

<sup>2</sup> Ce coeur obsédant, qui ne correspond  
 Pas avec mon langage et mes costumes,  
 Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,  
 Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes  
 D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance  
 Et ce désespoir, à nul autre égal  
 D'appriivoiser, avec des mots de France,  
 Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?

[This haunted heart that doesn't fit / My language or the clothes I wear / Chafes within the grip of / Borrowed feelings, European ways. / Do you feel my pain, / This anguish like none other / From taming with the words of France / This heart that came to me from Senegal?]

Naomi Garrett. *Renaissance of Haitian Poetry*, 142. Translation by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, *The Negritude Poets*. New York: Viking, 1975, 15.

~

Wai Chee Dimock. *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, and Philosophy*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Pp. 278. \$48.00, \$17.95 pb.

Wai Chee Dimock, by way of interdisciplinary intervention, contests the sovereignty of "commensurability," not only as a philosophical concept, but also as a highly durable and even efficacious "cultural disposition" in the post-Reformation world. Commensurability, she reminds us, is a "style of rationality" which strives for perfect justice. At the same time, this striving for "the just measure of things" — for what is fit, equal, and proportionate — has proven so efficacious that it is seen, conversely, as constitutive of rationality *per se*: what is true of justice is true of all thinking, all universalizing. In practical deliberation, commensurability promises the resolution of all conflicts because all competing interests and values can be measured and scaled according to the standard of a single agreed-upon end (happiness, pleasure, utility, civic duty). To Dimock, this style of rationality is as questionable as it is attractive. Her complaint is that "a language whose charge it is . . . to resolve its conflicts into a commensurate order is a language that abstracts as much as it translates and omits as much as it abstracts." Her concern, then, is to rescue "the stubborn densities of human experience unsubsumed and unresolved by any order of the commensurate" (5).

As many readers will recognize, this ethical concern for the "residues of justice" does not originate with Dimock, and she carefully acknowledges her debt to a multipartisan tradition extending from Aristotle to the Frankfurt School, communitarianism, and feminism. Her claim to originality lies in the method by which she sets out to "unsettle" the notion of commensurability. Dimock calls for "a critical practice responsive to . . . the cognitive residues of a text" (141). Resisting a poststructuralist temptation, she does not dispense with justice *per se*, but calls for a "non-integral" and "less exhaustive" version of it (5). Thus, in the same spirit, one can do justice to this very ambi-

tious book without the blunt instrument of commensurability, but not to Dimock's advantage, inasmuch as her book's flaws are *roughly* proportionate to her ambitions.

Dimock's critical practice is a version of the interdisciplinary perspectivism associated with cultural studies. Unsettling justice requires unsettling the foundations of those disciplines which give commensurability cultural expression and authority. Accordingly, she isolates "three languages of justice" — literature, law, and philosophy, all discrete "styles of reasoning" or "cognitive domains" (9). She then sets them against each other to expose their unique but limited competencies and to show how each acts as an epistemological supplement and corrective for the other. We soon see that the relationship between law and philosophy is far less interesting to Dimock than is the dichotomy that emerges between both of these disciplines and literature. Indeed, law and philosophy together are equally committed to total justice. This alliance encompasses Luther, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Bentham, Marx, Chomsky, John Rawls and Richard Posner; it cuts across the fields of jurisprudence, tort and criminal law, moral and political philosophy, cognitive linguistics, philanthropy, and theology. In contrast, literature, by which she means primarily the novel, "is the most eloquent dissent from that canon of rational adequation so blandly maintained in the abstractions of law and philosophy." Thanks to the "messiness of representation," "the problem of justice is given a face and a voice . . . that plays havoc with any uniform scale of measurement and brings to every act of social weighing the shadow of an unweighable residue." So enabled, literature is an indispensable corrective. Because "it denies us the promise extended by law and philosophy both. . . . it is a testing ground no jurist or philosopher can afford to ignore" (10).

However, in defending literature, Dimock oddly diminishes it. If literature honors the residues of justice, it is not in conceptual command of them, even though literature, like philosophy or law, seeks to affirm a commensurate order. What decisively distinguishes literature, and most especially the novel, is that, as a matter of form, it must *fail* to affirm that order. A literary work is only a "sedimentation" of residues, that is, of its constitutive "illogic." Indeed, to argue that literature does "cultural work" is to align it falsely with "instrumental reason" (169). Works, accordingly, can only dramatize blind collisions between contradictory commitments. These assumptions lead to idiosyncratic readings of Dimock's proof texts, an oddly arbitrary gathering of nineteenth-century American novels and short fiction by Cooper, Melville, Rebecca Harding Davis, William Dean Howells, and Kate Chopin, among others. Emblematic of her practice is her analysis of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. She argues that the novel "tries to imagine a morality commensurate with economic reason" (175)

but, generically faithful to the incommensurabilities of experience, offers itself as "a failure in the economics of justice" (181). Ultimately then, if literature, law and philosophy are blind to their own disabilities, we must turn to the cultural critic, who aligns abstraction and residue using the "more supple vocabulary" of a critical discourse that is neither literature, nor law, nor philosophy (91).

