

## Editor's Column

# In the House of Criticism

### The Task of Criticism and the Pleasures of Exile

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS IN LITERARY studies in recent years has been the turn to questions of human rights. This development is important because in the 1980s and 1990s, when the world was gripped by massive violations of human rights in places such as Srebrenica and Rwanda, critics and theorists were generally busy debating the relation between signs and signifiers, synchrony and diachrony, metaphor and metonymy, apparently oblivious to what was occurring outside the text. It seemed as if linguistic codes had come to provide a semiotic firewall for critics, even when it was apparent that language itself was implicated in what one may call postmodern genocide. Radovan Karadžić, considered one of the architects of the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in July 1995, is also a poet with six published volumes to his credit. During the Rwanda genocide of 1994, the voices behind the propaganda organs of Hutu power, including Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines and *Kangura* magazine, were not subalterns but some of the most educated people in the country. For example, the broadcaster Ferdinand Nahimana, later convicted of inciting genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, holds a doctorate from a prestigious French university. Given the prominent role of intellectuals in postmodern genocide, especially those trained in the humanities, the near absence of literary scholars in debates about the role of language and poetics in the unfortunate events that defined the end of the twentieth century was puzzling.<sup>1</sup>

This near absence was surprising because it was always assumed, in many intellectual traditions, that one of the qualities of the imagination was its capacity to bring unspeakable events into human

experience. It was also surprising because, of all the intellectual projects concerned with the human, literary criticism or theory was matched only by anthropology in its concern with the lives of others, including the subjected and excluded. Indeed, it could be argued that literary criticism, often associated with the rejection of the inherited tradition of humanism yet located within its institutions, was born out of displacement and exile. As a form of knowledge and reflection, criticism was born out of what Michel de Certeau called "the relation between a departure and a debt" (318).

From Marx and Freud to Theodor Adorno, Erich Auerbach, and Hannah Arendt, from Edward Said to Assia Djebar, the great critics of the long twentieth century were exiles. Their work was enabled by their location inside and outside modernity and its institutions of knowledge production. The literary criticism that would travel, to use Said's phrase, was not the one located in secure places—F. R. Leavis's Cambridge or Cleanth Brooks's South—but the one produced by exiles on the margins of dominant discourses (Said, "Traveling Theory"). It is in the works of the exiles of the twentieth century that one can discover literary criticism functioning as a project of the human subject outside nation, outside the imperium of humanism, in the place of the other, in the language of the other. Confronted with the abyss presented by slavery, genocide, or the violence of empire, writers and critics would seek refuge in the house of criticism. Commentary and other kinds of critical writing would be enabled by what the Caribbean writer George Lamming aptly called the pleasures of exile—"to be an exile is to be alive" (24).

Still, it was not apparent what the pleasures of exile were, especially given that criticism, like creative writing, had been institutionalized by national language. Exiled intellectuals may have embraced their homelessness as a counterpoint to the nations and languages that had rejected them, but it was

never clear whether exegesis would forget, to use Certeau's apt phrase, "the misfortune from which its necessity springs" (319). Beneath the bravado with which exiled intellectuals expressed their ability to transcend the priestly narrative of the nation, there lurked the suspicion that *Heimatlosen* was celebrated because of the melancholy engendered by the loss of place. Adorno's reflections on modern life in *Minima Moralia* were driven by the desire to find a place above both "the narrowest private sphere" and mass production (18). But no one can read Adorno's aphorisms and his studied attempt to distance himself from the "estranged form of modern life" without noticing the unstated longing for an aesthetic state as a compensation (17). Indeed, the fears of exiles like Adorno about modern life centered on the way in which the states that had excluded them from their cultures did so by depriving the aesthetic of its capacity to account for the human subject and on the inability of criticism to offer what Thomas Docherty calls "the solace and assurance of the *heimlich*" (9). The house of criticism seemed caught between two desires: to escape nationalism and the aesthetic project of the state and yet to hold on to the national language and the philological ideals embedded in it. Docherty makes this point powerfully in *Criticism and Modernity*:

