

Field, material, technique: On renewing postcolonial literary criticism

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jcl.sagepub.com**Ben Etherington**

University of Western Sydney, Australia

Jarad Zimbler

University of Birmingham, UK

Abstract

Concerned by the eclipse of concerted discussion of literary technique in the postcolonial field, this article outlines a critical practice which would restore questions of technique to the centre ground. Proceeding from the assumption that technique is the agent of art's thinking, it proposes that the literary craft practised in any given work or authorship needs to be thought through in its *context of intelligibility*: a conception which synthesizes insights of Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Adorno; particularly their respective notions of *field* and *material*. Then, in two short studies, on the critical reception of Louise Bennett in the Caribbean and J. M. Coetzee in South Africa, these concepts are put into motion to illuminate the truth-content of field-defining developments of the literary material.

Keywords

Postcolonial literary criticism, literary technique, field, material, prosody, prose style, Pierre Bourdieu, Theodor Adorno, Louise Bennett, Mervyn Morris, J.M. Coetzee, André Brink

In September 1965, Edward Lucie-Smith, an émigré from Jamaica, attended a poetry performance by his compatriot Louise Bennett at the Royal Court Commonwealth Poetry Festival. The festival's title alone signalled historical inertias and ironies: Jamaica had been politically independent for four years, most of the British Empire was dismantled, and yet Lucie-Smith encountered his culture under a banner that conjoined Crown and post-imperial federation, and at the seat of the nearly dissolved imperium.¹ It seems the

Corresponding author:

Ben Etherington, University of Western Sydney, Australia.

Email: b.etherington@uws.edu.au; J.J.Zimbler@bham.ac.uk

encounter affected him, perhaps all the more for taking place where it did. Hearing Bennett's gregarious patois, its force channelled by the ballad form, crystallized for Lucie-Smith the challenges for poetry in the aftermath of decolonization. He commented in a review for the *Sunday Times*:

[H]er unpretentious monologues ... went a long way towards proving that a large part of the job of poetry in a new nation is not to make or break images, but to tell the truth so that it sounds true. (Nettleford, 2005: 3)

It is worth meditating on this tautology, for the hair's breadth that separates *truth* and *truth that sounds true* implies a mode or rather a paradigm of postcolonial literary criticism that has never eventuated, but which might yet be recovered and its promise realized — or so this essay proposes.

It is curious that Lucie-Smith counterposes the task of sounding true to the making and breaking of images. If the latter all too easily eclipses the former, this experience of Louise Bennett's work seems to provide an important corrective, and it may well be of the greatest importance that Bennett manages to sound true *unpretentiously*. There is a real sense here that in undertaking the labour of sounding true Bennett is getting on with the honest work of writing the poetry of the new nation. But is the truth not true, however it sounds? One thinks of a comment made by Fanon in *L'an V de la révolution Algérienne* six years previously: "The truth objectively expressed is constantly vitiated by the lie of the colonial situation" (Fanon, 1967: 128). This forms part of that work's contention that, in the struggle for national liberation, the Algerian people were undoing the lies of the colonial situation and so accessing objective truth. Here the struggle for truth is coterminous with the demand for sovereignty, in which case Lucie-Smith's comment, coming after the achievement of self-rule, would be redundant. But of course we are dealing with very different kinds of truth. One concerns analytically verifiable truth, which we can gloss as the truth of a scientific reason, the other what we will call truth-content, for which the gloss "true-sounding truth" will do for now.

The nation might have its independence but this does not automatically generate true-sounding poetry; and this cannot be achieved merely by quarrying the new nation's raw linguistic material — say the unmediated "orality" of the folk. It is to be earned through composition: a *task* of and for the new nation. Bennett's labour to make poetry sound true initiates a dialectic of the available expressive resources and techniques, which we will henceforth designate the dialectic of the "material".

This same dialectic has been initiated where other writers of decolonization — be they poets, novelists, or playwrights — have faced the demands of craft and so become subject to judgements concerning the truth of their works.² These judgements need not resort to an aural metaphoric. Lucie-Smith's comment is not significant for counterposing the sound of truth to preoccupations with images, as though turning from appearance to essence. The emphasis may just as well be on looking and seeing, as is the case in another of those apparent tautologies about the apprehension of truth:

No-one has really looked at the evil of the South African situation in the way in which evil is really to be looked at. (Temple, 1974: 3)

This is the South African novelist's predicament according to J. M. Coetzee, interviewed in a local newspaper in 1974 soon after the publication of his first novel *Dusklands* (1974). He implies that a work might concern the truth and yet avoid a confrontation with it: apartheid's evil may be plain enough, but knowing about it is quite different to being forced to inhabit it as one's own reality. To ensure the truth strikes home with sudden immediacy, the novelist will need to do something other than re-present to readers well-handled items from the trove of gathered images; something other still than seizing or even shattering those images.

Whether it is poetry or prose with which we are concerned, the emergence of a convincing and compelling work is never an isolated and self-contained event. It is not just a matter for the author who makes, but also for the readership and audience that wants to recognize truthfulness. As such, there needs to be a shift in critical practice if truth-content is to find articulation. This is a challenge for criticism which must look further than the content of particular utterances and provide more than interpretive paraphrase; a criticism adequate to new truths because it approaches literary technique as the agent of art's thinking; and whose task it is, therefore, to make truth-content explicit.³

Now decades into its career, the study of postcolonial literatures is hardly any closer to such a critical practice, its progress checked by the *eclipse of literary technique* in the discipline, which is itself largely the result of an overriding concern with the making and breaking of images. There are, of course, few agreements in the domain of postcolonial studies, and many are now departing for "world literature". But most would accept that the field was formed around the problematic of representation, and that narrative has been the favoured object of investigation.⁴

In both respects it is uncontroversial to regard Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as the point of departure, and thence to trace the development of a number of distinct concerns: with questions of authority and knowledge, colonial discourse and its internal contradictions, resistance to representational "regimes", and the formation of national community. As a consequence, the methods of deconstruction and discourse analysis have been widely privileged, and where they have not the concern has been primarily to critique such approaches from the standpoint of material reality.⁵ Across the field, literature and its critique have been approached as instruments in the reckoning with colonialism and neocolonialism. It is as though the task so casually indicated by Lucie-Smith never existed. The pursuit of this lost possibility does not require a nuancing of any of the many positions within postcolonial studies, but, insofar as it is centred on the making and breaking of images, a bracketing of the field altogether.

