

### KENNETH RAMCHAND “CONCERN FOR CRITICISM” (1970)

Ramchand begins by noting the recent publication of at least two books by a critic of African literature called Gerald Moore. It is the one entitled The Chosen Tongue, consisting of several essays devoted to the study of African and Caribbean literature, which particularly captures Ramchand's attention because of its intention to “impress us as a sustained act of literary criticism, and as an analysis of a socio-cultural tradition” (51). Ramchand points out that one is led to expect that

the author will show how these Black writers, whether using English as a first or second language, have seized it and made it their own not only in the general, almost incidental sense of using it to reflect their culture and society, but in the more intimate and exploratory manner of artists possessing and being possessed by the word. (51)

Ramchand is interested, however, in moving beyond these narrow “linguistic issues” (51) to a “rather more popular thesis” (51) where the study of literature is concerned, one that concerns less “close critical analysis of particular texts than . . . a broad discussion of themes” (51). He quotes Moore to this effect: “Quite apart from their common use of English, these areas have in common direct historical, cultural and ethnic links with one another too obvious to need labouring here” (51-52). Ramchand points out that it is “this thesis and not any concern for language” (52) which underpins the collection as a whole.

Ramchand resents this “attempt to see West Indian literature and West Indian culture as part of African literature and African culture” (52), a move indebted to the work of Jahnheinz Jahn in particular. Jahn argues in the introduction to his Bibliography of Neo-African Literature that what he calls “Neo-African literature has certain stylistic elements which stem from Negro-African oral tradition. It is this style which characterises Neo-African literature and not the author's language (for the most part European) birthplace or colour of skin” (qtd. in Ramchand, 52). Ramchand argues that the “uniqueness and objectivity of these stylistic criteria, and their value as part of a critical method” (52), even though by Jahn's own admission still provisional, are undermined by another of Jahn's works, Muntu: an Outline of Neo-African Culture, and in particular is discussion of the work of an African American writer named James Weldon Johnson. Ramchand contends that “there is nothing specifically African about the stylistic features and the imaginative processes enumerated” (53) there. Ramchand is of the view that “stylistic criteria' are being advanced to give an impression of objectivity while the author pursues a more subjective hypothesis . . . that has little to do with literary criticism” (53).

Ramchand argues that this “neo-African theory” (53) is very much alive and well in the critical theory of Kamau Brathwaite, not least his essay “Jazz and the West Indian Novel” where the “same stylistic elements are celebrated” (53). The essay is the culmination of Brathwaite's attempt to “find in the West Indies ‘some mode of New World Negro cultural expression based on an African inheritance, not matter how unconsciously’ (53) through an analysis of Roger Mais' Brother Man, this notwithstanding the fact that this emphasis is only a “corrective stress” (53) and that his larger intention is “to see West Indian literature in its . . . proper context of an expression both African and European at the same time” (qtd. in Ramchand, 53). Ramchand's point is, given the flaws in the novel which Brathwaite himself points out and the fact that there have been few jazz novels, that Brathwaite offers an “aesthetic which is so useless critically” (53). He asks: “how useful is this aesthetic as a critical tool for describing or evaluating what we have?” (53). For Ramchand, this is borne out by the fact that it “firmly refuses admittance to Naipaul, and then, surprisingly, to Lamming and Harris” (53). This leads Ramchand to ask: “Is the historian of creolisation in the West Indies here driving unwittingly towards a theory of aesthetic pluralism?” (54).

Ramchand then turns his attention back to Moore's study which attempts to advance “archetypal correspondences” (54) between the work of African and Caribbean writers. He finds Moore's attempts in this regard very unsatisfactory, forcing him to wonder whether “it has ever struck Mr. Moore how different these sensibilities [in African writers] are from that of any Negro West Indian writer, how inimitable even by a West Indian, whether consciously or unconsciously, are the imaginative worlds these writers create” (54-55). All in all, he contends, The Chosen Tongue “belongs to a tradition of enthusiastic content-summary and naive / pretentious socio-political and racial-cultural generalisation that passes for literary criticism in the West Indies. In such criticism writers who do not fit generalisations are either dismissed or excluded” (55). This becomes particularly evident, Ramchand asserts, with regard to Moore's treatment of Naipaul, “our most technically assured (although most conventional) artist, and one of the

most disturbing observers of West Indian social realities" (55). In Ramchand's view, "creolisation is one of the principal themes of Naipaul's novels" (55) which is "lamented as a growth into mimicry" Negro creolisation is seen by Naipaul as a treading of the weary road to whiteness; Indian creoleness is an imitation of this imitation" (55).

