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HAVE WE PASSED THE LAST POST- ?
THEORIZING POST/COLONIAL LITERATURE

Aimé Césaire. GREGSON DAVIS. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xvi + 208 pp. (Cloth US\$ 59.95)

Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature. SILVIO TORRES-SAILLANT. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiv + 353 pp. (Cloth £45.00)

Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature. CHRIS BONGIE. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. xi + 543 pp. (Cloth US\$ 65.00, Paper US\$ 24.95)

The three books under review here all make important claims for a Caribbean poetics, but they do so from perspectives that range from practical criticism (Davis), through comparative poetics (Torres-Saillant), to what is sometimes called high theory (Bongie). With the exception of Davis's book, which is a detailed treatment of a single seminal figure, they range widely and seek grounds for broad comparative assessments. The need to establish such grounds for comparison is witnessed by the three-volume *History of Literature in the Caribbean*, which Bongie and Torres-Saillant both reference. To find one's way in this potentially dizzying display of critical and theoretical acumen, it will be most helpful to proceed from the general to the particular, from high theory to practical criticism.

Post-modern, Post-colonial (or is it Postcolonial?), Counter-Postmodern ... How does one cope? The prefixes keep tumbling out of the word processors of the theoreticians, each of whom seems quite determined to ring changes on the usage of all predecessors. The non-specialist is at a loss to know where to begin; but begin one must, since without an adequate lexicon the risk of confusion in this area is well-nigh total.

Since Kwame Anthony Appiah asked the rhetorical question whether the Post- in Post-Modern is the Post- in Post-Colonial at the beginning of

the 1990s, the distinctions have proliferated. One cannot deny that it was necessary to draw attention to this epistemological problem, as Appiah did, but we now run the risk of originality overwhelming comprehensibility. Chris Bongie's *Islands and Exiles* proposes to bring order out of terminological confusion:

The "post/colonial," in short, will be distinguished throughout this book from other variants of the word, notably "postcolonial" and, more infrequently, "post-colonial." Postcolonial will be used simply as an historical marker, covering approximately the last half of this century and describing certain societies that have been or still are under the formal or informal control of another nation, as well as the cultural artifacts that these societies have produced; post-colonial will henceforth be limited to conveying the (purely ideological) hypothesis of a future that would be completely severed from colonialism – a fully liberated time that the "post/colonial" insistently puts into question. (p. 13)

Fair enough; the distinctions are reasonably clear and allow for relative precision in usage. The next paragraph in Bongie's theoretical introduction lays out the lineage of his position with respect to what has come to be called French Theory, of whom the leading exponents for him are Lyotard and Derrida. "The entangled condition that I am gesturing toward in the word 'post/colonial' can be read in parallel with Lyotard's more recent uses of the word 'postmodern,' in which it signals not a 'new age' following upon modernity ... but a self-reflexive component of that modernity" (p. 13). This distinction resembles that which Theo D'haen has posited between modernism and counter-modernism (a colonial phenomenon) and postmodernism and counter-postmodernism (in the postcolonial era). Like Bongie, D'haen begins with Lyotard, but D'haen then develops Habermas's critique of Lyotard's dismissal of metanarratives. (See D'haen 1997:303-21.)

Keenly aware of the charges of political "quietism" leveled against deconstruction, Bongie expatiates in his analysis of Coetzee's *Foe* on the novel's relation to Derrida:

Foe's incessant return to the sign of its own blindness, its parasitic attachment to the already-told stories that it recites, revising without in any decisive way overturning them, is eminently deconstructionist in its epistemological concerns and its insistence on the necessity of inhabiting the very thing that it puts into question (be it, as here, the language of colonialism, or, in Derrida's case, that of metaphysics. (p. 26)

The length and the syntactic complexity of this sentence are typical of the author's style, which is part and parcel of his highly self-conscious engagement with theory.

Readers of the *New West Indian Guide* may well find the most useful aspect of Bongie's book in his application of Édouard Glissant's theory of creolization to a wide range of literary and historical phenomena from the late eighteenth century to the Martiniquan Creolists of the present day. He also uses the critical writing of J. Michael Dash to excellent advantage. Bongie's pairing of Glissant with Lafcadio Hearn in his Chapter 4 produces critical perspectives that are as stimulating as they are unexpected.

