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‘The Journal of Commonwealth Literature in the 1970s’

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In looking back across the development of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature (JCL) in the 1970s, it is serendipitous but not without significance to note two important moments which occurred at both the beginning and at the end of the decade. In 1970 the publishing of JCL passed from Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. to Oxford University Press. The move indexed the success of the journal both nationally and internationally, and enabled it to grow in scale. Commencing in 1974, each volume came to feature three issues rather than two per year, a move intended to clear more space for the annual bibliography, and secure, as editor Arthur Ravenscroft explained in 1973, ‘thirty-two more pages for articles and reviews than have hitherto been available, some compensation, it is hoped, for the inevitable increase in subscription rates’ (1973: np). Not long afterwards Andrew Gurr was appointed as Reviews Editor and the Reviews section of the journal was restructured so that more publications could be collectively dealt with in short review articles. Although Ravenscroft was always scrupulous in acknowledging his colleague at the University of Leeds, A. Norman Jeffares, as the first to propose the establishment of an academic journal for the study of Commonwealth literature, since its establishment in 1965 JCL was empowered by Ravenscroft’s editorial energies and his intellectual vision, especially regarding the particulars and possibilities of the term ‘Commonwealth Literature’. So it was an important moment in JCL’s fortunes when in 1977 Ravenscroft announced in Volume XI (3) that he would be stepping down as Editor in 1979. As the decade closed, safekeeping of JCL transferred to its new editors, Andrew Gurr and Alistair Niven, and also to a new publisher: Volume XIV (1), which appeared April 1979, was produced by Hanz Zell (Publishers) Ltd., based in Oxford. This was the year, too, when the scope of academic interest in Commonwealth literature brought a significant new

competitor in the shape of Anna Rutherford's journal *Kunapipi*, formerly the *Commonwealth Newsletter*, first published in the autumn of 1979 and featuring a number of JCL contributors on its Editorial Advisors board (including Alistair Niven).

Between these two moments of transfer in 1970 and 1979 Commonwealth literature as an academic field evolved as Ravenscroft knew it must and as he anticipated in his editorial reflections of the early 1970s, but not necessarily in directions he could conjecture. While contributors frequently explored, quite conventionally, the literary qualities of Commonwealth texts unconstrained by cultural or national contexts – their value primarily as imaginative creations, their status as a great works rather than good writing – by the decade's end the always-unsteady provenance of the 'Commonwealth' in Commonwealth literature was breaching the boundaries of JCL's initially cogent rendering of the term, and being pushed more and more towards those preoccupations often named these days using the unhyphenated version of a term which began to recur in the journal suddenly from 1975: 'post-colonial' (Thieme, 1975: 10). While Ravenscroft never used this word, Gurr's first Editorial in the spring of 1979 spoke of the shared problems of so many Commonwealth writers that included 'writing in English as a foreign language or culture, grappling with post-colonial and non-metropolitan forms of identity and political stance' that occurred 'with fairly slight variations in region after region' (1979: 7).¹ Although keen to reconfirm the title of the journal under its new editorship as a form of shorthand that described a field of study more convenient than concrete, Gurr's use of 'post-colonial' in relation to matters of identity and politics was already adumbrating the critical terrain of much postcolonial thought to come, as it became established in the 1980s. Recently, Neil Lazarus has argued that in the 1970s the term 'postcolonial' (hyphenated or not) 'was a periodising term, an historical and not an ideological concept. It bespoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order' (2011: 11). But the evidence of JCL suggests that a more

transitional articulation of the term was already in play by the mid-seventies even if a fully formed sense of the postcolonial, as Lazarus rightly suggests, would remain the achievement of the later 1980s.

Ravenscroft's first Editorial for the OUP-published JCL anticipated the tensions and changes to come, unwittingly perhaps, but always with his characteristic thoughtfulness and clarity of perspective. In the July 1970 number he was pleased to announce the important appearance, at last, of a bibliography of South African writing in English, even though South Africa was not a part of the Commonwealth (it had withdrawn its membership in 1961). He also established 'Southern Africa' as a new area of annual bibliographical record. While Ravenscroft often claimed commonality for Commonwealth writing on the grounds of its shared lingua franca, English, in this Editorial he also acknowledged the need for scholarship that dealt with 'the complex multi-cultural situations which include literary activity in other languages and mutual cross-cultural influences. [...] It is even possible to envisage future situations where a far deeper study than usual might have to be made of non-English literary traditions, in order to be able to debate meaningfully the literary aims and performances of some writers in English' (1970: v-vi). As the decade proceeded, Ravenscroft became increasingly aware of the ways in which the study of Commonwealth texts was putting under pressure Eurocentric critical paradigms, and empowering scholars to ask new questions about familiar texts with a keener eye on non-Anglophone cultural particulars. The scope of JCL expanded to embrace, on the one hand, literary works not immediately thought of as an example of the new literatures in English, and, on the other hand, the critique of the conventional paradigms of literary criticism established in Western thought. Alongside the usual lucid essays on new writing in English, in the 1970s there appeared critiques of canonical or pre-1900 texts – bringing together essays on the theatre of Wole Soyinka (Johnson, 1976), race in Shakespeare's *Othello* (Cowhig, 1977), Indian poetry in English

(Eng 1974), the Englishness of Malcolm Lowry's fiction (Bareham, 1976) – as well as essays which wished to challenge the prevailing modes of reading literature from once-colonised countries. These latter contributions will especially interest me in my reflections upon JCL in the 1970s.

