Veiled Politics in West Indian Criticism

Abstract
Much West Indian literary criticism may be said to reflect two general approaches to the literary text. One approach tends toward the formalist school, and the other displays a socio-historical slant. Of course such generalizations run the risk of obscuring particular subtleties and nuances of critical emphasis, but at the same time they provide valuable insight into the nature of West Indian criticism. The implicit binarism in such a generalization reveals its own bias and provisional nature. It too is fictive, as fictive as the formalist procedures which repress diachrony in favour of the synchronic, or as the historical narrative which labours to obscure its own hermeneutic cracks as it represents the putative facts of history. At the same time, representing the Corpus of West Indian criticism as a locus of ideological conflict tends to foreground the ideologies which compete for prominence, and reveals the hegemonic underpinnings of these ideologies. In other words, what is at stake is far more than a disinterested exegesis of literary texts. Each analysis is itself symbolic of a certain political stance, that effort and desire to represent existence and experience in a particular way. In addition, the characterization of West Indian criticism as an arena of ideological conflict, falling into the two broad categories indicated earlier, facilitates an understanding of the critical enterprise as bound up with the construction of identity. The construction of identity which is so much a function of the West Indian novel for example, is no less an important force in West Indian criticism. Indeed, Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’ notwithstanding, the crisis of identity is a fundamental issue for the West Indian poet also, as Derek Walcott eloquently demonstrated at the 1988 West Indian Literature Conference in Jamaica.
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Walcott’s opening speech at this conference represents a poetic identity crisis located in the act of resistance and contrariety. He opposes prose to verse, sense to non-sense, the unitarianism of one or the other margin to the equivocation between two margins, and the Cartesian ego of cerebra
tion to Romanticism’s subjectivity structured through sensuality. Indeed, Walcott’s critique, a term which he would no doubt resist in the context of his address, is far closer in methodology to the kind of French poststructuralist criticism which he disparages than his text might superficially
admit. The binary oppositions which his text establishes, and its proce­
dural method of ‘playing’ between two margins is reminiscent of Barthian
jouissance, that linguistic sensuality which signals and celebrates the death
of all structures of signification as stable and transparent. However, Wal­
cott’s jouissance is not discovered in the infinite interplay of signification,
but in a determined retreat into the imagination of Romanticism. Walcott
states:

I cannot think because I refuse to, unlike Descartes ... I don’t know how to think
therefore I am. I am one who cannot accept these processes, of games of self­
contradiction, of essays on poetry, any more than I can accept the right-hand
margin of History, which begins in our language, from the left and proceeds with­
out trim, without metre, without that closing question of the couplet until it satisfies
itself with cause and effect. This ignorance is old. It is the future of the Caribbean.  

Ironically, this resistance to structure and analytical method relies upon
the same binarist and deconstructive procedures which Walcott is ostens­
ibly refuting in his address. In addition, Walcott’s polemic, loosely veiled
in the equivocation of his witticisms, argues against a reality constructed
through cause and effect; it is an argument against a pervasive scientism
and a linear concept of time and history. But while Walcott wishes to
undermine the would-be stable and authoritarian representations of polit­
ical and historical discourse, he feels constrained to argue against decon­
struction’s destabilization of the sign. Indeed Walcott’s address exemplifies
deconstruction’s aporias, those moments when the text contradicts itself,
and the problematic of meaning becomes more readily apparent. Never­
theless, Walcott feels compelled to resist the destabilization of the sign
after he has examined such linguistic instability in the service of poetry’s
sublimity. Walcott comments on a typographical error made as he pre­
pared his opening address for the Conference:

Typing this last word I made an error. I wrote the word ‘love’ instead of the word
‘life’; and have corrected it to mean what I intended. To mean what I intended is
what this public prose would have me believe, but to discover, through a typo­
graphical error, what is accidental but also true is to leave in the error and write ‘I
have avoided writing critical or philosophical prose for all of my love.”