The eclipse of technique is apparent even in a critic such as Jahan Ramazani, who himself addresses the related near-eclipse of poetry. In *The Hybrid Muse*, which posits that "postcolonial studies and poetics [...] offer a potentially valuable blend of strategies" (2001: 4), the poetic mixing of languages, registers, and forms in the complex linguistic environments of the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia are brought under the rubric of "hybridity": "a potent lens through which to explore interculturalism in the postcolonial world" (2001: 6). Priyamvada Gopal has countered: "To the extent that English poetry from non-anglophone cultures is necessarily 'composite,' 'mongrel,' and 'compound,' hybridity offers little more than a stating of the obvious" (2012: 197). Faced with this, Ramazani attempts to dynamize his argument with the rhetoric of subversion.

The result can border on condescension. We are informed, for example, that syntactic pivoting on line breaks and delayed resolution in a poem by Soyinka displays “astonishingly elastic syntax” that hybridizes two language systems (2001: 15–16). Too much is taken for granted, including the actual character of these language systems and the particular meaning of this poem.

Gopal comments that the abstraction performed by a concept like “hybridity” is “too neglectful of the specificities of different aesthetic projects” (2012: 184), and in her essay, demonstrates the very different social and artistic implications of code-switching and language blending in poems from the Caribbean, India, and South Africa. She concludes that effective comparative work requires finely calibrated approaches that attend to “specificities of context — linguistic, political and cultural” (2012: 197). Although pointing in the right direction, “specificities of context” yet falls short of what we propose is required to grasp the dialectic of literary material that particular aesthetic projects generate. Any substantive discussion of the coming-into-being of a work that produces and enacts truth would need to be able to seize upon the *shifting parameters of expressive possibility*, and to develop the means to describe the *transformation of literary substance* taking place.

To be very clear, ours is not another version of the demand that works be “situated” in their historical contexts, interpreted against the background of myriad events, details, and personalities. Neither are we repeating Eli Sorensen’s (2010) recent call to revive the category of the “literary” within postcolonial studies, which, he explains, requires a robust resuscitation of form.⁶ Nor are we reiterating the oft-made demand to read closely. The practice we outline necessitates attentive reading, but one can give a detailed reading of a text, combing it for the aesthetic, cultural, and historical information relevant to one’s purposes, and yet miss entirely that which determines its expressive potency.

Rather, we wish for a criticism capable of sensing the work in its dynamic relation to the historical trajectory of its literary material and of discerning the act of composition within a field of writerly and institutional relations. We wish, that is, for a criticism that takes seriously what we would like to call the work’s *context of intelligibility*: that configuration of potentiality in a given moment and place that impels and shapes the work and makes possible its emergence into meaning.

The challenge of clarifying what this requires has led from and back into the writings of two figures, Theodor Adorno and Pierre Bourdieu. This is not to suggest that these thinkers have been absent from work in the field.⁷ It is simply to acknowledge that their work has proved essential for conceptualizing the mode of criticism we are elaborating here. We have relied especially on “literary material” and “literary field”. The meaning of neither is straightforward, and there would be little gained in attempting any drawn-out account. Instead, we offer some sense of how and what they allow us to think.

To begin with the latter, it is worth stating at the outset that the literary field is embedded always within what Bourdieu describes as the fields of power and of social relations. How the literary field comes into being and eventually achieves a relative autonomy is something with which Bourdieu is centrally preoccupied and is certainly relevant when

we consider the literary fields emerging during decolonization, but the details of this discussion need not detain us here. Nor need we dwell on Bourdieu's division of the field into sub-fields of restricted and unrestricted production. What is most important is the claim that the field is a set of works, understood as position-takings, which are related to one another in such a way that each is given value and meaning in relation to all others, and which thereby constitute the shape of the field itself.

The literary field is a relational structure in which — and this is of the greatest significance — the grounds of relation are those practices peculiar to the field. In the broadest sense, this means something like writing itself, but given the very long history of written art, these grounds of relation will tend to be techniques and competencies that are at the least artisanal and which have to do with refashioning language into works. For this reason, no matter how political an author's intent, or how class- or race- or gender-specific their motivation, the medium of their activity requires that they negotiate a field structured by an aesthetic logic and that they pursue their aims by means of that logic. The importance of this must not be underestimated, for it follows that the context most pertinent to our proposed literary-critical enterprise is that of other works, though these are considered neither in terms of influence nor of intertextuality. For Bourdieu, negative relations are as important as positive relations, and reactions to minor works as important as reactions to major ones.

Bourdieu, moreover, gives prominence to authors, who themselves exist in a space of relationally determined positions correlated to the space of their works, an environment they share with institutions involved in publication, reception, and consecration. These institutions give objective existence to the structure of the field, making manifest the divisions between the projects of writers, and the symbolic capital each has accrued. But the processes of selecting, editing, and publishing works are also ones by which position-takings move from virtuality into actuality. It is often the literary agent, editor, publisher, and/or reviewer who sees more clearly — or rather explicitly — the stakes and struggles that constitute a particular field; and their interventions may well be more substantial even than this.