In several ways, but without consciously co-ordinating them, JCL began to bring together many of the critical activities that would be developed theoretically in the 1980s specifically under the aegis of postcolonial studies. To my mind, JCL's fortunes in 1970s challenge the assumption that the study of Commonwealth writing was gazumped by postcolonialism with its radical new glossary of conceptual argot and commitment to discursive decolonisation – the 'decisive change of paradigms and problematics' that Lazarus (2011: 13) decries as postcolonialism's unpalatable gift. Actually, such activities were already starting up in the pages of JCL so that the shift from Commonwealth to postcolonial was more transitional than decisive, the key difference being that the critics concerned did not yet have the theoretical vocabulary to announce, present and pursue their readings as such. The move from Commonwealth to postcolonial was more organic than one might imagine. My point is neatly indexed by an essay published in 1977 concerning Janet Frame's fiction, written by W. D. Ashcroft. Ashcroft's fine study of Frame's writing draws upon Plato and R. D. Laing rather than the vocabularies of critical theory in arguing that, in texts such as *Owls Do Cry* (1957), Frame pushes in a liberationist direction beyond the accepted norms of society, sanity and language in order to strike a consciousness where new kinds of selfhood and being might emerge: 'the path from "this" world into "that world", true discovery, lies out beyond the fringes of mundane possibility and it is in these terms that [Frame's] work must be understood' (Ashcroft, 1977: 22). Twelve years later, Ashcroft would join Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in shaping exciting new critical terms in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) that freshly theorised these and

similar initiatives brokered by Commonwealth writers. The capacity of these writers to bring to crisis the normative languages of metropolitan authority and innovatively source epistemes beyond modernity's clinical prescription and panoptical will-to-order would become highly praised in postcolonial circles, in the words of *The Empire Writes Back*, as 'a radical dismantling of the European codes' (1989: 195). Ashcroft's 1977 essay on Frame does not have to hand anything like this kind of conceptual vocabulary, of course. But its careful reading of Frame's writing is more inward of these postcolonial concerns than one might expect. Clearly, before events such as the University of Essex's Sociology of Literature Project conference held in July 1984, titled 'Europe and its Others', that brought together many of the key thinkers and ideas of the fledgling postcolonial studies, criticism of Commonwealth literature was already modestly feeling its way towards postcolonialism's key concerns.²

In the early 1970s Ravenscroft could sense that changed critical paradigms were inevitable, and he made sure that JCL remained a space where the key developments and debates could be had. To be sure, his own critical endeavours were firmly ensconced in conventional modes of literary analysis, and indeed we should not forget the profoundly important consequences of those early scholars of Commonwealth writing who believed that the work of, say, Chinua Achebe or Amos Tutuola was on a par with the novels of George Eliot or D. H. Lawrence, and so merited an evaluative approach, redolent of F. R. Leavis, preoccupied with serious matters of literary greatness, moral value and scrupulous critical judgement. But when in the 1970s criticism began to move in a direction away from T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and Leavis, Ravenscroft's humility as a scholar enabled him to face up to the profound challenge issued by writing from Commonwealth countries to the metropolitan interpretative frames often used to read it – including Ravenscroft's ever-discernable Leavisite standpoint, of course. In his July 1970 editorial he mentioned a seminar

at the University of Leeds held the previous February where delegates debated the varied practice of teaching Commonwealth literature either as an extension of English literature or as a part of area studies. Ravenscroft had no problem with approaching Commonwealth writing for either literary-critical or more anthropological purposes, so long as the latter was not confused as constituting a version of the former. 'The danger', he suggested, 'lies in the insidious temptation to spend time on inferior novels and plays and poems merely because they may contain millable anthropological or even political grist, and at the same time imagine that one's life is primarily literary' (1970: v). Praising the diverse literary materials explored in the present issue as concerned with 'the realization of full humanity', Ravenscroft concluded by praising the 'very real function of literature' (1970: vi) to deliver this transcendent realisation beyond the boundaries of bigotry and ignorance. But by December 1971, his position had become less steady. In his report on the Conference on Commonwealth Literature held at Aarhus, Denmark, in April 1971 and organised by 'Miss Anna Rutherford and her colleagues and students', Ravenscroft wrote of English literature's possible contribution to world literature in terms of its puritan tradition, a 'particular kind of austerity of outlook' (1971: 127) analogous to Leavis's 'great tradition'. Yet the more he learned about Commonwealth writing at such conferences, he confessed, the more the centre could not hold. The older sense of 'unity in diversity', announced in JCL's inaugural issue of 1965, was now under pressure. While Ravenscroft still wanted to hold onto the 'larger human experience' (1971: 128) as a criterion for literary excellence, he realised 'how much new thinking and fresh responding to some of the most fundamental problems raised by the works of Commonwealth writers is still needed' (1971: 127). To his and JCL's credit, Ravenscroft beckoned rather than blocked such 'new thinking'. He empowered JCL as a scholarly resource where the foundations of the creation of Commonwealth literature as a field of study might be taken to task, where such 'fundamental problems' could be intellectually broached.

