‘Almost an Englishman’: Colonial Mimicry in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself.*

If one aspect of the project of Western civilization was to make the inferior others, by education and example, as much like the Whites as possible, another aspect was to maintain precisely that difference which justified white authority.

David Murray

‘Burn but his books’: Caliban, Equiano, Bhabha

In the third act of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611), Stephano and Caliban conspire together on the question of how best to put an end to Prospero’s rule, both over Caliban’s island, which Prospero has colonized, and Caliban himself, whom he has enslaved. After protracted debate, Caliban finally advances a programme of insurgency:

Why, as I told thee, ‘tis a custom with him
I’ th’ afternoon to sleep: there thou mayst brain him,
Having first seiz’d his books; or with a log
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,
Or cut his wezand with thy knife. Remember
First to possess his books; for without them
He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not
One spirit to command: they all do hate him
As rootedly as I. Burn but his books.
What is striking here is Caliban's recognition of the importance of the role played by Prospero's 'books' in securing and maintaining his subjection. Even though the master is to be killed while sleeping, it is none the less thought prudent to 'first seiz[e]', 'possess' and finally 'Burn... his books' before the projected murder can be carried out. The suggestion, indeed, is that it is the 'books' themselves which construct the white colonizer and his native other as human and monster, master and slave respectively, 'for without them', as Caliban surmises, the differences between the two dissolve into likeness - 'He's but a sot, as I am'. What is radical, in turn, about such a dissolution is that it erodes the legitimating ground on which the exertion of the colonizer's discriminatory power is based.

Caliban's insight into the complicities between forms of representation and knowledge, on the one hand, and the implementation of power, on the other, has become axiomatic for much postcolonial theory and criticism over the last twenty years or so. It is, however, also operative at a much earlier historical juncture, in the context of the slave narrative tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, within which Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789) occupies a central position.

As a slave narrative, Equiano's text unfolds as a double inscription. At one level, it is autobiographical in form, a linear charting of the changing states through which its subject passes: from an original freedom in Africa, through the monumental ruptures of the Middle Passage and enslavement in America and the West Indies, to manumission and the eventual recovery of a liberty memorably celebrated by the ex-slave's dancing in 'Georgia superfine blue cloathes'. Such secular progress is itself the allegorical prelude to a spiritual movement which delivers the penitent into the Christian faith as, in another memorable formulation, Equiano describes how 'the Lord was pleased to break in upon [his] soul with... bright beams of heavenly light' (*IN*, p. 190). Yet *The Interesting Narrative* is not solely an act of self-representation. It also participates in a far larger political project, specifically designed, as it is, to further the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, just formally commencing in both public and parliamentary spheres at the time when the text was first published and finally succeeding in 1807, ten years after Equiano's death.

Like the Caliban of *The Tempest*, Equiano is much concerned,