If Bourdieu helps us to see the relational character of literary production, and thus the necessity of attending to the specific logic of literary differentiation, Adorno, in speaking of art's *material*, helps us to see the constraints on literary practice, and thereby to understand something of its character. To clarify what we take Adorno to mean, we might begin with the familiar notion of the material conditions of production: the level of productive means that constitute the limits, at any one time, as to what a society is able to create in order to reproduce itself. Now, where artistic production is concerned, the material conditions, or simply the material, is no less than the totality of choices available to the artist, including (a) that which is most easily understood as material, and which might be thought of as "raw material", e.g. the marble of the sculptor, the words of the poet; but also: (b) themes or subject matters, e.g. the human body, unrequited love; (c) the tools available, e.g. hammer and chisel, meters; (d) genres, e.g. still-life, epic; and (e) the know-how or techniques by means of which these tools are utilized and developed. The material, moreover, will contain in itself certain tendencies, which are products of its historical character. For, as a consequence of social historical change and the continuing progress of the material (understood in a value-neutral sense), the passage of time ensures

that, in a particular place and moment, only certain possibilities will in fact be available for a production that is capable of truth-content.

Although Adorno tends to illustrate this point in relation to music, we might consider any of the arts. A European sculptor, for example, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, finds that marble itself has become drained of potential, unavailable except as a resource for the inauthentic art of the curio-shop, or interior design. Similarly, for an Anglophone American poet of the 1950s and 1960s, not only have the metrics and forms of earlier generations become banalized; metre itself has ceased to be meaningful. Thus, technique is inherent in the dialectic of the material; it is not a set of prescriptions for craft then applied to raw material. Nor, we might add (though this is not something addressed by Adorno himself), can the material simply be transplanted, in the guise of a literary tradition or culture.⁸ The expressive requirements of the present are those of both a now and a here, and in each literary field the material is not merely supplemented by local practices and traditions, but wholly reconfigured, such that new tendencies may be revealed.

When taken together, then, “material” and “field” prompt us to the recognition of the dual character of literary context and of literary production. For an artist encounters *at one and the same time* (i) a relational field of positions, occupied by immediate predecessors, peers, and rivals, and of position-takings, which are distinct works, groups of works, and movements; and (ii) a totality of subject-matters, techniques, strategies, forms, genres, tones, and so forth. Put differently, we might say that the field is what and with whom one works alongside and against, whereas the material is what is worked with, what is to be mastered and overcome, a set of problems, possibilities and demands. Not every position-taking will necessarily develop the material, though in failing to do so it may well clarify the material’s demands.

Are field and material therefore intended to be the fixed axes of a methodology? Not in the slightest, for we believe with Adorno in an approach that begins with an authorship or even the work at hand and that therefore eschews the very notion of a portable methodology. As to the problems raised by using Adorno and Bourdieu together and for the purposes of reading literatures forged in the confrontations and aftermaths of colonization, we readily acknowledge that their theoretical abstractions bear the sediment of the places and moments in which they came to fruition.⁹ These problems are hardly amenable to conclusive resolution on a theoretical level. Rather than explaining in advance what conceptual modifications might be necessary, we will conduct two brief studies in which the concepts introduced above are deployed and adapted to particular contexts of intelligibility.

Our starting points are the two tautologies considered at the beginning of this essay. We examine the struggle of critics to recognize and articulate Bennett’s true-sounding truths and Coetzee’s looking at evil as it ought to be looked at. This enables us to gain purchase on the protean boundaries of literary fields as their scales of values are challenged, revealing field-defining tensions and forces. In both, moreover, we frame our discussions in relation to works that somehow address the truth of the colonial situation in their grappling with literary material. The essays do not build sequentially into a larger argument but are self-contained. Their juxtaposition, we hope, will direct readers towards the path which this theoretical exposition has attempted to open up.

Before turning to these, however, it is worth acknowledging that, whatever our criticisms of other paradigms in postcolonial and world literary studies, the existence of both disciplinary formations has helped to constitute our own orientations and sense of possibilities. We react against what we perceive has been lost to both, but are impelled by and make use of the dynamics they have initiated, towards, that is, a criticism committed to reading works for and in light of the truths of a reality structured by forms of globe-spanning domination; and a criticism that takes seriously the value of comparative analysis. Saying this, we ought to say also that our interest is not in theorizing thematic resonances or historical parallels. For us, comparing contexts of intelligibility is a means of shedding light on those processes by which new literary communities and aesthetic possibilities become available; and on the relationship between particular literary cultures and the larger historical formations to which they belong.

The iambs of the mind

Me no know is what kine a chuch
 Fi-yuh mout coulda jine –
 Yuh lip-dem heng dung lacka when
 Mule cyaan meck up him mine

Gwan! Me an yuh no combolo –
 Yuh foot shapeless an lang
 Like smaddy stan far fling dem awn
 An meck dem heng awn wrang! (“Cuss Cuss”, Bennett, 1982: 94)

At the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies second triennial conference at the University of the West Indies in January 1971, Gordon Rohlehr presented a paper, “Literature and the Folk”, which considered the “folk” in Caribbean culture: as an inspiration and subject for “middle-class” authors, but also the work of actual “folk” artists. After discussing a number of writers and musicians from the eastern Caribbean — novelists, poets, and calypsonians — the paper comes to the poetry of Louise Bennett. It works through parallels and divergences in Bennett’s creole ballads and Trinidadian calypso so as to put into relief the respective social realities out of which each emerged and which they address. This serves to build his case that language culture across the Caribbean exists along a “continuum”. It does not stratify into class perspectives, or divide into oral and scribal modes.

Towards concluding, Rohlehr comments that the engagement with Bennett has been limited. Particularly, that he has discussed her poetry in a “purely literary” way; by which it seems he means he has discussed her poems as printed objects. This does her art as much disservice as would considering calypsoes without melody. On the page the poems “assume a hymn-book monotony, and an apparent regularity of rhythm, which could bore the reader who makes the mistake of hearing the poems as if they were meant to conform to conventional (Standard English) ideas of prosody”. In Bennett’s performances, he hears significant departures from the regularity perceived in print: “There are sudden changes in pitch and tone and speed, a complete departure from the stress patterns which the ballad form would seem to be imposing”. Rohlehr is making claims for

the poetry's force in spite of the conventional expectations produced when seeing the ballad. He sees that this is just as much a challenge for criticism, remarking:

The problems of prosody haven't begun to be solved in the West Indies. (1992: 81)

Following this, he suggests briefly that an appropriate criticism would function more like the criticism of musical performance, attending to the utterances of the performing voice, instead of their "comparatively frozen form on the page" (1992: 68).¹⁰ The shift to performance criticism somewhat goes against the suggestion, however faint, that this is, at least partly, a problem for the phenomenology of print. The regularity of rhythm is only *apparent*, the ballad form *would seem* to be imposing stress patterns.