Here we see Walcott attempting to distinguish poetry and the poet from
prose and the politician. He is creating space to construct identity, the
poem’s and the poet’s identity by attributing error and chaos to the ‘truth’
of poetry, and intention and sense to the ‘falsehood’ of critical prose. But
such distinction is ultimately untenable, since his typographical error re­
veals, not only the mercurial nature of the linguistic sign, but the depend­
ence of language itself, poetic and prosaic upon difference. This difference
which permits the possibility of meaning and interpretation, allows
Walcott to distinguish between the nuances of ‘life’ and ‘love’ or Auden’s
‘poet’ and ‘ports’. Such distinctions and subtleties are common to all
discourses, and are not a characteristic mark of poetry alone. The urge to establish these distinctions derives from Walcott's approach to the construction of identity.

I have begun this discussion of West Indian criticism with Walcott's 1988 opening address at the West Indian Literature Conference because in several ways, his approach highlights some aspects of West Indian criticism which are significant. Walcott distills meaning into gesture – a shrug. In its attempt to avoid the appearance of reasoned argument, his critique emphasizes the haphazard and contradictory nature of its own procedure. The anecdote of the typing error is included in the text and reinforced by its comparison with Auden's experience. Error produces truth and simultaneously celebrates the fallibility of the human. Idiosyncracy and resistance function as strategies of identity construction. This is not the logical Cartesian human who proceeds to truth by systematically avoiding fallibility. Rather, Walcott's human is a creature of Romanticism, recognizing that the possibility of error, resides always in the 'spontaneous overflow' even when it is recollected 'in tranquility'. The point is that a Romantic construction of the human and the literary is asserted in Walcott's address to subvert a post-structuralist deconstruction of the human and the literary.

Style functions importantly as an aspect of critical procedure. Where the typical structuralist/post-structuralist approach conveys the detachment of language understood as empty signifier, Walcott asserts the presence and individuality of the word. The sanctity of the imagination provides the hermetic retreat for the individual, and Walcott warns the individual to protect the 'Empire' of his mind: 'The imagination is a territory as subject to invasion and seizure as any far province of Empire.' Still somewhat daunted by the prospect of some deconstructionist emptying his signifiers of their Romantic humanity, Walcott reaffirms the primacy of poetic time and memory: 'The superficial idea of art as immortal is not what I mean: this is a prosaic idea of time, the immortality of art. To the poet, there is no word for this dimension of memory' [my emphasis]. Thus the poet/hermit retreats not only into the imagination of Romanticism to secure poetic identity, but attempts to initiate a further retreat to a place more primal than the word, a dimension where there is no word to destabilize by the very act of naming, those alcoves of poetic memory. Walcott's text demonstrates the dilemma of the 'against theory' proposition. It commences as a subversion of the authority of public prose, but is itself an example of public prose. In an attempt to relinquish any association with the authority of the speaking subject as authorial voice and consciousness, the text foregrounds those errors which undermine authorial intent. But the text itself participates in a system of meaning, and even the erroneous underwrites interpretation, as Paul De Man's *Blindness and Insight* reminds us. Thus, we are left with contradiction and indeterminacy, and Walcott's admonishment to young poets to be 'protector[s] of silences'. Part of the irony of Walcott's text is not only that it attempts to resist post-
structuralism's destabilization of logocentricity by reasserting Romantic ideals, but that it moves towards an exile of self-imposed silence. Walcott invites the poet to relinquish the word for the silence of gesture – a shrug – a sneer. Resistance is reduced to taking a vow 'not to listen', and the final retreat is recognized in the cloistered life of the hermit.

