⁷ We use the term 'intelligibility' not to suggest that a correct verdict on the meaning of literary technique is possible or desirable but to argue that, even as students across the world remain saturated by imperial norms of taste, a practical

¹⁷ For a detailed exposition of the notion of 'context of intelligibility' in an essay that addresses debates about the direction of postcolonial criticism see Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimble, 'Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49.3 (2014), pp. 279-97.

criticism that aspires to a decolonial standpoint needs to inhabit the constraints of the material that postcolonial or otherwise ‘peripheral’ writers themselves encounter.

What are the consequences of an inability to inhabit these constraints or to recognize the existence of a distinct literary material? What happens when even well-intentioned critics are not attuned to a work’s technical and formal context of intelligibility? We get a sense of this looking at Helen Vendler’s discussion of Derek Walcott’s *The Fortunate Traveller*, which signals her awareness of a decolonising context but lacks that alertness to different materials that is exemplified in analyses like Garuba and Okot’s. From the opening lines, Vendler is troubled by Walcott’s interweaving of poetic registers and voices: the ‘unhappy disjunction between his explosive subject’, which she calls ‘the black colonial predicament’, and his ‘harmonious pentameters’.¹⁸ She then documents Walcott’s ‘mismanagement of tone’ (28) in his earlier verse, including the attempt to combine ‘island patois’ and ‘Yeatsian poise’ (26):

Man, I suck me tooth when I hear
How dem croptime fiddlers lie,
And de wailing, kiss-me-arse flutes
That bring water to me eye!

¹⁸ Helen Vendler, ‘Poet of Two Worlds’, *The New York Review of Books* 29.3 (1982), pp. 28-32. Reprinted in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Derek Walcott* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003), pp. 25-33 (p. 25). Further references are in text.

[...]

When flesh upon flesh was the tune
Since the first cloud raise up to disclose
The breast of the naked moon.

The final lines, Vendler comments, have an 'unlikely "literary" note' (26), and she finds much the same tonal mismanagement and lack of linguistic control in the *Fortunate Traveller*. 'The patois poems in this new volume still seem to me unconvincing' (30), she comments, citing lines from the 'The Spoiler's Return'. As if to forgive Walcott his limitations, she speculates that there may be a larger problem for poets across the Americas whose efforts to reconcile their multi-lingual worlds into resolved aesthetic forms have tended to fail.¹⁹

One response might be to consider whether Vendler has properly understood the lived experiences and cultural perspectives of Walcott and these other poets. Another is to meet her on the terrain of practical criticism. It is the latter strategy that the Jamaican poet and critic Mervyn Morris adopts when he comes to reflect on Walcott's collection. Noting Vendler's repeated criticisms of the implausibility of Walcott's shifting poetic registers, Morris wonders

¹⁹ This includes 'Hispano-American poets': 'such work may accurately reflect their linguistic predicament, but the mixed diction has yet to validate itself as a literary resource with aesthetic power' (31).

what the 'plausible voice' of several of the poems might be.²⁰ He demonstrates that in one poem there are in fact two voices, one mocking another; and that, in a second poem, the difficulty in locating 'the controlling voice' arises because the poet occupies at turns the vantages of 'the oppressors as well as the victims' (121-22). 'Walcott knows what he's doing' (126), Morris comments, as he comes to 'The Spoiler's Return' and delivers his most detailed technical appraisal:

So, crown and mitre me Bedbug the First –
the gift of mockery with which I'm cursed
is just a insect biting Fame behind,
a vermin swimming in a glass of wine,
that, dipped out with a finger, bound to bite
its saving host, ungrateful parasite,
whose sting, between the cleft arse and its seat,
reminds Authority man is just meat,
a moralist as mordant as the louse
that the good husband brings from the whorehouse.

²⁰ Mervyn Morris 'Derek Walcott: *The Fortunate Traveller*', in *The Art of Derek Walcott*, ed. by Stewart Brown (Brigend: Seren Books, 1991), pp. 101-11. Reprinted in Mervyn Morris, *'Is English We Speaking' and Other Essays* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999) pp. 119-129 (p. 122). Further references are in text.