Rohlehr joins a list of distinguished commentators who have puzzled over the discrepancy between the banal sight of Bennett's ballad quatrains and the transformative experience of hearing her perform. Famously, Edward Kamau Brathwaite claims that Bennett's poetry is yoked to the "tyranny of the pentameter". Her prosodic success comes in establishing rhythms "in counterpoint *against* the pentameter". In the decolonizing narrative of *History of the Voice* (1984), her ballads play the role of English metrics' last stand, beyond which the creole voice breaks free of its chains. At the end of the footnote in which this comment appears, Brathwaite concedes that a fuller explanation is required, which would elucidate "the phonemic structure of nation language and how this relates to syntax and prosody" (1984: 30). He is perhaps less confident than his rhetoric would suggest that he has wholly grasped the rhythmic logic of Bennett's verse. Again, there is a hope that it may be possible to reinsert through criticism the phonological dimension that print has sucked out.

The contemporaneous reception of Louise Bennett in the Caribbean helps to elaborate the notion of the context of intelligibility of particular literary practices. In his essay, Rohlehr has certainly provided much historical and literary context. We see, though, that this is a different matter to grasping Bennett's prosody. This requires the production, or at least adaptation, of categories of perception and appreciation that can give an account of how she is able to sound true, as well as uncovering the field of relations in which categories of consecration and evaluation emerge. In the case of Bennett, it ought to be simple. The linguistic material of her poetry is Jamaican creole, or "patwa" or "dialect" (Bennett's preferred term). She employs the ballad form, almost exclusively in quatrains. Most are dramatic monologues and concern topical issues of the day. None of these are remarkable as facts. The first known instance of a ballad in a Caribbean creole comes in the 1820s (Winer, 1993: 78–81). Michael McTurk, Edward Cordle, and Claude McKay published dialect ballads in British Guiana, Barbados, and Jamaica, respectively, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and Jeannette Layne-Clark in Barbados and Joan Andrea Hutchinson in Jamaica perform creole ballads to this day.

Bennett was not important for the field of Caribbean poetry in her time because she wrote ballads in "dialect". Nor was she important only because she did it so well. She was important because her success in composing exclusively in creole came at the moment of decolonization, when the field of Caribbean poetry was being reconstituted around the question of language. To recognize Bennett as a poet was to legitimate as a poetic resource the language that she employed. This created the possibility for

recognition, but also misrecognition as the critical motive might only be to enlist her to sanction aesthetic projects of a very different order. In this respect, her literary recognition might be as the plaything of a field of which she was not a full member.¹¹ Something akin to the naïve artist discussed by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art*, whose importance comes in being “discovered” by those reflective artists who have made it their business to master the field’s logic (1996: 242–4). So, for example, very few of the poets who celebrated Bennett would ever themselves attempt a creole ballad.

The question of Bennett’s prosodic agency is vital. It is the difference between receiving her as an elevated folk artist who provides inspiration for the literary artists who know what they are doing, and reconstructing the field such that her mode of inventiveness is considered part of the constitution of the space of possibles. Put another way, the question is whether her poetry helped only to steer other poets towards creole as raw material, or was itself part of the reworking and development of the region’s poetic material.

In print, Bennett was inaugurated into the field of Caribbean poetry in a concerted way. By Mervyn Morris in “On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously”: an essay written soon after his return to Jamaica after time in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. It won a national essay prize that led to serialization in the *Sunday Gleaner* in June 1964, and was later reprinted in the first issue of *Jamaica Journal* (Morris, 1967). When Morris opens “I believe Louise Bennett to be a poet”, one is tempted to cite Bourdieu on acts of literary consecration — “the monopoly of the power to say with authority who is authorized to call himself a writer” (1996: 224) — and import with it his analysis of the autonomy of the literary sphere and the logic of the position-taking of writers within it. The word consecration is helpful, but to assume that Morris is speaking to a sphere that resembles the literary culture of nineteenth-century Paris would be a great distortion. Nor need we look to a transnational “world” literary sphere that would understand Morris to be appealing to consecrating authorities in places like Paris. It is perhaps better to characterize Morris as employing the rhetoric of consecration in order at once to transvalue the local literary field, and to constitute it as an independent field.

If such a claim seems overblown, one need only look at the scorn Morris uncharacteristically heaps on those previous authorities who have presumed to decide on what counts as poetry in Jamaica. Particularly, J. E. McFarlane’s anachronistically published *A Literature in the Making* is called an “absurd little volume” (1967: 70). But even more respectable attempts to anthologize Jamaican poetry are shown to have failed, with the inclusion of Bennett serving as Morris’s litmus test of adequate scope. These polemical salvos do not carry through to the argument as a whole, which is tightly organized. Thesis: Bennett is a poet, whose strength is “to recreate human experience vividly delightfully and intelligently” (1967: 70). Then follows: i) a discussion of Bennett’s skilful use of her most characteristic genre, the dramatic monologue; ii) other genres employed; iii) her skill in creating apt images; iv) an appreciation of her logical and ironic intelligence; v) a consideration of her weaknesses, including: hastiness, the limitations of topicality, unsubtle moralizing and strained moments in which Bennett is “false to her medium”; vi) comparison with the uses of Jamaican dialect in folk songs and by poets “for artistic purposes that don’t seem natural to dialect at all” (1967: 74); vii) a restatement of the thesis.

Morris's training in practical criticism at the time of the New Criticism is evident throughout. Bennett's successful poems have "the oneness the wholeness of a completely realized experience" (1967: 71). Accordingly, the elements of composition are judged in terms of their resolution within the given work. The literary-historical bearings are also Anglo-centric. Measured form is "very eighteenth-century in its careful balance" (1967: 72), Browning is the reference-point for the dramatic monologue and Gilbert and Sullivan for comedy. In a society only then just post-colonial, such comparisons are not necessarily imposed. There are, however, local sources of inspiration, such as the vaudeville artist Ernest Cupidon, whom a young Bennett saw performing in the 1930s.