JCL facilitated several opportunities in the 1970s to encourage fresh thinking to gather, often from scholars working in the so-called Third World. In 'Indian Writing in English: An Area of Promise', published in 1974, C. D. Narasimhaiah described the fate of once-colonised countries in polarised terms: 'When the colonies came of age they were faced with the choice either to take over British values or assert their identity, if necessary, with an unseemly aggressiveness.' Writing from the University of Mysore, Narasimhaiah sets his stall out in the latter camp, although without any unseemliness entering his critical voice. He speaks of how 'compromise fashioned for us the concept of the Commonwealth which accommodated individual identity in a common tongue' and, borrowing with a dash of irony William Walsh's concept of the 'manifold voice', searches instead for an attempt to negotiate 'post-Imperial' identity enabled by 'the critical distance [the writer] enjoys from the language' (1974: 35).³ Narasimhaiah is motivated by his disquiet at the dismissal of Indian fiction in English as odd and uncreative by Kingsley Amis and John Wain, and by his reading of V. S. Naipaul's view of the novel as fundamentally metropolitan and not easy to transfer culturally. He proclaims instead the origins of the Indian novel in the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, and links these to a wide panorama of concerns that explain why, as he sees it, 'Narayan's Guide is more engaging than Naipaul's Mystic Masseur, why Kipling's Kim and Raja Rao's Serpent and the Rope are more significant than E. M. Forster's Passage to India, for The Serpent and the Rope begins where A Passage to India ends' (1974: 37). These kinds of declarative evaluations were not uncommon in a critical milieu where one judged literary achievement rather than spoke of interstitial liminalities or silenced subalterns; but they play an important part in the essay's attempt firmly to challenge the authority and terms of metropolitan intellectual endeavour. Narasimhaiah's reading of Rao's writing reaches for a Leavisite approach to literature ultimately to challenge it and to reveal its culturally specific limitations within distinctly Western mores. He argues that in India metaphysical matters go

hand in hand with ‘individual and social concerns’ because ‘an interest in higher reality is inseparable from man, society and civilisation – Leavis’s phrase to suggest the predominant socio-moral concerns of western man’ (1974: 37). Leavis’s wisdom gives us little chance of appreciating the Indian novel in English, it seems, because it does not constellate the metaphysical and the material in an appropriate way due to its moorings in the West where, it is suggested, ‘there is a radical division between the religious, the contemplative, the qualitative on the one hand, and the scientific, the rational, the practical on the other’ (1974: 38). Narasimhaiah begins to speak of ‘Indian readers’ and to distinguish their culturally located responses to *The Serpent and the Rope* which render overarching or metropolitan-struck reading practices as problematically provincial. ‘The Indian is accused of lacking in the vision of evil’, he hypothesises. ‘To which he may retort: It is not that we don’t have a vision of Evil, but that you don’t have sufficient vision of the Good. Who is to arbitrate?’ (1974: 45). Ultimately, Narasimhaiah concludes, the incapacity of Western critics responsibly to read Rao lies in the cultural illiteracy of even of the most sophisticated of these readers – the kinds of shortcomings which rendered ‘the ending of *The Waste Land* already distorted or misunderstood by critics as being ironic, thanks to their predilection for the vision of evil’ (1974: 45). Rao’s triumph, it is proclaimed, is to have engaged with a literary form popular in but not exclusive to the West, and produced works of art which cannot be fully perceived through Western critical lenses. Rao’s writing is thus ‘clearly outside Dr Leavis’s “great tradition”, nor is Dr Leavis’s criterion of moral centrality, moral grandeur, wholly applicable to it’ (1974: 47). In the powerful conclusion to his essay, Narasimhaiah censures Indian scholars who ‘parrot the opinions of now Sainsbury and Bradley, now Richards, Eliot, and F. R. Leavis with a veneer of originality in the manipulation of language’ (1974: 49). The truly comparative criticism which Jeffares ‘pleaded for’ (1974: 48) at the inaugural Commonwealth Literature conference at Leeds in 1964 requires more than a ready diversity

of texts. For Narasimhaiah, comparativism will be engendered by a diversity of reading practices originating beyond British-made universal critical frameworks that provincialise the metropolitan mind and require the wisdom of Indian readers – no longer the mimic men of the First World – to educate the critical capacities of those at the old colonial centre.