Ramchand is of the view that "Metropolitan critics have so far failed to serve West Indian literature because they have been unable to resist offering second-hand and superficial analyses of the society, and are unwilling either to pay close attention to particular texts or to relate their interests in other literatures to their interest in West Indian literature" (55). Ramchand believes that this is part of a wider neglect of "literary criticism in or for the West Indies" (55). Sylvia Wynter may be an exception in her "forceful assault upon the cultural myth of Europe--its consequence upon criticism in the West Indies and its contribution to 'the air of inauthenticity' at the University" (55). While agreeing with most of what she says, Ramchand believes that one aspect of her argument may underestimate the "gravity of the situation and the responsibility it imposes upon literary criticism in these islands" (55). He takes exception to her claim that while the "critics are safely 'home and dry' at the university," . . . 'the writers are scattered, in exile" (qtd. in Ramchand, 56) and that "the interpreter replaces the writer; the critics displaces the creator. Yet in displacing the creator, he diminishes his own validity" (qtd. in Ramchand, 56). Ramchand sees a parallel between the current situation (1970) in the West Indies and that noted by F. R. Leavis (the "greatest English critic and teacher of the century" [56]) in England in 1932. So concerned were he, his colleagues and his "graduated students" (56) that they "laboured successfully to create a consciousness throughout their society that literature matters as literature, not as a substitute for something else; and that literary criticism is a craft calling for maturity, intelligence and sensitivity to the organisation of words on the stage" (56). This was important to Leavis, Ramchand argues, because he believed that "literature matters, potentially, as the deepest and most subtle influence upon feeling, thoughts and standards of living" (56). He admits that sometimes Leavis uttered peremptory dismissals of great writers, that he "applied standards in his critical practice [which] have led to accusations of narrowness, even bigotry" (57), and that his views have sometimes been attributed to "arrogance and waspish malice" (57). However, Ramchand notes that "most of his judgments of significance have passed into critical orthodoxy, influencing syllabuses at schools and universities" (57). He argues, more importantly, that Leavis' "value resides not so much in the 'rightness' of his particular conclusions but in the atmosphere he helped to create; and in procedure--the method of analysis he so scrupulously and sensitively applied to literary works" (57). Whatever the correctness or not of particular views expressed, Ramchand argues, what matters is "his belief that if literature is a power for good, bad literature and the criticism elevates it are powers for harm" (57). Moreover, Ramchand contends, Leavis' asides and broadsides were designed to stimulate "that genuine dialogue on which literature thrives" (57), much of which was inspired by Leavis' many comments on literature and critical theory.

Ramchand laments that it is a:

sad reflection on the quality of our intellectual life in the West Indies or on the state of our psyche that we do not argue with one another about what matters to us--neither in literature nor in any other fields. Are we too busy to read what our colleagues are writing? Is it that they have written enough? Is it that what is written by someone we know is somehow already known and judged by us? Or are we afraid, in the atmosphere of insecurity, jealousy and distrust that is so thick in our half-baked society that an intellectual disagreement will always be construed as a personal assault? . . . Without discussion and disagreement literature will not yield up its powers to transform and release us. (57-58)

However, he points out, "without a method to guide us, discussions can easily lose purpose and meaning" (57).

Hence, Ramchand's turn to Leavis' essay "The Irony of Swift" which is a "classic illustration of method and belief operating to each other's advantage" (58) and useful for an understanding of Naipaul's oeuvre. Ramchand believes that there is a lot we can learn from Leavis' "analytic method" (58), notwithstanding any flaws which might coexist with it. Leavis begins by stressing that his goal is "to discuss Swift's writings--to examine what they really are" (qtd. in Ramchand, 58) because it is "difficult to discuss the works 'without shifting the focus of discussion to the kind of man that Swift was'" (58). His hope is that "reference to the man will be reduced only to what is essential for the purposes of literary

criticism" (58). Leavis offers the "most controlled example of close reading and verbal analysis in English literary criticism" (58). "By the end of the analysis we know exactly what Dr. Leavis means by irony, and how Swift's irony works" (58).

By contrast, this scrupulousness, "particular reference and analysis, and a progressive defining of critical terminology" (58) are all missing in Gordon Rohlehr's analysis of Naipaul's work. He "precludes any real discovery of his author through the critical performance itself by beginning with a conviction: 'Naipaul is a Trinidad East Indian who has not come to terms with the Negro-Creole world in Trinidad. . . .' (58). "Because Rohlehr does not work towards this sweeping pronouncement, and does not seek to convince us by the methods of literary criticism, the reader who does not already agree with the judgment of Naipaul the man finds the essay as a whole difficult to accept. Something different happens when Dr. Leavis passes judgment on Swift" (59). The Leavis interested merely in the workings of Swift's irony (this is Leavis the "close-reading critic" [59]) is counterbalanced by the Leavis who believes that literature's moral impact matters and who passes judgment on Swift the man and "negating author" (59) at the end of the essay. The thing is, Ramchand argues, that one can disagree with Leavis' final conclusion without all the same failing to admire the "actual criticism" (59) which precedes it. This is because the "critical analysis is not an illustration of a thesis declared before hand or imposed from the outside. We can accept the analysis and make such reservations about the judgment as we find necessary" (59).

In short, Ramchand sides with the views of Leavis and, by extension, the greatest influence on Leavis, Matthew Arnold, that the reader must aim for objectivity in criticism. He cites one of Leavis' most important "article[s]" (59) of "critical faith" (59) in this regard:

The analysis and judgment of literary art belong to the literary critic, who is one in so far as he observes a disciplined relevance in response, comment and determination of significance. He is concerned with the work in front of him as something that should contain within itself the reason why it is so and not otherwise. (qtd. in Ramchand, 59)

Ramchand returns finally to Wynter's fears about the privileging of the critic over the creative writer. Like Arnold, too, Ramchand argues that critics "are not displacing the creators" (59). Rather, by "his teachings and by the fanatical practice of his craft, . . . the critic at the University can help to spread the belief that literature matters" (59).