Although it is made clear at the outset that a great part of the reason for Bennett's exclusion from the field of Jamaican poetry is exclusive use of dialect, it is noticeable that Morris does not argue for her importance on these grounds. Dialect is simply Bennett's chosen "medium". From the vantage of the highly political debates on creole and Standard English, orality and print, later in the decade, Morris's gesture could be taken as moderate, even conservative. There are points at which a pragmatic appraisal of the limits of a personality that would speak dialect teeter on stereotyping, such as the criticism that Bennett employs a word that would not be used "at that level of dialect" (1967: 73), or the claim that abstract images used in a dialect poem by Dennis Scott are unsuited to the "concrete medium of dialect", and so must effectively be translations of "standard English thoughts" (1967: 74). The essay might be charged with forcing Bennett to play by the rules of English verse culture in a way that freezes that which is dynamic in her practice: the voice.

In the course of the discussion, Morris calls for a selected collection of Bennett's poems that would discriminate on literary grounds "dropping all the ephemera and choosing the best of the others" (1967: 73). It would be nearly twenty years until such a volume materialized. In the meantime, and soon after Morris's essay, *Jamaica Labrish: Jamaica Dialect Poems by Louise Bennett* (1966) appeared. The editor was Rex Nettleford, a Rhodes scholar the year before Morris. In his introduction, Nettleford cites and rejects Morris's criteria for a selected works of Bennett, with the rather sharp comment:

[N]ot enough is known about the language which she uses for us to be sure about what are "the best of the others" though the rigid application of criteria born of a tradition of English literary criticism could, I daresay, disqualify a great many of the pieces. (Nettleford, 1966: 10)

The rhetoric could hardly be more removed from Brathwaite, but the appeal is the same: to linguistics to supply that which the "criteria born of a tradition of English literary criticism" has not grasped.

Nettleford's chosen criteria seek to capture Bennett not only as a "valid literary figure", but also as "entertainer" and "documenter of aspects of Jamaican life". In the section that considers her as a literary artist, he conducts his own practical criticism, the underlying assumptions of which appear to be more or less those of Morris. Of most concern here is his rhythmic analysis, something absent from Morris's essay. His tools are those of a conventional metrical scansion. The "racy monologue" of her poem "Pedestrian Crosses", for example, "takes on the breathless gallop of the anapaestic

rhythm” (1966: 13). Nettleford here appears unfazed by the sense of rhythmic rigidity that affronts Rohlehr and Brathwaite; any notion that foot-based metrics colonize her voice is neutralized by the contention that “iambic rhythms are natural to the Jamaican drawl” (1966: 11), a fact he believes to be self-evident.

In the next section, on Bennett as performer, however, Nettleford asserts that she ought to be regarded essentially as a “poet of utterance”: “if on the printed pages her poems appear to be dated frozen jingles, in the renditions she gives of them they take on vitality and meaning” (1966: 16). How has “breathless gallop” become “frozen jingle”? Had he been referring to print as a kind of *aide-memoire* of anapaestic rhythms heard in performance? Where print meets voice there is, again, a schizophrenia of admiration and dismissal. Accordingly, *Jamaica Labrish* presents itself as a *transcription* of Bennett, with print serving as one kind of record of a figure from oral culture.

It was not until he had put together an edition of Bennett of the sort that he had in mind that Morris presented his full rebuttal, in a long (for Morris) essay, “Louise Bennett in Print”, in *Caribbean Quarterly* in 1982. He reiterates the call for Bennett to be considered within the sphere of the literary proper. Though the tone is less high-minded, the justifications are mostly the same as in his earlier essay. There is an additional consideration, though. He now discusses Louise Bennett’s rhythm:

Louise Bennett most often employs a version of the ballad quatrain. But mystification and undue awe have been the usual consequences of relating her prosody to the iambic stress-patterns of the English/Scottish ballad norm. What Louise Bennett quite regularly employs is a quatrain (version) in which eight syllables are followed by six, then eight, then six, with the rhyme scheme **abcb**. An extra syllable here, a syllable short there, need hardly cause a flutter; especially as, even more regularly, each pair of lines tends to have fourteen syllables (or their equivalent in time). The regularity gives Louise Bennett’s most characteristic verse an underlying structure which — unlike many of the people who recite her monologues in public — the author herself invariably suggests in performance. Yet, unconcerned about iambic stress patterns, she is free to “manipulate the tonal range of the language” [the reference is to Nettleford], to follow the contours of Jamaican speech and to point each line for meaning and for dramatic effect. (1982: 47–8)

To appreciate the profundity of this passage, we can unpack a little the comment on “mystification and undue awe”. “Undue awe” refers to the Houdini act Bennett is supposed to be accomplishing when her performing voice escapes the iambic chains apparent in printed form. *The chains were never there in the first place*. Bennett had never employed metrical feet to generate rhythm, not on stage, not on the page. Rather, the formal constraints come in regulating syllable number and end rhymes. Mystification, then, concerns print. The freezing of Bennett’s voice perceived by Rohlehr, Nettleford, and Brathwaite took place in the inner-ear of their reading eye. They were fighting the iambs of the mind.

Morris is calling for his colleagues to develop a Jamaican prosody that will decolonize the line. This is why he is unapologetic about presenting an edition of Bennett that is not tediously phonetic. An orthography that attempted to register every nuance of the voice would betray a lack of confidence in the reader’s inner-ear. The words on the page ought to “suggest recognisable noises and nuances of meaning” (1982: 49) to those

familiar with Jamaican creole, but, as we have seen, this requires shedding Anglocentric habits of prosodic recognition rather than exclaiming on the priority of the voice.