Narasimhaiah's critique of Western reading called time on the motto of 'unity in diversity' not least by insisting upon the inerasable cultural particulars of metaphysical literary vision, so that moral concerns could never be thought of existing immaterially in a vacuum. His essay offered an embryonic version of what today one might call a theory of postcolonial reading, by seeking to bring to crisis the normative modes of critical evaluation beloved of Ravenscroft, Jeffares, Walsh and others and exposing the inescapable constraints of cultural literacy in the contact zone of critical encounters. It was a modest response, one that sat amongst but a few similar voices appearing in JCL in the 1970s; but collectively these constituted a growing critical scepticism in relation to the intellectual underpinnings of Commonwealth literary criticism as forged in the 1960s.

Another pointed example, which I have selected to dwell upon at length, was Lloyd Fernando's essay of 1976, 'The Social Imagination and the Functions of Criticism in Asia', that attended keenly to the fact 'that we have taken inadequate account of the ways in which literature is firmly and intricately bound to social contexts' (1976: 53).⁴ Fernando's essay fascinatingly and powerfully evidences the fact that some of the debates which preoccupied postcolonial studies from the 1980s had actually already started to happen, albeit in different terms, in JCL in 1970s – a decade often seen as not yet concerned with the intellectual terrain and points of focus that would preoccupy postcolonial criticism. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, of course looked forward to and in many ways inaugurated the coming decade's concerns rather than clinched existing debates. Although lacking the critical vocabulary which Said and others made available, Fernando's essay nonetheless possessed an

important proleptic envisioning, discernible retrospectively, of the kinds of possibilities and problems associated with postcolonial thought which were soon to emerge.

A Sri Lankan-born migrant to Singapore who achieved his doctorate from the University of Leeds in the 1960s, Fernando enjoyed a busy career as a critic and creative writer. Writing from the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur (where he was Head of English), he welcomed the ‘upheaval in literature studies in universities all over the world’ and the ‘new dimensions’ (53) to older debates which this had brought. Read from the vantage point of today, his argument readily reveals the growing influence of literary theory and the critique it mounted against well-established reading practices advocated often within First World departments of English studies. It commands our attention too, I would suggest, because more than any other essay from JCL in the 1970s it evidences the critical leverage which conceptual initiatives were affording readers from, and of, once-colonised cultures. At the same time, it also captures the tense proximity of ‘literary theory’ to the contestation of normative modes of reading which were gathering outside Europe in postcolonial cultural contexts, reminding us that the discursive turn in English literary studies was motivated transcontinentally and not the exclusive product of the emerging penchant for First World poststructuralist or post-Marxist philosophy. Indeed, while drawing upon the likes of Roland Barthes and joining the critique voiced elsewhere concerning Leavisite great traditions and the New Criticism, Fernando sets his argument as much against the avant-gardism of contemporary European thought regarded as manifesting ‘minority culture in extreme form, [as] simply at the forefront of the commercial organization of contemporary art in the West’ (54). Significantly, Fernando earths his critique of reading standards in the cultural predicament of South and East Asia rather than the intellectual milieu of post-1968 France or British cultural materialism, while routing his line of enquiry at times in parallel with analogous occasions for critique happening in Europe.

First and foremost, Fernando's essay takes forward the gathering dissatisfaction with the centrality of Anglophone culture and scholarship in once-colonised countries, as exemplified by the request in October 1968 by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong that the University of Nairobi abolish its English Department and attend more readily to African cultural endeavours, oral and written. The first of its three parts calmly, lucidly and determinedly calls time on the prevailing reading practices of the post-war years, calling our attention to critical 'demarcations which now need to be questioned' (53). An important distinction is between the realms of written and oral expression. As Fernando argues, in a South Asian context it does not follow that this scholarly distinction is analogous to that between 'creative and everyday behaviour', with orality regarded as a quotidian matter for Orientalists and anthropologists. Oral expression need not be denigrated, and nor should a sense of the artist specifically as a writer be lauded, especially when we remember that in scribal societies this division has resulted in 'a separation between artists and the common milieu' (54). Fernando connects this point of view with work of Roland Barthes, especially Barthes's challenge to the cleaving of literary and non-literary forms of expression and his advocacy of 'language as rhetoric' (54) which can be fruitfully pursued across a range of representations found in a variety of cultural activities. The theoretical consequences are quietly revolutionary: 'Our awareness of the immense variety of writing modes, not least in the resurgent cultures of the so-called Third World, also makes us aware of the serious inadequacies of terms and methods developed so far for understanding the boundless vitality of human expression' (54). Excited by the prospect of reading 'boundlessly', if you will, without exclusionary models of literary value, Fernando espies an exciting opportunity to clear the ground of paradigms no longer fit for purpose. Without having to hand the vocabulary to name things as such, he invites a new mode of critique in tune with the postmodern eschewal of high and popular cultural hierarchies, and at

root interdisciplinary in content: ‘We have an opportunity to start afresh, in view of the detentes of all kinds taking place in the world today. Disciplines, as much as societies, have realized that they have much to learn from learning to live together’ (54).