To bring Bongie into useful dialogue with both Davis and Torres-Saillant, one cannot do better than to focus on their respective treatments of Aimé Césaire, whose work figures in all three books. Bongie's focus on discourse leads him to disseminate his references to Césaire throughout much of his book: in the chapter on Glissant, of course (Glissant early on pointed out the necessity of transcending *négritude*); and also in a chapter on the Martiniquan Creolists of today (who began by declaring themselves the sons of Césaire only to attempt to kill the father, in the case of Raphaël Confiant); but, most importantly, in a chapter he devotes to the Guadeloupean novelist Daniel Maximin, whose work is well suited to Bongie's theoretical approach. Bongie concludes a discussion of Césaire's writings on Toussaint Louverture and Victor Schoelcher with this illuminating observation on his relationship to Maximin:

It is Césaire's problematically faithful imitation of his "revolutionary" models that I will be discussing at the beginning of the next chapter – a chapter in which, through a consideration of Daniel Maximin's post-modern reworkings of Caribbean modernism ... I will be interrogating the explosive rhetoric of transcendence (*dépassement*), linearity (*lignée*), and ends and/or goals (*fin*) with which Césaire justifies the emulation of his nineteenth-century model. (p. 340)

Whatever position the reader may take on deconstructionist political quietism, the manner in which Bongie uses rewriting (in Maximin) to connect the late eighteenth century with the late twentieth is productive and illuminating.

Silvio Torres-Saillant positions himself from the outset in opposition to Bongie's theoretical perspective:

The intellectual discourse of such prominent contemporary figures as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Paul de Man, and Jürgen Habermas has little to say regarding the literary art of the Caribbean. These are Western intellectuals whose theories have derived from their reflection on Western problems, and it is difficult to assign to them universal applicability. By the same token, a discourse that sets out to explain Caribbean literature must bear in mind the sociocultural specificity and the historical imperatives governing its development. (p. 7)

Nothing could be clearer, in theory at least. In Chapters 1 and 2 Torres-Saillant treats "the unity of the Caribbean on sociohistorical and cultural grounds" and "[the hypothesis that] the region constitutes a coherent cultural whole," respectively (p. 10). For this author, the foremost literary intellectual whose work points the way toward a comparative Caribbean poetics is (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite, to whom the third chapter is devoted. Successive chapters treat the work of the Haitian René Depestre and the Dominican Pedro Mir. The sixth and concluding chapter "highlights the points of contact between the three writers studied" (p. 11). The creolization that constitutes the subtext of Bongie's book becomes, for Torres-Saillant, "a notable hybridization of form and a handling of language that oscillates between the loftiness of high-sounding oratory and the demotic style of pedestrian talk" (p. 11). Torres-Saillant's style is as accessible as Bongie's is intricate; the former writes as a native intellectual (who happens to chair a Dominican Studies program in the City University of New York), the latter as a Canadian metatheoretician working in a Department of English in the United States.

Treatment of Césaire as an unavoidable reference point and major figure is as disseminated throughout Torres-Saillant's study as it is in Bongie's. From that point on, however, the contrasts stand out starkly. In the chapter on Depestre, Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* underpins the binomial oppositions proceeding from black/white that Torres-Saillant foregrounds in the collection *Gerbe de sang*. Later in the same chapter Césaire's *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* – his public statement of opposition on quitting the French Communist Party in 1956 – is used to similar effect. In the chapter on Pedro Mir, Césaire is again cited (following Roberto Márquez's *Latin American Revolutionary Poetry* ..., 1974 [pp. 208-9]) as Mir is called "a Caribbean poet in the militant troubadour tradition of Guillén, Césaire, or Jacques Roumain" (p. 215). In the chapter on Brathwaite, Césaire's play *Une Tempête* is drawn into ideological consonance with the Barbadian poet's "Caliban," also published in 1969, a tactic that Torres-Saillant practices consistently to demonstrate the thematic and cultural unity of the region's major writers. It is abundantly clear that in this study the tradition of politically committed writing – which Bongie's theoretical perspective subverts and problematizes at every turn – is alive and well.

Davis's *Aimé Césaire* is at home in the paradigm of Césaire-as-modernist that the present reviewer largely created twenty years ago. No worries over the postmodern or the postcolonial trouble Davis's limpid critical style. Even Césaire's late collection of poetry, *moi, laminaire* ..., (1982), remains outside the debates over postcolonial/postmodern theory, despite its having been treated as a postmodern work in 1990.