Criticism, as we know it in modernity, depends upon an attitude which is, tacitly at least, nationalist in fact and in origin: within modernity, there is a specific relation between aesthetic criticism and the formulation of the emergent nation-state, especially within what is becoming known as Europe. The political nationalism in question here is profoundly allied to that aesthetic or cultural theory whose determinant formation is that of tragedy, and specifically that aspect of tragedy usually identified in the neo-Aristotelian concept of *terror*. The consequence in modernity for criticism and theory, ignoring its own topographical locatedness and its own

debts to a tragic consciousness, is the occlusion of the object of criticism in the interests of the production of what is fundamentally (if silently) a nationalist identity for the subject, the critic herself or himself. (9)

The challenge of criticism in the twentieth century was how to negotiate the tenuous line between a distinct topography (that of language and nation) and the critics' consciousness of being located at the diminishing point of the library that had enabled their projects.

This was the situation in which Auerbach found himself as he completed *Mimesis*, his *magnus opus* on theories of representation in the Western tradition. In Istanbul, where he had been forced into exile, Auerbach lamented the fact that he was obligated to write the primer of representation in Western culture on the margins of Europe, away from a specialized library, but he was quick to note that his book owed its existence "to just this lack of a rich and a specialized library" (557). Displacement from the library and archive of Europe had enabled a totalized vision of theories and styles of representation from Homer to Virginia Woolf. In exile, essentially metonymic modes of representation were brought together into a metaphoric apparatus that made Europe appear singular.<sup>2</sup> In fact, few readers of Auerbach's book could fail to notice the double paradox that was its condition of existence. The first paradox was this: *Mimesis* was made possible by the author's displacement from Europe, but by establishing a singular narrative of representation across various traditions and cultures, the book imagined and willed into being a shared European identity even in the midst of the nationalism that had precipitated World War II. The second paradox could not become clear until the concluding chapter of the book: here there was obvious dissonance between Auerbach's mastery of the European canon and his doubts about his relationship with his community of readers. Thus, a book

that started with an unforgettable comparative reading of the most majestic celebrations of the theme of representation in the Western tradition—Homer's *Odyssey* and Genesis 22—would end in an elegiac register:

With this I have said all that I thought the reader would wish me to explain. Nothing now remains but to find him—to find the reader, that is. I hope that my study will reach its readers—both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. And may it contribute to bringing together again those whose love for our western history has serenely persevered. (557)

In this concluding statement, Auerbach expressed deep regret that in exile he was outside his conceptual and philological homeland, that his point of writing was also the limit of the idea of Western culture itself. Here a tragic consciousness was a precondition for philology, criticism, and comparative literature. Without topography, criticism seemed a belated gesture. The irony, of course, was that it was the absence of topography that had made the idea of a Europe produced by philology necessary. Responding to the criticism that his discussion of representation in Western culture was "too time-bound and all too much determined by the present," Auerbach noted that the question he had asked himself when researching his subject was simply this: "How do matters look in the European context?" (573). He added, "*Mimesis* is quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s" (574).

The 1940s marked the crisis of European identity, of its signs and signifiers. For intellectuals like Auerbach, committed to a Europe unified by literature even when it was divided by languages and competing ideologies, the rise of fascism represented a terminus; it was not clear that the Europe they had known, the one that had authorized

their intellectual projects, would survive the triumph of the dark forces embodied by the swastika. In this context, Auerbach's elegiac ending of *Mimesis* was a form of distancing himself from the dying idea of Europe. And yet it is precisely because of this distancing, this exiling of himself from the beloved, that Auerbach would recuperate what he considered the core and continuity of a European tradition of representation. Auerbach's challenge was how to read Western texts when he was separated from the idea of Europe and from the aesthetic state that had enabled German philology in the first place. The insistence on European time was necessitated both by the sense of its loss and by a desire for Europe, or Germany, as the home of language and perhaps being. Criticism would be a calculated response to the loss of the beloved.