The consecration and integration of Bennett's work is not confined to the critical sphere. Bennett is a clear formal and tonal influence on Morris's creole ballad, "For Consciousness" — a poem that concerns misapprehensions of power structures after independence as the peasantry moved into urban centres. Typically, Morris abbreviates the lines of his four stanza ballad (though they swell and loosen in the final two, cited below). The poem raises to the surface that which had been inherent in the critical misrecognitions of Bennett's verse. He employs a Bennett-like voice of folksy moralizing to deflate the pretensions of black-power grandstanding, and to warn of unintended consequences. It is testament to, and further unfolding of, the truth-content of Bennett's ironic and prosodic intelligence:

but agents of de owners dem
is harder now to sight —
plenty busha doan ride horse
an' some doan t'ink dem white.

In de new plantation story
firs' t'ing dat have to know
is who an' who to tackle
when de call to battle blow. (Morris, 1979: 17)

Idealism's two stools

The Dragon of Death lay on his back, his arms flung out in a posture of crucifixion. He lay on the bloody floor of that charnel house utterly exposed, his face, chest and legs blackened, charred, the skin flaking off to expose white bone. His balls and manhood were like strips of dirty oilcloth... (Wilhelm, 1975: 41)

This passage, excerpted from Peter Wilhelm's novella "LM", is a vision of colonialism's brutality, finding necessary expression in the moment of Mozambique's decolonization. José, the Dragon of Death, a Portuguese settler, has gone out to meet violence with violence, as of course he must. Here we read the outcome, in sentences that have about them the clumsy predictability of José's end: the heroic epithet, ironically deployed; the religious allusions of *crucifixion* and *charnel house*; the triple-decker qualification, *blackened, charred, skin flaking off*; the contrast of straight-talking *balls* with coy *manhood*; and the simile, unconvincing yet clearly intended to deliver the final shock. We are patently meant to see evil; but the writing itself gets in the way, and we are left with the writerly pose of sardonic indignation.

It is in light of this passage, and others like it, that one understands how evil might be looked at and not seen. In "LM", as in a host of South African fictions of the 1960s and 1970s, we find the re-presentation of familiar images, where violence becomes an opportunity for the routinized display of the author's descriptive tool-set. Yet these failures reveal the demands and constraints of the task at hand. As much as their weaknesses are not inherent but historical they also delimit the relational grounds of success, and

condition its experience. Thus, when it was published in 1974, J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* was immediately praised by local reviewers for the *spare, stark, taut, and intense* prose by means of which it confronted colonial violence:

He would not take it. I stamped. His lips seeped blood, his jaws relaxed. I pushed the muzzle in till he began to gag. I held his head steady between my ankles. Behind me his sphincter gave way and a rich stench filled the air. "Watch your manners, hotnot", I said. I regretted this vulgarity. The shot sounded as minor as a shot fired into the sand. Whatever happened in the pap inside his head left his eyes crossed. (Coetzee, 1974: 111)

The meanings of words such as *spare* and *stark* are necessarily relational, but the more important point here is that the power of this prose — avoiding allusion, metaphor, and adjectival amplification whilst striving for a syntax of simplicity — was realized precisely in relation to the overdone descriptiveness which Coetzee had identified in the earlier fictions of Alex La Guma, and which we have discovered lingering in Wilhelm's "LM".

Not that the reader's capacity to *look with* should be mistaken for the work's capacity to *look at*. Wilhelm himself recognized *Dusklands* as a novel that gazed steadily on the truth of an existence laid bare:

Technically and morally, the book begins where most South African fiction leaves off [...]. The author's style is cerebral, a frame for thought under stress: the language seethes [...]. Some might find *Dusklands* stark and obsessional. But starkness and obsession can illuminate, and the novel is a metaphor on ourselves which has unquestioned power. (1974: 21)

Insufficient as the basis for a truthful literary practice, Wilhelm's familiarity with the field, and in particular with the shortcomings of Coetzee's local peers and rivals, nevertheless allowed him to feel the force of *Dusklands* and the necessity of its style.

Yet proximity and familiarity alone cannot guarantee critical clear-sightedness. Readers caught up in the moment of the work's emergence are themselves subject to those distortions and habitual ways of looking that confound artists, especially where literary criticism intervenes with categories promising consecration whilst inhibiting comprehension. *Realism* and *modernism*, for example, used loosely for South African fictions of the apartheid period, allowed convenient shortcuts to evaluation and interpretation, but masked the historical character of technique. The consequence was a sometimes-painful confusion, a blurring of vision and a muffling of audition, which stifled the encounter with the work's truth. This was so even for the most astute readers, such as André P. Brink, in whose response to *Dusklands* one finds several symptoms of this head-cold of misrecognition.

In January 1973, at a symposium devoted to the Sestigters (a group of Afrikaans writers prominent in the 1960s, the decade for which they were named), Brink spoke mostly of the group's failure, which he regarded as moral. Nevertheless, he believed its cause was largely ignorance: the Sestigters knew of Sartre but not of Fanon; they had followed Kafka and Beckett, not Günter Grass; they had read Freud and Jung, not Laing; they had lived after the Second World War, not alongside Vietnam; and they had visited Paris and

Amsterdam but never confronted South Africa (Brink, 1973a). By no means unique, this criticism was especially striking because Brink had been the Sestigters' chief theorist and exponent. Turning his back on his companions, he renounced not only an affiliation and orientation — with and towards metropolitan thought and perspective — but also a literary practice and a literary culture.

Always cosmopolitan in outlook, Brink had nevertheless remained committed to Afrikaans, hoping to bring into it all the richness he found in the novels of Europe and the United States. But, as his bid for freedom faltered, his cosmopolitanism seemed increasingly to obscure his own country's truths, and so he took up themes of race and domination, a development on which he later reflected:

whereas in my previous writings, I'd enjoyed the exploration of more or less exotic places and experiences ... the very experimental sort of fiction, I now want to consciously explore the basic questions of where do I come from, what were the forces and the places and the people that shaped me. [...] I think that explains why from a particular moment, my writing became so much more South African orientated. (1979: 10)

This shift in orientation was accompanied by another significant change: Brink began to publish in English as well as Afrikaans, harnessing the political charge of the former, which was used in South Africa by black and white writers alike. In several ways, then, he attempted a position-taking that would place him at the confluence of local literary languages and production, and that would imbue him with an authority both moral and aesthetic.