Starting afresh means rejecting the practices if not the wisdom of the past. ‘Literature’, Fernando declares, ‘is not, as F. R. Leavis argued for more than twenty years, the English literary tradition, nor can the methods of its nurture be confined to those developed in the last seventy years’ which prioritised ‘human dilemmas in terms of Western mythologies of the individual man’ (55). Rather than pursue a culturally limited rendition of moral propriety obtained through the careful reading of a presumed great tradition, Fernando suggests the scaling back of certainties and a willingness to contend questioningly with the *petit récits* (as Jean-François Lyotard would put things a few years later) that characterise the heteroglot happenings of the world’s coincident cultures. Values are not so much confirmed but provincialised as part of a method of critical sensitivity and humility: ‘we realize with surprise and delight that it is wisdom to accept [cultural practices] in their variety where they are not assimilable to the values we hold. The result is a life of greater richness’ (55). This standpoint can be retrospectively requisitioned to a postcolonial politics of reading which strikes at the heart of those Eurocentric assumptions that would measure colonised cultural practices, ancient and modern, within terms of reference considered as flawlessly transportable. In 1976, Fernando voices this politics still very much within the rhetoric of Leavisite universalism – ‘In such a programme one would expect many of our literary certainties to become less certain as a more humane understanding of literature comes to prevail’ (55) – but such language operates more like a Trojan horse, enabling his radical point of view to enter the fray of critical debate which, as we have seen, took place predominantly within the terms of reference inaugurated in the initial numbers of JCL. Yet at the same time Fernando is more daring than others at the time in bluntly confronting Western critical

approaches with the poverty of their claims. He questions two recurring methods of the mid-twentieth century: the Freudian-inspired attention to author biography and psychology, and the formalism of the New Criticism with its 'strict explication of distinctive structures of imagery and meaning within a work' (55). If great literature is meant to be about a common wealth or source of human endeavour, then these critical activities have not revealed proof of their existence. On this point Fernando is forcefully clear: 'Both these methods reveal severe limitations when applied to the concept, here advanced, of literature as verbally expressive art (oral and written, great and popular) [... and] have generally failed to turn up sufficiently convincing evidence in support of claims of the common human value of specific literatures across all frontiers' (55). At the heart of his argument, then, resides the once-and-for-all rejection of universal values and the declaration of a way of reading 'boundlessly' which paradoxically rests upon the recognition of the specificity and boundedness of all cultural activities and our approaches to them. 'Actually', he announces, 'such terms as "the human condition", "appearance and reality", and "universal significance" wear thin now, and indicate not profundity but rather the inability of the user to press through to genuine inter-cultural understanding' (56). This distinctly postcolonial reflex simultaneously provincialises Europe, displaces universalist methodologies and demands the recalibration of inter-cultural encounters beyond the manichean good and evil of Europe and its others.

In a move which anticipates the increased attention to power (political and discursive) in later postcolonial thought, Fernando orients the new critical practices he desires away from moral universals and towards society and politics. He offers a view of literature as 'the human community's social imagination', in that 'every work of literature, good or bad, speaks for and of the writer's culture' (56). Here Fernando calls upon the critical work of figures such as Lionel Trilling, Northrope Frye and Raymond Williams as bringing a Marxian sensibility into literary studies which is 'open-ended enough to accommodate artistic

materials and values which they do not know' (56). Resisting the inflexible materialism that would come to characterise the anti-postcolonialism of Aijaz Ahmad and Arif Dirlik, popular for a while in the 1990s, Fernando praises Williams and others who have 'avoided the propagandist thrust in earlier Marxist theory and shown the virtues of non-doctrinaire social awareness' (56). He contrasts the thought of Lenin and Engels on the role of literature, finding in the former's ideas a 'dogmatic pettiness' while praising the latter's sensitivity to literature as a social rather than partisan activity and as generating 'insights of permanent value' (56). Engels's view (as Fernando understands it) of a writer's thesis as implicit in their work is taken up in order to challenge the biographical focus of received literary criticism but without letting the writer's work become a 'text' in the Barthesian sense of the term: devoid of authorial anchorage, a nexus of writerly possibilities. Thus rendered, the literary work, for Fernando at least, is 'anchored intricately in a live context of culture, history, and environment, and it should be the critic's task to trace this relationship. [...] Writers in their work speak the truth better than they really know, and even in despite of their personal beliefs' (57).