### The Pleasures of Exile

But what about those who sought a home in the language of the other and strove to inhabit a family romance constituted by forms not of their making? What work would criticism perform in the prison house of a corrupt nationalism, one built on the denial, destruction, and deracination of the vulnerable self? Consider, for example, the story of the South African writer and critic Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele. Growing up in a country where racial identity determined the lives of the citizens, excluded from opportunities of task, time, and work, Mphahlele turned to creative writing and criticism to maintain his sense of humanity at a time when the state was constructing laws to diminish the humanity of the subjected. In his 1959 autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, Mphahlele recounted how he had responded to legal segregation by retreating into imagination and criticism. Excluded from high culture and confined to second-rate institutions, Mphahlele wrote short stories and works of criticism to affirm his cultured identity in a world where culture

was reserved, by official decree, to people of European origin.

In 1951 Mphahlele was banned from teaching in South Africa. Under apartheid laws, this kind of banning was tantamount to social excommunication. It deprived one of rights of citizenship and civic life: "I had been banned from teaching and conditions were crushing me and I was shriveling in the acid of my bitterness; I was suffocating," Mphahlele noted in his autobiography (200). A form of constriction and exclusion, apartheid, the system of white power in South Africa, had turned the author's native land into a space of social death. What should have been a place of moral nourishment had become a prison house: "You just felt the world getting too small for you, ever contracting and shutting you in" (203). There was no room of one's own in a place where the state not only maintained total surveillance of the public sphere but also colonized the private spaces with laws managing the details of human life. The banned author's only hope of being a person was exile. So in 1957 Mphahlele applied for a visa to leave South Africa without the option of returning.

In an exile that was to last twenty years, Mphahlele would become a major actor in the drama of African literature at its emergence, founding cultural centers in Nigeria and Kenya and teaching in Zambia and the United States. During this period, he published a major novel called *The Wanderers*, a testimony to the pain of exile and its limited pleasures. But it was in his literary criticism that Mphahlele would use exile to remap his own relationship to Africa, to the African diaspora, and to the world. In works of criticism such as *The African Image* and "Voices in the Whirlwind" and *Other Essays*, Mphahlele displayed the power of criticism to house the thoughts of peoples from various nations and traditions. In these works, exile was an occasion for reflecting on the human character rather than on loss. As he noted in *The Af-*

*rican Image*, Mphahlele adopted Africa as a totalized yet unstructured place, but he also reimagined it as a place of instruction, a site for “absorbing, learning, and arguing” (26). Most important, exile enabled critical reflection: “In independent Africa and in that undefined continent of exile, where mobility on the vertical and horizontal planes is possible, you need to re-educate yourself, to constantly overhaul your values” (30).

But why would the author see exile as an occasion for overhauling his own values and presuppositions? This question points to the pressing cultural imperative behind Mphahlele’s celebration of his dislocation: exile, which would appear to many people to be the name and logic of homelessness, was the instrument of one’s self-alienation. And this self-alienation was connected to a powerful ideal of freedom. Here it is important to recall that in Mphahlele’s native South Africa under apartheid, the state’s soul making depended in part on the location of Africans in a mythical “tribal” homeland and, simultaneously, their structural dislocation from the institutions of cultural modernity, which the state displayed as the mark of European civilization. Like other members of the generation of the 1950s, Mphahlele sought to counter this notion of culture as the exclusive property of people of European descent by overidentifying with high culture and distancing himself from what was considered native. The more the state tried to restrict African access to high culture, most notoriously through the Public Amenities Act, the more European music and American jazz were valued:

We had jazz, we had European music. European music was in an uncanny way a symbol of conquest for the individual. It took one to far-away lands where we imagined ourselves elevated above the tyranny around us. Jazz also spoke to us of an imaginary land where Blacks were achieving things we couldn’t dream of. Except that jazz also grounded us deeper in our Black experience because we did sense its

other dimension: a state of mind rooted in a life that knew slave ships, whips, back-breaking labour, break-up of family life, alienation, and so on. Music became for us something no white savage could take away from us.