These minor caveats aside, the book is brilliant. Trained as a classical scholar, Davis brings to his subject the necessary knowledge of Greek and

Latin (and their literatures) that previous critics of Césaire have lacked. He builds upon the best previous work and cites his sources just enough to let the reader know where to look for more extensive treatments. Indeed, readers who care about Césaire's work have a right to be disappointed only by the book's brevity; but that is not the author's fault. The Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature, for which it was commissioned, is a series of slim volumes (a scant two hundred printed pages) that does not allow for a thorough discussion of Césaire's poetic oeuvre, much less his works for the theater.

Davis's book has six chapters of more or less equal length; after prolegomena on Césaire's education and early influences, the author turns successively to "Exploring Racial Selves" (on the *Cahier*), "Inventing a Lyric Voice" (on *Armes miraculeuses*), "Lyric Registers" (on *Soleil cou coupé* and *Cadastre*), "The Turn to Poetic Drama," and finally "The Return to Lyric" (on *moi, laminaire ...*). A brief epilogue and even briefer introduction frame this slim but elegant volume.

Davis is at his best when he does a condensed exegesis of selected poems from each of the collections he takes up. The result is invariably as clear as it is learned, and the reader comes away with a firm sense of Césaire's poetics. In the forty-page chapter devoted to *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, for instance, the opening gambit runs thus:

A reader who is attuned to the Western literary canon may readily detect intertextual resonances in the idea of a deferred homecoming (*retour au pays natal*). The archetypal return in the Western tradition is, of course, that of the Homeric Odysseus, and far from downplaying the potential significance of the parallel, we would do well to pose, albeit briefly, the question of how *Cahier* subtly exploits the association. (p. 22)

How indeed? This is the crucial question for those more attuned to theoretical problems than is Davis. His answer, which involves taking seriously the "masking" rituals Césaire evokes in his long poem, touches on cultural anthropology as well as comparative literature, the author's academic discipline: "Each of the principal masks (and there are principal as well as subsidiary ones in the course of the poem's evolution) endows the wearer with a distinctive voice. What is chiefly conferred in this instance is a mysterious power of potent speech (note the fivefold anaphora, 'I would say')" (p. 29). Derek Walcott, who is not mentioned here, did his own Caribbean appropriation of Homer, twice in fact, first in an epic poem (*Omeros*), then in a play (*The Odyssey*). Walcott's work, like Césaire's, would qualify as counter-modernism in Theo D'haen's terminology.

Several readings of the *Cahier*, since this reviewer's in 1981, have seen a downward spiral that prefigures a kind of spiritual rebirth of the

hero/speaker. Davis treats that feature of the long poem as follows: "The narrative setting has explicit eschatological color that points the reader to the threshold of death. Before making his foray into the world of the dead, the hero of *Cahier* must first shed, like his ancient Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman archetypes, his pretensions to grandeur" (p. 44). Davis then explicates the all-too-famous passages in the *Cahier* where the speaker refers to what "we" colonized Caribbean peoples have not been – "Amazons of the king of Dahomey, nor princes of Ghana ... nor scholars at Timbuctu ... nor architects of Djenné, nor Mahdis, nor warriors" (p. 44) – which have always proved a stumbling block to those critics for whom Césaire's poem must be an unambiguous statement of neo-African resistance to colonialism. The result is a much more sophisticated and convincing demonstration of the dialectics of ethnicity in the *Cahier* than we have been accustomed to.

Concerning the lyric oratorio *Et les chiens se taisaient*, which Césaire had designated a tragedy, Davis has taken up (p. 131) the notion put forward by Arnold (1990) to the effect that "the ancient Egyptian variant of the 'dying god' motif ... is arguably the preponderant model in Césaire's eclectic mythography." He works out this hypothesis in much more detail than was previously attempted, so well, in fact, that the case has now been made conclusively.

To those like Torres-Saillant who wish to maintain the autochthonous quality of recent Caribbean masters, Davis would reply that "Egyptian civilization was regarded by the négritude writers as 'black'" (p. 131) long before Bernal or even Cheikh Anta Diop popularized the notion. Such justification is unnecessary, however, if one pursues the theoretical perspective of counter-modernism, according to which colonized intellectuals appropriated models and styles already present in the contemporary West and then turned them back on their colonial masters. This is precisely the sense Davis gives to the term *post-surrealism* (p. 74 *et passim*), the only instance one finds of a period term prefixed by *post-* in this book.

Each of the three books has an excellent bibliography and a very useful index.

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