Romanticism's veneration of the self, the essential 'I' in retreat from the horrors of the Industrial Revolution or the philistinism of 'Third World' existence is part of a critical tradition which privileges form and symbol. On one hand, Romanticism's emphasis on the creative imagination provides respite from the pervasive commodification, or what Aimé Cesaire calls the 'thingification' of capitalist ideology. However, such emphasis also reflects the increasing marginalization of the artist from society to the degree that he is forced to turn inward to construct identity. Ironically, although Walcott is anti-Cartesian in the text we have been examining, his emphasis on turning inward to the imagination is very similar to the Cartesian approach. In addition, the Romantic artist's emphasis on the creative imagination is an attempt to subvert and escape the alienating consequences of capitalist ideology. In other words, the creative imagination resists capitalist commodification; it resists the fragmentation of labour which Marxism tells us produces the alienation of the worker from his labour. Romanticism emphasizes the sanctity of the individual creative imagination and the organic unity of the creative work. Post-structuralism is potentially troubling to the Romantic view of art and the artist since it destabilizes both of these categories, and indeed alienates the artist from his art. In a manner of speaking, post-structuralism produces in the Romantic artist, the alienation from labour which capitalism precipitates in the proletariat. The Romantic artist retreats from society and turns inward to the imagination to avoid the corrupting force of capitalist ideology. Among other consequences, such introspection invariably signals a detachment from history and socio-political concerns. Textuality, which Walcott seems to associate with poetic rather than prosaic writing, becomes an alternative to history, and as Edward Said observes:

'Textuality' is the somewhat mystical and disinfected subject matter of literary theory ... Textuality has therefore become the exact antithesis and displacement of what might be called history. Textuality is considered to take place, yes, but by the same token it does not take place anywhere or anytime in particular.9

In short, the refuge of textuality permits the construction of a transcendental selfhood in spite of the historical and socio-political vagaries of capitalism, and in the 'Third World', the debilitating effects of neocolonialism and imperialism. This substitution of textuality for history is evidenced in Walcott's 'Caligula's Horse' as we have seen, and it is also consistent with his analysis in a much earlier essay, 'The Muse of History'. In this essay Walcott argues that:
The common experience of the New World, even for its patrician writers whose veneration of the Old is read as the idolatry of the mestizo, is colonialism... These writers reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory. Indeed, historical narrative is subject to the same structures of representation which characterize fictional narrative, and so in this sense history is fiction. But this is distinctly different from characterising the fictional aspect of history as myth. It is this *legerdemain* which Walcott employs to substitute textuality for history. Such substitution facilitates the elision of fundamentally different experiences between victor and victim, colonizer and colonized. Wilson Harris also establishes his critical perspective on the framework of this elision, so that he substitutes textuality (which in Harris’s case is often calcified myth, extricated from social and political experience) for history. This calcified myth approximates what Edward Said refers to as ‘latent Orientalism’. Said indicates that the West’s ‘orientalising’ of the East may be understood in the context of latent and manifest Orientalism. He states:

The distinction I am making is really between an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity, which I shall call *latent* Orientalism, and the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth, which I shall call *manifest* orientalism. Whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant. Indeed, it is this latent Orientalism which naturalizes Orientalism as a doctrine and as a means of comprehending the East. Latent Orientalism fixes the East in an unchanging context of difference and separateness, permitting divergences in the way Orientalism manifests itself without altering Orientalism as a doctrine.

If we consider Walcott’s and Harris’s substitution of myth for history as a type of positivity, recalling Said’s characterization of latent Orientalism, we recognize that such substitution tends to obscure the ideologies inherent in colonialism and imperialism. The socio-political manifestations of such ideologies then function as a type of immoral or amoral literature, for as Walcott indicates, history is ‘a kind of literature without morality’. Such a view of literature which locates the literary text not only outside, but above history and ideology is a further indication of Walcott’s and Harris’s indebtedness to Romanticism. As Terry Eagleton indicates in his analysis of the ideological underpinnings of Romanticism:

*It is no accident that the period we are discussing [The Romantic Age] sees the rise of modern ‘aesthetics’, or the philosophy of art. It is mainly from this era, in the work of Kant, Hegel, Schiller, Coleridge and others, that we inherit our contemporary ideas of the ‘symbol’ and ‘aesthetic experience’, of ‘aesthetic harmony’ and the...*
unique nature of the artefact... If literature had ceased to have any obvious function ... then it was possible to turn this fact to literature's advantage.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus the literary, from Romanticism's perspective, asserts a non-ideological, ahistorical stance, and this marks, not only its retreat from socio-political concerns, but more importantly its complicity with the dominant ideology of the bourgeois class. Indeed, much of literature's hegemonic power derives from its representation, within those theoretical approaches that view literature as outside politics and history, as non-ideological. It is important to recognize that Eagleton is not dismissing Romanticism as mere escapism, but acknowledges its counterhegemonic resistance to capitalist commodification. However, Romanticism's initial manoeuvre to isolate and defend a poetic faculty against a de-humanising capitalism, evolves into a concept of the literary as self-contained entity, extricated from socio-political and -historical contamination. In short, resistance to capitalism's commodification effect produces an alternative \textit{status quo} in the form of the literary. The Romantic concept of the literary draws a veil over the political status of literature, and thus weilds its own ideological influence over the analysis and explication of texts.