(*African Image* 27–28)

One became a human being by rejecting state-sponsored notions of blackness and appropriating the culture of the dominant as the condition of possibility of one’s being; one became a person through disidentification with the state’s community-building project.

An often forgotten history of literary and cultural criticism in the twentieth century concerns the appropriation by the colonized and dominated of high European culture as a counterpoint to the domination of the world by Europe. Struggling to untangle the paradox of modernity—namely, the coexistence of ideals of freedom and forms of domination—W. E. B. Du Bois turned to high culture as the inevitable antithesis of the instrumentality of a racialized life:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.  
Across the color line I move arm in arm with  
Balzac and Dumas where smiling men and  
welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From  
out the caves of evening that swing between  
the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of  
the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius  
and what soul I will, and they come all gra-  
ciously with no scorn nor condescension. So,  
wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this  
the life you grudge us, O knightly America?  
Is this the life you long to change into the  
dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so  
afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, be-  
tween Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the  
Promised Land? (239)

A literary education did not, of course, quarantine one from the instruments of domination, but for many colonial subjects an aesthetic education intended to enforce colonial rule would often be converted into a narrative of freedom through criticism.



### A Criticism of One's Own

The best illustration of how criticism can be a conduit outside systems of domination is found in the writings of C. L. R. James, the Caribbean historian and literary critic. Coming of age under the hegemony of an enforced Englishness, James noted that his education was confined to the history and literature of western Europe, in a kind of Plato's cave:

The atmosphere in which I came to maturity, and which has developed me along the lines that I have gone, is the atmosphere of the literature of Western Europe. In my youth we lived according to the tenets of Matthew Arnold; we spread sweetness and light, and we studied the best that there was in literature in order to transmit it to the people—as we thought, the poor backward West Indian people.

("Discovering" 237)

In this colonial enclosure, and following on the influential writings of Matthew Arnold, criticism was not intended to train subjects in the art of questioning the dominant system; rather, the critic's work was to chaperone subjects into affiliation with a set of core moral values, thereby producing docile bodies. Indeed, some of the most fascinating moments in *Beyond a Boundary*, James's memoir of his aesthetic education, are the ones in which the good colonial boy identifies, unquestioningly and absolutely, with high European culture:

We met visiting literary celebrities as a matter of course. Never losing sight of my plan to go abroad and write, I studied and practiced assiduously the art of fiction: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Tchekov, Flaubert, Maupassant and the Goncourt brothers, their writings, their diaries and their correspondence; Percy Lubbock and Edwin Muir; I balanced the virtues of Thackeray, Dickens and Fielding against the vices of Hemingway, Faulkner and Lawrence. Intellectually I lived abroad, chiefly in England. What ultimately vitiated all this was that it involved me with the people around me only in the most abstract way. I

spoke. My audience listened and thought it was fine and that I was a learned man. In politics I took little interest. I taught at schools, but there were no controversies on education. I taught the curriculum. I didn't think it was any good, but I didn't bother about it. (71)

The more he mastered the canon, the more James seemed imprisoned by his education, unable to see outside the colonial aesthetic or blatantly racist social practices. When he was rejected by the merchant marines in Trinidad because of the color of his skin, James was, in his words, "not unduly disturbed":

I remember that the English sergeant, instructor of the cadet corps, was quite angry when I told him about it. "Here," he said, "they say they want men and when they have a likely lad they won't take him." White boys from the school joined the public contingent as commissioned officers and came back to the college to see us with chests out and smart uniforms and shining buttons. When the masters heard what had happened to me some of them were angry, one or two ashamed, all were on my side. It didn't hurt for long because for so many years these crude intrusions from the world which surrounded us had been excluded. I had not even been wounded, for no scar was left. (40)

As far as James was concerned, colonial racism was just another instance of cultural envy; they hated you because you had mastered their culture.