Fernando's presentation of the literary work as socially invested and alive within its contexts means that, in his view, the activity of critical analysis must be necessarily embedded in practical as well as more reflective requirements. In the second part of his essay, he discusses artistic oral traditions in South and South-East Asia, such as the traditional shadow play, and the need for scholarly activities both to study this threatened tradition and also to maintain its survival in a rapidly changing environment. This latter point requires scholars to get involved with practitioners and understand that financial sustainability will be required to keep traditional skills being passed to new generations, while remaining alive to the necessity to bring together the cultural resources of previous eras with the needs, innovations and possibilities of the present. Opposing scholarly work that prioritises

preservation, Fernando strikes a distinctly Fanonian note in promoting the intellectual as empowering and articulating the progressive evolution of traditional artistic forms as meeting wider social and cultural needs:

Basically, the traditional arts will need strong state sponsorship to keep them within the repertory of a National Theatre like that being planned in Malaysia today. If it happened, experimentation with traditional forms, too, could yield new possibilities. Only then will literary scholarship and criticism be saved from appearing to be some kind of embalming process. (58)

Fernando's ideal literary critic works alongside cultural practitioners and participates in the contextual particulars and artistic endeavours of the cultural milieu in question, rather than occupying a cloistered or elite position away from the daily business of social expression. There is also something distinctly Fanonian, too, in Fernando's keenness for criticism to help broker something like a national consciousness freed from the yoke of colonialism that 'constricted the national psyche of Asian nations', now that 'a joyous literary outpouring in Malaysia and Indonesia' (59) has followed the withdrawal of colonial rule. In this part of the world, as Fernando makes clear, subjugation was compelled by the Japanese imperial machine and not simply British or European settlement, and this historical predicament has propelled the particular 'hatred of injustice, inequality, and oppression from any quarter' (59) that distinguishes South-East Asia's fortunes.

In such terms, there is much that is productive and progressive in Fernando's thinking. Nonetheless, as the essay approaches its conclusion, Fernando's argument becomes problematised in two ways. Each problem reveals not just the limits of his thinking but also the difficulties he faced in fully realising, in 1976, the radical directions where his thought

was pushing towards. First, Fernando's pursuit of the politics of scholarship in terms of national resurgence and post-independence empowerment never facilitates a mode of intellectual work akin to that of Fanon's native intellectual, because Fernando still wishes to maintain an illicit universalism within his inter-cultural concerns. In other words, the tensions which lie within his paradoxical sense of cultural creativity as both boundless and bounded overwhelm his critical mission. Fernando's queasiness with Marxist thinking betrays itself in his capricious use of notions of the national. On the one hand he praises 'the adoption of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language in 1928' (59) and the constitutional adoption of Basaha in Malaysia in 1957 as making possible 'a vital connection between literature and society' (59-60). This manoeuvre somewhat sidesteps the deeply problematic matter of national language in Malaysia, a region with a history of manifold cultures and often conflicted relations between its Malay, Indian and Chinese populations. On the other hand, at the same time Fernando quotes approvingly the Malaysian poet Usman Awang who revered the artist who fights not simply for the independence of the nation but 'the brotherhood of man, and the community of nations, regardless of political ideology, belief, race, and colour of skin' (60). Very quickly indeed, Fernando slips into a language of human universals which becomes more and more detached from cultural and geographical specifics (especially vexed in Malaysia) the more he waxes lyrically about 'literature being given its essential place in human life anew' (60). Here, 'literature' signifies the literature of Malaysia, but also of Indonesia; and, very quickly, the cultural endeavours of 'the East' more generally: 'art itself, in the East remains a rich lode which has only begun to be mined' (60). At best semi-attached to the contexts of cultural production, this is 'boundlessness' in the old style, with claims to 'human life' seeming to repeat rather than reformulate the residual terms of reference familiar from the great tradition of European letters to which Fernando would have been exposed, however critically, at Leeds. At the very moment when Fernando might more fully relinquish

the constraints of Leavisite critique, he seems strangely unwilling to make the necessary jump and heads instead for the safe harbour of abstraction rather than stay for long amidst the complex terrain of Malaysia's tense cultural, historical and national fortunes.