The first of Brink's avowedly political novels was *Kennis van die aand* (1973b), published in its English-language edition as *Looking on Darkness* (1974b). An account of racism and its violent outcomes, it dispensed with those techniques Brink had previously championed: the use of multiple narrators and points of view; dramatic shifts in time, space, and idiom; transgressions against conventions of syntax and diction. In place of the surreal dreamscapes of his earlier fictions, *Lebola vir die lewe*, *Die Ambassadeur* and *Orgie*, one found a nightmare monologue, a confession that exposed much of what the apartheid state wished hidden.

Yet, though it earned official displeasure and a banning, the book was somehow unsatisfactory, not least in its failure to escape apartheid's own principles of vision and division. Indeed, setting out to violate the censor's prohibitions, *Kennis van die aand* simply confected the state's paranoias: in the line of the plot and the detailed descriptions of certain acts, the novel seemed scripted not by Brink, but by apartheid's statute-book, which outlawed blasphemy, sex across the colour bar, and any portrayal of white South Africans that caused harm to their dignity. The narrative thus became a catalogue, and the narrator, in whose suffering readers were meant to believe, a flat surface on which to project it.

There are, of course, many reasons for a novel's inadequacy to its present, and the features sketched above are only some of those that aligned Brink's purpose with a making and breaking of images, a re-presenting of what was already well-enough known. For all that, *Kennis van die aand* has never been considered amongst Brink's best works.¹² If it is regarded as significant, this is only for its success in enticing the censors into the

open, which guaranteed the novel's notoriety whilst limiting the number of its South African readers.

J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* appeared as Brink's conflict with the state came to a head. To judge by the responses of its early readers, the novel accomplished much of the task Brink had outlined at the Sestigers symposium. Not, however, according to Brink, who published a substantial review in *Rapport*, an Afrikaans daily.

The very title of Brink's review declared his reticence, identifying Coetzee straightaway with outmoded practices and problematics by nominating him an "Engelse Sestiger". Why did Brink do this? Because, "As J. M. Coetzee in Afrikaans geskryf het en sy debuutwerk *Dusklands* 'n dekade vroeër gepubliseer het, sou hy stellig bekend geraak het as 'n sentrale figuur onder die Sestigers" [If J. M. Coetzee had written in Afrikaans and published his first work, *Dusklands*, a decade earlier, he would certainly have become well-known as a central figure amongst the Sestigers] (1974a).¹³ This could hardly be read otherwise than as an attempt to undercut his rival's work by casting it as mere imitation, but Brink disclaimed any desire to make *Dusklands* seem "passé", explaining the comparison as one demanded by "the work's radical conception and development of structure" (1974a). Yet the message was clear: those very elements cited by others as evidence of Coetzee's modernity in fact echoed the practices of the previous literary generation. For which reason Brink rather crossly remarked: "the book is not 'the first truly modern South African novel' as the publishers proclaim" (1974a).

Overblown claims for the exceptional modernity of *Dusklands* were not, however, Brink's only concern, since Coetzee's novel had anyway disappointed in its execution:

Coetzee has, unfortunately, been unable to realize all the possibilities of such a manifold perspective: on the one hand his novel misses the subtle complexity of, say, Claus's *De verwondering* or even Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* (to say nothing of Nabokov's archetypal *Pale Fire!*); on the other hand, it lacks the directional momentum of a simpler framework. In reality, the work lands structurally between two stools, and the final impression is less satisfying than what it – so easily – might have been. (1974a)

To Brink, in other words, *Dusklands* was neither sufficiently complex nor sufficiently simple. In view of these shortcomings, as much as the novel's perceived belatedness, he confessed: "I can think straightaway of a dozen titles, Afrikaans and English, which are as truly modern and South African, of which some are in fact better" (1974a).

In a quite fundamental sense, then, Brink *could not see* Coetzee's novel, could look neither with it nor at it, and so could not understand the ways in which it had met and overcome certain problems in and of the material. This is not to say that he mistook *Dusklands* altogether, for he recognized Coetzee's intellectual and aesthetic sophistication, and even acknowledged that the novel said important things about South Africa. But Brink nevertheless saw weakness where others saw strength, and found a mismatch between the aim of showing the badness of apartheid and the use of unreliable narrators, embedded narratives, and reflexive techniques. No less significant, he treated Coetzee's style as adornment, and so could not relate the brute reality experienced by readers of *Dusklands* to the achievements of a literary practice, crafted in relation to the shortcomings of other South African fictions.

Why was Brink unable to recognize the full measure of Coetzee's success? Part of the answer is given by the review itself, by the way Brink framed his moment of aesthetic judgement: Coetzee's novel was not as good as it could have been because it fell between two stools, being neither one thing nor the other. Such an approach may seem innocuous, particularly if we are used to dividing the literary world into two hemispheres: pure art and mercenary art, cosmopolitan art and national art, modernist art and realist art. But it means forgetting the *context of intelligibility*, and, as both cause and consequence, the *historicity of literary practice*. For to imagine two available modes, two positions one might occupy with more or less comfort, is to embrace aesthetic idealism; it is to ignore what the South African poet Guy Butler had observed in 1956: "language feels the strain of space as well as time" (Butler, 1994: 46).

Brink's response to *Dusklands*, in other words, was conditioned by a bloodless, abstract view of the material, and by a belief in univocal and detachable techniques. Nor were these errors incidental or occasional. On the contrary, they informed the previous decade's *Aspekte van die nuwe prosa* (1967), a work of literary theory, which framed recent changes in South African writing in relation to two trans-historical modes: one invested in the transparency of reality; the other underwritten by relativism and constructivism. The former, Brink claimed, characterized the "traditional" form of the novel, originating with Defoe and emanating in the various realisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The latter produced "die nuwe roman", the new novel, a vein which throbbed with sudden vitality in the *nouveau roman*, but above all in the works of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, and Nabokov, and which stretched back to Sterne and ultimately to Cervantes.