The practice of West Indian criticism is often realized in the context of a struggle between Romanticism's ideological influence and the reassertion of literature's participation in existential realities. Therefore, criticism is always a simultaneous argument between the ideological positions broadly defined as formalist at one extreme and socio-historical at the other, as well as an analysis of the literary work. Thus the analysis and explication of the literary work may also be read as an implicit critique of the polarities of literary theory, acknowledging literature's participation in ideology and existential reality, or veiling such participation.

In 'Caligula's Horse', Walcott construes deconstruction as a threat to the integrity of the poetic imagination without differentiating among deconstructionists. Indeed, critics such as Paul De Man and Harold Bloom do not fundamentally threaten the security of the imagination's retreat, but perpetuate its putative status as politically and ideologically inert. Their deconstructive praxis promotes the 'blindness' of all attempts at interpretation and meaning; reading is always 'mis-reading'. If referentiality and meaning are taken out of the world, then nothing is left but the imagination, the mind contemplating the impossibility of meaning and truth. This form of deconstruction may be understood as a re-direction of Romanticism. In other words, the idiosyncratic and irrational nature of the Romantic imagination now turns itself upon the world rather than away from it. The threat of a rational, ideological world is diffused by a neo-Romanticism which construes such concepts as meaningless misreadings.

Stephen Heath for example, considers the Yale School's privileging of Romantic texts, and states:
It is always useful ... to consider literary theory in terms of the works it privileges... Deconstruction operates theoretically over all texts... At the same time, there has been in its development in literary theory a particular privileging of Romantic texts...¹⁴

Thus a particular type of deconstructive act masquerades as revolutionary practice when indeed it is more properly understood as a secondary phase of Romanticism. As Heath indicates, Paul de Man argues for deconstruction’s subversion of the established canon of literary works while writing on Wordsworth, Shelley, Yeats and Rousseau.¹⁵ In this way, Heath argues: ‘Upsetting the canon here is, in fact, the valuation of ‘literariness’, a valuation which can thus ironically renew quite traditional versions of literary autonomy.’¹⁶

Admittedly, deconstruction, even of the Yale School type problematizes the organic unity and symbolic integrity of the Romantic imagination; however, as already indicated, deconstructionists such as de Man and Bloom destabilize structures of meaning and interpretation in a manner which re-affirms the authority of the poetic imagination. Their practice subverts the rationality of cause and effect, and the political force of historical event. The anarchic chaos of Bloom’s ‘misprision’ and de Man’s ‘blindness’ ensure the interminable jouissance of the imagination by enveloping existential reality in a cloak of linguistic arbitrariness and instability. Their dismantling of all positions, ideologies and meanings functions as the authoritative discourse subverting all other discourses. Thus ironically, an obscure positivity is derived from a systematic process of negation. Truth resides in the act of negation, a position quite similar to Walcott’s approach in ‘Caligula’s Horse’ and ‘The Muse of History’ or indeed, Wilson Harris’s privileging of the metaphysical realm, that imaginative Empire which subordinates existential reality. In effect, Walcott and Harris are theoretically closer to the Yale School of deconstructionists than might be readily apparent. Somewhat reminiscent of Said’s latent Orientalism, this imaginative retreat functions as a constant despite the variables in manifest (i.e. socio-historical) reality. Walcott’s ‘Caligula’s Horse’ and ‘The Muse of History’ characterize history as a type of anti-hero engaged in an epic struggle with the heroic, creative imagination. The literariness of history (i.e. history as limited and limiting literature) is foregrounded almost to the exclusion of the history of literariness. As a result, the ideological nature of literature and literariness becomes obscured. Literature is made to appear outside and above socio-political and ideological concerns, when indeed it is always intimately involved with existential reality.