Second, and somewhat paradoxically, this reluctance to detach from a residual (rather than offer a political) vocabulary of human brotherhood runs hand in hand with a curiously antipathetic dismissal of 'the material of art of the West' (60) as fatally bankrupt and exhausted beyond resuscitation. His more thoughtful and measured engagement with thinkers working within but in contention with First World frames – Barthes, Frye, Williams – which characterised the essay's first part gives way in its second section to a shrill and intellectually foreclosed dismissal of those 'many modern works of literature in the West which represent a peak of egoistic self-preoccupation' and which, allegedly, 'hold an unnecessarily strong attraction for the lax, the lazy-minded, and the malleable' (60) in contemporary Asia. While Fernando makes these claims in order to displace 'the thoughtless application of evaluative procedures customary in the West' – the crux of his argument, of course – and confront a "“Europocentric” view of the world' (60) to which the Empire writes back, he seriously misunderstands both the ongoing vitality of Western literature as well the ways in which writers and scholars from once-colonised countries have continued to turn to it for the purposes of critical inspiration rather than to mimic or denigrate. Fernando may require the critic to foster 'a spirit of inter-cultural exploration and understanding' (61), and we might understand why this requires a forceful rejection of customary procedures so that the scholarly imbalance between European thought and cultures elsewhere is redressed. But if the result is an angular rather than more supple and attentive engagement with how such inter-cultural transactions occur across metropolitan and once-colonised spaces, regardless of what the critic might want, then such laudable aims will be hard to secure.

Fernando's valuing of the inter-cultural leads him to prize in particular 'writers in Asia who are the products of a mixed education and upbringing' (61), maintaining a problematic biocentric synchronicity between biogenetic and cultural admixture. Noting with sensitivity that such writers – Ricaredo Demetillo, Dom Moraes, and others – face a distinctly liminal position 'which we do not yet fully understand' (61), he argues that 'such Asian writers, from the Philippines, India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka deserve study because they explore inter-cultural problems under compulsion, as it were, though with penetration' (62). The hardening of the contrast between an inter-cultural Asian sensibility and monocultural British literary field is clinched when Fernando contrasts his Asian examples with an homogenised vision of metropolitan culture: 'It is curious that British authors themselves found no challenge to deal with similar issues, no fresh sources of inspiration about conflicting ways of life, values, and manners from the vast empire so closely associated with Britain for over two centuries' (62). Those more recent writers who have made this discovery – Conrad, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Pound – Fernando reminds us 'are non-British' (62), although this designation hardly gets one close to the myriad inter-cultural particulars which inflect the sensibility of each and may actually situate some of these figures closer than Fernando might like to writers such as Demetillo and Moraes. Once again, while voicing a commitment to the inter-cultural, Fernando's essay struggles to attend with sensitivity to the rhizomic terrain of inter-cultural literary pursuits, due to the manichean rationale – at one point Western cinema and TV are described as 'artistic sewage' (63) – which drives the essay's second section.

Throughout Fernando's essay, then, there remains a profound misalignment between the exciting opportunities it opens up – inter-cultural thought, provincialising Europe, valuing the conventional non-literary, exploring the social rather than moral significance of literature – and the counter-intuitive and often contradictory positions it ultimately takes: using European thought inter-culturally (Barthes, Engels) while dismissing all thoughts Western;

claiming value for popular forms in principle but deriding some of them in practice if insufficiently literate; advocating for a social imagination but ultimately on universalist grounds. Even so, and considering the direction in which Fernando was travelling intellectually, looking back from today's vantage point we may still applaud Fernando's far-reaching and visionary attempt to move the ground as regards the critical evaluation of cultural happenings in once-colonised countries, and commend his salutatory attempt to make critics 'genuine participants in the literary arts' that changes 'what is often mechanical activity – dull clerkship – into really useful, creative involvement in spreading the enjoyment, instruction, and understanding of human culture which only literature can give' (64). In some respects, his essay's flaws are less interesting than its ambition, hard to realise in a short space of course, and its suggestiveness for readers of JCL in the later 1970s (not least its open-minded Leavisite editor).

I have dwelt upon Fernando's fascinating essay at length because it seems to anticipate very many of the possibilities and problems subsequently associated with the postcolonial: the attempt to shift attention from abstract universals to cultural particulars; the critique of the West as intellectually imperious and culturally exhausted; the concern with political rather than moral matters; the influence of metropolitan theory in countering the perpetuation of colonial discourses; an agile rather than dogmatic engagement with Marxist-inspired materialism; the repositioning of the critic as involved in confronting the limits of their literacy, (un)learning that loss as a privilege. Indeed, the presence of the work of Fernando, Ashcroft and others that Ravenscroft published during the 1970s makes it hard to find or signal a decisive moment in the transition from Commonwealth to postcolonial criticism. Certainly the vocabularies changed in the early 1980s, as a new conceptual register which drew upon Gramsci, Foucault, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida made its way into discussions of colonised and newly independent cultures. But the content and concerns of