In spite of his conscription into the cultural systems of Englishness, James would adopt a mode of aesthetic education to become one of the prominent voices of Pan-Africanism and radical politics. He was to become a major historian, in 1938 publishing *The Black Jacobins*, one of the first comprehensive works on the Haitian Revolution. But it was perhaps his work in literary criticism that transformed him from a good colonial boy to a radical Marxist. It is significant that this transformation took place in exile, not in Britain but in the United States. There James

became cognizant of the work of criticism as part of a hermeneutics of suspicion. And it was when he turned to American writers such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville that James was able to initiate a critical practice outside the continuum of culture and tradition imposed on him by the colonial system of education. Reading American writers outside the matrix of European civilization, James presented them as agents of American democracy, not of a living or continuous tradition.

By presenting Europe and America in opposition, James initiated a major shift in the grammar of criticism in the late colonial period. This shift is evident in the bifurcation in James's criticism. In his major essays on European writers, James was the high priest of the canon. Works did not make sense unless the individual talent could be reconciled to tradition. For example, James argued that all the currents that went into the making of Shakespeare were brought together in *Hamlet*; for him the play gathered and embodied the central ideas underlying European modernity ("Notes"). In contrast, an American writer like Melville wrote against the totalitarianism of tradition and functioned, like American popular culture, as "the unsurpassed interpreter of the age in which we live, its past, its present and its uncertain future" (*Mariners* 148). James had come to read American literature as an allegory of the condition of exile itself.

How do we explain the difference in James's readings of European texts and American ones? Why is it that James, a man of high culture and sensibility, admired American popular culture? One could argue that he had in the 1950s come to differentiate between criticism as a project that functioned within tradition and as a form of asceticism, a mode of interpretation that emerges through departure from familiar spaces. America was important to him because it represented the other in ways that Europe and Africa could not. When he saw himself in the mirror of this American other, James was liberated from the imper-

alism of interpretation. For him, producing criticism on an American author would eventually become a lodestone for freedom.

In 1948 the United States Department of Migration and Naturalization issued a deportation order against James, who in the late 1940s had been involved in radical politics in the Detroit area and had also published important books on the international revolutionary movement. For the next two years, James spent most of his time on Ellis Island or out on bail. Ellis Island, the proverbial entry into America, became a signifier of statelessness: "I was an alien. I had no human rights. If I didn't like it, I could leave. How to characterize this otherwise than as inhuman and barbarous? And what is its origin except that overweening national arrogance which is sweeping over the world like some pestilence?" (*Mariners* 141). As he surveyed the castaways and renegades held in legal limbo, James concluded that the prison on Ellis Island was an affront "to any shred of national pride, any consciousness of the role that America now plays and must forever play in the visible future of society, any sense of the past history of the country, what it claims, and, also, what it is being tested by in the eyes of hundreds of millions all over the world" (150). Ironically, James's virulent response to his impending deportation was driven by a powerful cultural grievance: having identified the United States as the source of new cultural energies in the age of a declining European culture, he felt that the ideals on which America was built were being undermined by the barbarism that he was witnessing on Ellis Island.

How could James celebrate the authority of American civilization and the appeal of its popular culture in the face of this radical deviation from the ideals of freedom? This question was compounded by the terms of the deportation order. James was being deported not because of his actions but because of his revolutionary writings. He was adamant that there was nothing in his writings from 1935 onward that

Photo: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, HAER NY, 31-NEYO, 89-11.



could transform him “into a clear and present danger to the people of the United States”:

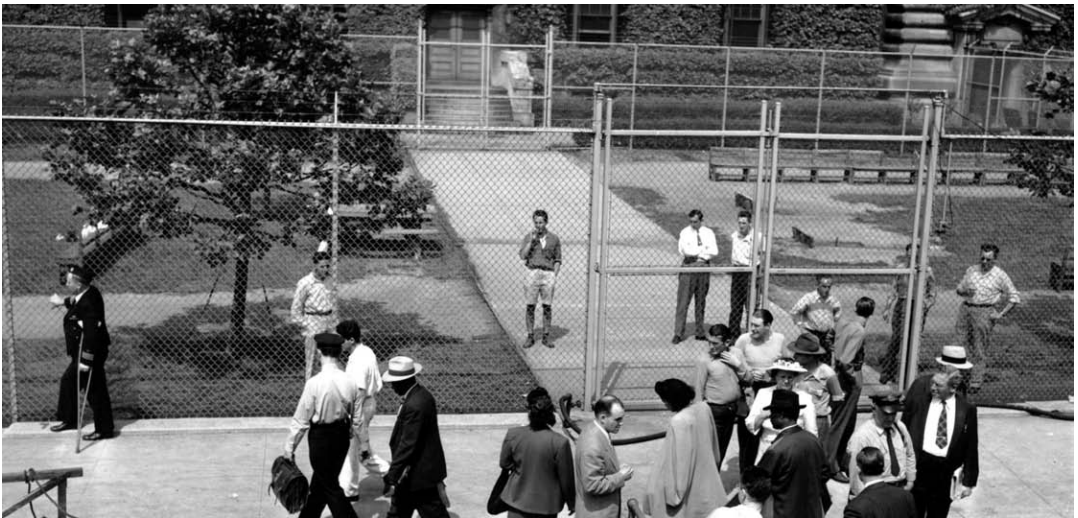
It is my books that the writer who rejected my appeal dwelt upon. . . .

This is my chief offense, that I have written books of the kind I have written. And I protest against it as a violation of the rights of every citizen of the United States. The very highest executive officers and politicians in the United States, the very highest, have assured the

American people and the listening world that the drive against Communists is not directed against freedom of intellectual investigation, it is not directed against freedom of speech, it is not directed against differences of opinion. Over and over again it is repeated that the drive is directed against an international conspiracy, aimed at destroying the freedoms and liberties of the American people and establishing by any and every means a totalitarian government.

If this is true, then any charges against me, any decisions against me, can be based only upon the view that I am a person who, directly or indirectly, aims at accomplishing, assisting or encouraging these monstrous abominations. (191)

James made this argument at the end of *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, a major work of criticism written in the prison on Ellis Island. Published in New York in 1953, the book would demonstrate James's mastery and critique of American culture; Melville would be his entry into that critique. The point of criticism would be identification and *dédoublement*. In his reading of Melville, James would indict those who had fixed his identity as an alien whose thoughts and being were at odds with American values. What he was saying to the bureaucrats in the Department of Migration and Naturalization—perhaps too subtly—was



Visitors to Ellis Island in 1947 pass an enclosed recreational area for detainees awaiting decisions in their deportation cases. Photo © 2013 The Associated Press.





that he, a reader of the American canon, and not they, enforcers of rules, was the true citizen of the republic. Criticism would be an antidote to enforced statelessness. It would function as the will to human freedom in the midst of constraint. Caught between the dream of Ellis Island as a site of liberty and its existence as a prison, James would turn to Melville's works as a bridge between freedom and necessity.

*Simon Gikandi*

## NOTES

1. There were exceptions to the rule. Although Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* does not deal directly with genocide, it is a powerful meditation on the relation between language and violence. Human rights are the subject of important works by Joseph Slaughter and Elizabeth Anker.

2. For the implications of Auerbach's exile on the emergence of comparative literature as a field of study, see the articles by Emily Apter and Aamir Mufti.

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\_\_\_\_\_ A group being deported in 1952 for illegal entry into the United States wave good-bye to the Statue of Liberty. Photo by Al Ravenna, from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, LC-USZ62-137829.