But in the end, we don't need Dimock's methodological impositions to mediate between the disciplines. Neither philosophy nor law nor literature is as internally pure or self-enclosed as her metadisciplinary radicalism requires them to be. Disciplines have a functional integrity even as their boundaries prove highly permeable. Indeed, Dimock's critique of commensurability is haunted by the fact that it is derived from *within* philosophy itself, from a philosophical counter-tradition not merely supplemented by literature but engaged in a mutually enriching dialogue with it. Alasdair MacIntyre and Seyla Benhabib, for example, find a middle way between abstraction and residue by reintegrating the unencumbered, hypergeneralized self of the Kantian tradition into the complex web of narratives that constitute a human life. Aligning abstraction with residue is also within the competence of the legal profession inasmuch as legal equity is a judicial practice which seeks to correctively adjust the rigorous precision of unfeeling justice with actual, recalcitrant human circumstances. Literature, says Dimock, gives "the problem of justice a face and a voice" (29), but, as Kathy Eden has argued, equity is a process which confronts legal principle with faces and voices, and thus is fundamentally a judicious exercise of the literary imagination. In the same spirit, Martha Nussbaum has argued that narrative fiction, because it privileges contextual complexity, is a rich form of philosophical inquiry, which is to say that it thematizes human problems instead of helplessly dramatizing its own generic deficiencies.

Thus, in seeking a "more supple vocabulary" of alignment, we would do better to read the fictions of literary artists rather than the critical fictions of Dimock, who is not the first critic to see herself as their rival. That is, we should look instead to, say, *Antigone* to see how the problem of justice is given a face and a voice as Sophocles explores the intellectual and emotional consequences of Creon's tragic desire to make civic virtue the measure of all action; or to *The Brothers Karamazov* as it tries to work its way past Ivan Karamozov's tragic inability to square Christian forgiveness with cruelty to children, or happiness with freedom. True, these are debatable claims about how literature works, but they survive as the cognitive residue of a critical tradition uneffaced by Dimock's own empirical simplifications.

WILLIAM BARTLEY

## WORKS CITED

- Benhabib, Seyla. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Eden, Kathy. *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame UP, 1981.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

~

Chris Bongie. *Islands and Exiles. The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, Pp vi, 543. \$65, \$24.95 pb.

The scope of this book is enormously impressive: centred on the French Caribbean, it also considers the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, pre- and post-revolutionary France, Faulkner and Keri Hulme, while ranging from the famous (Goethe, Conrad) to the obscure (Bissette, Maynard). The main axis is a juxtaposition of the beginning of modern colonialism in the late-eighteenth century with decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, to illustrate Bongie's concept of the "post/colonial": decolonization is not a clean break with the past, and Bongie inserts the slash mark into "postcolonial" to indicate an ambiguous separation/complicity of the chronologically postcolonial with the colonial period. But the book covers far more ground than this, partly because Bongie is unashamedly eclectic and digressive. It is, therefore, hard work to read (and the digressions occasionally lead to slippage in the argument). Its "central theoretical point of reference" is Edouard Glissant's concept of creolization: the basis for a postmodern theorization of identity as mixed, fluid, "chaotic," non-originary and relational. This creolized identity forms one pole of a "creole continuum," whose opposite pole is the essentialist conception of identity that Bongie associates with modernism, particularly with primitivism, racism and belief in a revolutionary future. He argues that neither pole can be fully attained, and analyses texts to show how they are inevitably drawn back, from one end or the other, into the "creole" middle ground; naive essentialism is no longer possible, but nor is a whole-heartedly postmodern ditching of essentialist identitarian discourse.

This is not to say that both poles have equal status. Bongie's position is unambiguously post-modernist and, for all he recognizes the necessity of the modernist pole, he is rather patronizing in regard to its proponents. And, since postmodernism is positive and modernism is negative, the reasons why neither is a tenable stable position are very different. Given the centrality of the concept of the continuum, an explicit discussion of these differences would have been useful. Thus, it appears that what destabilizes the modernist, essentialist pole