these discussions were not entirely new. The terms of the debate changed, with transformative effects, to be sure; but the debates themselves were already in progress. In his 1975 essay 'V. S. Naipaul's Third World: A Not So Free State', John Thieme (a future JCL editor) sought to discover a critical sensibility in Naipaul's representation of the 'human consequences of imperialism in colonial and post-colonial societies' (1975: 10) and outlined the ways in which Naipaul exposes 'the psychological effects of colonialism on the individual' (1975: 13), avoids rendering an entirely pessimistic vision of colonial life in the figure of Mr Biswas, and concerns himself more generally in challenging the complacent acceptance of the colonial personage happy to accept metropolitan mores. 'Increasingly', writes Thieme, 'in Naipaul's more recent writing the apparently sardonic manner conceals a very real sympathy for the wretched of the earth' (1975: 17), to the extent that Thieme finds in Naipaul's work 'a very real movement towards a third-world consciousness, which is all the more convincing because he has so rigorously abstained from jumping on third-world bandwagons in the past' (1975: 21). Although Thieme does not cite Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), his vocabulary betrays his cognisance of it. And while one or two readers might not necessarily accept Thieme's supportive reading of Naipaul's art, of interest is Thieme's attempt to read Naipaul in terms of psychology and consciousness, as exposing – to use, again, contemporary parlance – the ways in which Naipaul's writing acknowledges the task of decolonisation as mental and experiential, not purely in terms of political suffrage. In pushing the discussion of Naipaul towards matters of decolonising the mind as well as the neo-colonial conditions operative in a 'free' state, Thieme too set the bearings of discussions of Commonwealth literature in a distinctly postcolonial direction while keeping attention firmly focused on conventional matters of literary appreciation.

When Arthur Ravenscroft published his valedictory editorial in December 1978, he modestly pointed out two achievements which characterised JCL's fortunes under his

stewardship. The first was ‘an openness of mind dictated by many ignorances and with an uneasy assumption that any literature written in English must be considered as integrally part of English literature. It was an assumption very soon discarded’ (1978: vi). As I have argued in this retrospective essay, Ravenscroft’s crucial willingness to open up JCL to questionings and points of view which challenged at root his own Leavisite leanings made the journal’s pages democratic and intellectually transformative, truly a space for rigorous debate and contestation rather than reflective of the solipsistic vision of any one scholar. As such, Ravenscroft’s editorial principles, his enthusiasm for the new, and his openness to critique were of the highest order, and still resound in JCL’s activities today. Second, Ravenscroft noted JCL’s tendency often to feature work about Third World contexts rather than writing from the settler colonies, partly because ‘more opportunities for publication existed in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand than in other areas’ (1978: vi). It was a comment which captured the difficult task of juggling work from the various areas of the Commonwealth without seeming to privilege one part of the world over another. But this also speaks of Ravenscroft’s sense of the field as encapsulating the very many different locations of postcolonial culture, however incommensurate they may be, as well as the necessity to maintain a focus across all of these as part of a rigorous intellectual practice – a principle which postcolonial critics of the following decades would not always support, as in Robert J. C. Young’s otherwise worthy recomposition of postcolonialism predominantly in terms of the ‘tricontinentalism’ of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Ravenscroft’s editorship of JCL in the 1970s made it an inclusive, never homogenising, scholarly organ and helped established, alongside the labours of Anna Rutherford and several others at the time, the field of Commonwealth and postcolonial studies as a collective rather than exclusive endeavour, ever open to fresh ideas, hard debates and good habits of self-critique. Working as I do in the same

School of English where JCL was launched fifty years ago, I remain particular cognisant of the necessity of these principles in my teaching, graduate supervision and research.

In the early 1970s, during her entrance interview with the English department at Oxford University, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown was asked about her reading interests. She answered by making mention of her keenness for Naipaul's fiction. 'They looked at me askance', she recalls, 'and one said patronizingly, "For that sort of thing, you should have applied to Leeds or somewhere like that. I believe they do African stuff up there"' (289-90). These days, 'they do African stuff' – and Caribbean, South Pacific, Middle Eastern, Canadian, South Asian, South East-Asian 'stuff' – everywhere (including at Oxford, which in more recent years has appointed many outstanding postcolonial scholars). As I have argued in this retrospective essay, this state of affairs is partly because of Arthur Ravenscroft's remarkable editorship of JCL in the 1970s at the University of Leeds and the journal's exemplary commitment to hosting and progressing key critical discussions during the fledging years of the field's development. As he signed off when passing editorial control to Gurr and Niven, Ravenscroft admitted that he 'had begun to feel myself growing stale' (1978: v). In my view, this comment was the only moment in the 1970s when Ravenscroft committed a discernible error of judgement. As any review of the vigorous pages of JCL during the 1970s must quickly discover, staleness of any kind will not be found.

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¹ Gurr was the first critic to use the term 'post-colonial' in JCL in his essay 'Two Realities in New Zealand Poetry' (See Gurr, 1965: 123).

² The proceedings of this influential event were published the following year, and featured work by Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward W. Said (see Barker et al., 1985).

³ Narasimhaiah's reference is to William Walsh's monograph *A Manifold Voice* (Walsh, 1970).

⁴ Subsequent references to this essay will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.