Given the peculiar pressures on marginal authors working in minor languages and lacking the symbolic capital accrued in metropolitan literary centres, Anglophone or otherwise, it is not surprising that Brink's study sought to embrace the whole of European literature: you belong to me, it said to the canon, and thus I must belong to you. Indeed, in a gesture to delight admirers of Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), Brink asserted: "literature is an international state, a cosmopolitan community" (1967: 11). But if this appeal to Paris, London, and New York is understandable, it does not diminish the oddness of the fact that, written by a practising novelist, playwright, and translator, *Aspekte van die nuwe prosa* remained deadened to the actual demands and constraints of a local material, and treated techniques as if their meanings were inherent, residing in themselves, preserved once and for all from the strains of time and place.

If the misrecognitions in Brink's review of *Dusklands* follow ineluctably from this forgetting of context of intelligibility, might the same be said of his decision to eschew the "experimentalism" of his earlier fictions for the sake of a more avowedly political mode? It is certainly possible; for if the "modern novel", "new novel", or experimental novel were presumed appropriate for the purposes of exploring moral relativism and the constructed nature of reality, a commitment to representing facts on the ground and the hard truths of politics would require a mode suited to the transcription of the world, a mode that for the sake of convenience we have been calling "realism" for many decades, though its codes and conventions were so long ago worn out that reality was precisely what it could not comprehend, at least not in South Africa in 1974.

For which reason it is of real interest that, in one of the early reviews of *Dusklands*, the poet, critic, and editor Lionel Abrahams praised the novel for revealing “as persuasively as anything in our fiction, the foundations of bad conscience in South Africa”, and recognized two things: that Coetzee’s novel took account of technical developments found in the works of recent metropolitan novelists and thereby diversified South African fiction by relating it “to modernistic modes”; and that Coetzee’s own mode was yet a kind of “realism”, at least to the extent that it remained committed to referentiality (1974: 3). If this already implies something other than a “two stools” approach, as well as a sense of the emergence of a distinctive and powerful literary practice, Abrahams’s comments on Coetzee’s difference from the Sestigers is still more revealing:

In these novels of Brink and Leroux, however, a marked role is played by surrealistic elements; this is in the interests of the symbolic method employed, but such elements do suggest that the subconscious is often being directly called upon. (1974: 3)

Here, the emphasis is neither on realism nor on modernism, but on a highly localized aesthetics of interiority, understood as one amongst several practices in relation to which the peculiar force and effect of Coetzee’s spare prose came into being.

Which brings us to a final point, regarding the nature of literary practice in general and the different shortcomings of Brink and also Wilhelm: failure or success in theorizing has no *necessary consequences* for the making of the work. For literary practice is in fact a *practice*, in the sense given the word by Bourdieu: a doing and a making governed by knowledge that is practical and by practice that is theoretical; by rules of procedure that have become habitual, even bodily, won in the long struggle with the material that issues in nothing other than what we have, from the outset, been calling craft.

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Notes

1. On the politics and the rhetoric of this event as a disavowal of empire see Low, 2013.
2. Though we have generally preferred the term “technique” to “craft” in this essay, there is an inescapable tension between these terms when abstracted from different contexts of intelligibility. If, generally speaking, the art of the centre must be always cognizant of technique to protect itself from reified commercial formula, the promise of craft as artisanal and collective practice yet remains for much peripheral art. See the section “Craft, the pun” in Timothy Brennan’s (2014) essay in this issue.
3. On technique as the way art thinks, see Jarvis, 2011.
4. Neil Lazarus speaks of “literally hundreds of studies” of Western representations of the non-West that one could cite. He selects a representative twenty-three monographs (2011: 241, n1).

- His explanation is that this proliferation attended a theoretical turn whereby “the critique of Eurocentric representation was increasingly subsumed by a critique of representation itself, as Eurocentric” (2011: 127).
5. Symptomatic of this view is Aijaz Ahmad’s comment that “one would need to know [...] the hard economy of materialities out of which arise certain kinds of images and addresses, certain generic expressions of grief or joy” (1992: 254).
 6. We will speak of the “material”, that totality of possibilities from which “not-yet-existing art works are to be made” (Robinson, 2012: 121); a notion whose scope encompasses, but is not limited to form.
 7. Adorno’s thinking percolates through the work of Sylvia Wynter, Roberto Schwarz, and Said going back to the 1960s. More recently Lazarus and especially Keya Ganguly have called for more thoroughgoing engagements with Adorno, reading him as an important thinker within a global tradition of dialectical materialism (see Ganguly, 2002). The influence of Bourdieu’s “literary field” continues to grow, and is particularly notable in the work of Pascale Casanova, Nicholas Brown, Sarah Brouillette, and Peter D. McDonald.
 8. See Roberto Schwarz’s “The Importing of the Novel to Brazil” (1992) for an exemplary illustration of this point.
 9. See Zimble (2009) and Etherington (2012) on the implications of thinking through theories of “field” and “material” in South Africa and the Caribbean, respectively.
 10. A stencilled transcript of the discussion after the paper records that Rohlehr had not intended to present the situations as either/or: “the fact that we are talking about writers who seem to be as much at home in oral traditions as in scribal ones, necessitates a mixture of approaches. If I have been arguing for anything at all, it has been for a certain openness in our approach to this business of criticism” (cited by Morris, 1982: 49).
 11. This chimes with Malachi McIntosh’s (2013) assessment that the conspicuous identification with the “people” (or “folk”) was a key structuring principle of the Caribbean literary field in the post-war era.
 12. It failed, for example, to garner the accolades of *An Instant in the Wind* (Booker Prize Shortlist, 1976), *Rumours of Rain* (CNA Prize, Booker Prize Shortlist 1978), or *A Chain of Voices* (CNA Prize 1982).
 13. All translations are by Jarad Zimble.

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