The second and ninth lines here are Standard English, and iambic in the English tradition; the sixth line taken by itself, is Standard too (and English in tone, with that punning allusion to sacrament). But they are, I think, absorbed into the overall context, Creole. Spoken by a reader who is at home in both Creole and Standard English, they are a subtle pleasure. By lingering at the end of the fifth line, for example, a performer might hint at what is obvious to the eye, 'bound to bite'. (127)

The subtle pleasure Morris takes comes in first registering those iambic pulses before then hearing the counterpoint created by the absent auxiliary verb before 'bound', one that nevertheless obeys the constraint of the pentameter in the relatively stressless syllable-timed medium of Trinidadian Creole. This does not detract from but emphasizes the voice's distinctive rhythms and capacious prosodic repertoire. (Calypsonians, of course, were fond of satirizing high style even as they flaunted their skill in using it.) It even affords a pun on 'bound' as both action (the insect bounding up the finger) and compulsion (the insect's drive to bite its host).

Morris knows what he's doing. He had been grappling with the challenges of decolonising practical criticism from the early days of Jamaican independence. His seminal 1964 essay 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously' employed the tools of practical criticism to intervene

decisively in the formation of the post-colonial Caribbean canon.²¹ Morris defended Bennett—a popular poet of the newspaper, stage, and radio whose sole medium was Creole—as she received the same dismissive treatment from the taste-makers of the early post-independence literary field as she had received a generation earlier, when she had first emerged. In a much less well known essay of 1968, Morris found himself defending Walcott against detractors in the West Indies who claimed that he was ‘not West Indian enough’, his voice ‘speaking away from that society’.²² This anti-elitist verdict, Morris contended, stemmed in part from ‘the absence of Practical Criticism in West Indian schools’ (8) – the kind of training that could prepare a broader literary public for the subtle pleasures of Walcott. If the later essay contra Vendler brings the satisfaction of calling out the tin ear of a white critic, the two earlier ones attest to the greater difficulties that attend the project of decolonising an aesthetic education. That old polarity of elite vs popular, and its formal correlate of difficult vs accessible, develop not only through the contest of critical proclivities and methods, but also as a consequence of the scarcity of pedagogical resources and decisions about what critical public that pedagogy seeks to cultivate.

Morris, Ngũgĩ, and Amuta speak to us from quite different and now distant historical junctures, moments when a pedagogy centred on practical criticism was a disciplinary common sense

²¹ Mervyn Morris, ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’, *Sunday Gleaner*, 7, 14, 21, and 28 June 1964, pp. 4, 23; p. 4; p. 4; p. 4.

²² Mervyn Morris, ‘Walcott and the Audience for Poetry’, *Caribbean Quarterly* 14.1-2 (1968), pp. 7-24 (p. 11).

rather than a topic of theoretical controversy.²³ We have returned to these earlier critics because we take seriously Harry Garuba's exhortation that those who seek to decolonize curricula must 'learn from old lessons' and because each of them wrestles with paradigms of practice that retain a pre-eminence in the classroom.²⁴ If teachers and students are to follow in the paths cut out by Morris, Ngũgĩ, and Amuta, and developed more recently by Garuba and Okot, they cannot merely fall back on the kinds of primers whose categories trace their origins to rhetoricians of the European renaissance, or, for that matter, their antecedents in Rome and Greece. Nor can they resort to the kinds of exercises envisaged by Richards in *Practical Criticism*. But this need not mean abandoning a critical pedagogy centred on the particularities of literary technique and form altogether, and treating literary works as if they were one kind of text among others, or as if they merely transcribed or betrayed meanings already accessible through political economy or sociology. Rather, it becomes necessary to think of technique and form as themselves always located, their effects and meanings always emerging from within particular contexts of intelligibility; the aim should be to recover ways of experiencing, ordering, and judging the world that may have little to do with a teacher's or student's previous aesthetic sensibilities. To attend to literary particularities is to inhabit the powerful and often unsettling worlds that literary works can make.

²³ We refer here not to the debates over decolonisation but to those over 'distance' and 'depth'.

²⁴ Harry Garuba, 'What is an African Curriculum?' *Mail & Guardian*, April 17, 2015. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-04-17-what-is-an-african-curriculum>

Of course, even fully realized, reading of this kind could not amount to a 'decolonized' practical criticism. 'Decolonising' any particular thing or practice cannot of itself achieve decolonisation's ends. This approach needs to form part of a coordinated ensemble of social and political practices based on anti-colonial principles. Its distinct contribution would be to enable readers to recognise the strengths and power of particular literary acts as they are located in particular situations, allowing them to confront the truth, and not just the surface, of colonized reality.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Harry Garuba.