Significantly, Walcott and Harris theorize against an adversarial history. Their anxiety of influence, is precipitated by Eurocentric history rather than by poetic precursors as in Harold Bloom’s case. Walcott and Harris struggle to overcome history through literariness; the social, economic and
political world is subordinated to the exigencies of the literary. Bloom on the other hand, locates anxiety within literariness itself rather than in any quarrel with history. Despite the similarities indicated earlier, it is this shift in the location of creative anxiety that marks the difference between critics like Bloom, and theorists like Walcott and Harris. Walcott rages against deconstruction, despite his own deconstructive method in 'Caligula's Horse', precisely because the socio-historical residue in his deconstructive act conflicts with Bloom's and De Man's deconstruction. Where Bloom's and De Man's subversion of meaning and interpretation operates in a socio-historical context that all but guarantees their selfhood, Walcott deconstructs the prose of politics and 'First World' deconstruction in a socio-historical context that emphasizes his otherness. Walcott's destabilization of meaning has to resist such destabilization where it threatens the literary construction of his selfhood. Bloom and De Man can engage a wholesale deconstructive activity which destabilizes even the concept of the Self, since their subversion occurs in a socio-historical context that corroborates their selfhood. An act of jouissance for Barthes or De Man or Bloom becomes an act of survival, resistance and re-creation for Walcott and Harris.

Thus deconstruction serves significantly different ends for Walcott and Harris than for Bloom and De Man. The socio-historical divergences between the 'Third World' and the 'First', the existential differences between the colonized and the colonizer create the possibility of deconstructive critiques with radically different results despite a shared methodology. The socio-historical categorization of the 'Third World' as victim, mediates the deconstructive practice of a Walcott or Harris; they deconstruct history to re-construct selfhood. Indeed the inherent contradictions always threaten the delicate balancing act which characterizes their approach. Both Walcott and Harris appear to emphasize form as a means of attenuating a socio-historical context that undermines their selfhood. Formalism masks the socio-historical impact of 'Third World' ontology. On the other hand, Bloom and De Man employ deconstruction to promote the fallibility, if not impossibility, of meaning and interpretation. They implicitly subvert Walcott's and Harris's attempts to re-construct selfhood by indicating that all efforts at construction are always already disintegrating. Thus the formalism which Walcott and Harris employ to subvert a 'Third World' history of conquest and subjugation is deconstructed by Bloom and De Man. Implicit in such Yale School deconstruction therefore, is a re-assertion of traditional versions (i.e. 'First World' versions) of existential reality, since there are no critical tools to re-assess and reconfigure 'Third World' history, which cannot themselves be deconstructed. In other words, Bloom and De Man also veil the socio-historical context by emphasizing formalism, but unlike Walcott and Harris, they do so, not to assert the selfhood of repressed otherness, but to highlight the futility of constructing selfhood. Their version of deconstruction veils its own reactionary political
stance in the guise of apolitical procedure, as it attempts to subvert the politics of resistance inherent in Walcott’s and Harris’s approach.

It is not co-incidental that a discussion of the politics of West Indian criticism dwells upon deconstruction and an assessment of some of its Anglo-American proponents. Intertextuality is as relevant to literary theory and criticism as it is to the literary text. Thus, as we have seen, Derek Walcott, whom we generally acknowledge as poet rather than theorist and critic, is implicitly admitting the hegemonic impact of post-structuralist theory on West Indian literature, and by extrapolation, on West Indian identity construction.

Indeed, the ideological conflicts in West Indian criticism are not merely between a West Indian formalist and a West Indian socio-historical approach – to engage an old cliche, it’s not merely Walcott vs Brathwaite. As we have only partially examined in this discussion, West Indian criticism reveals its own internal conflict between formalist and socio-historical concerns. In addition, West Indian theoretical and critical issues simultaneously engage metropolitan theory, and the nature of this engagement provides additional criteria to assess the politics of West Indian criticism.

NOTES

5. Walcott, p. 141.
8. Walcott, p. 142.
15. Stephen Heath, p. 43.