

Kamau Brathwaite

Roots

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ades.¹⁵¹ Every year the people of Bournehills put on the same mas' –the same pageant– *The Legend of Cuffee Ned*. They will not change a single iota of their metaphor. There is of course an outcry against this from other parts of the island: «Oh you poor people from the slave days, every year you doing the same thing». But Bounehills is making a point; until there is a change in the system, we will always be slaves, and until there is change, we must continue to celebrate our one, if brief, moment of rebel victory:

They had worked together! –and as if, in their eyes, this had been the greatest achievement, the thing of which they were proudest, the voices rose to a stunning crescendo that visibly jarred the blue dome of the sky–. Under Cuffee, they sang, a man had not lived for himself alone, but for his neighbour also. «If we had lived selfish, we couldn't have lived at all». They half-spoke, half-sung the words. They had trusted one another, and set aside their differences and stood as one against their enemies. *They had been a People!* Their heads thrown back and the welded voices reaching high above New Bristol's red-faded tin roofs, they informed the sun and afternoon sky of what they, Bournehills People, had once been capable of.

Then abruptly, the voices dropped... They sung then in tones drained of their former jubilation of the defeat that had eventually followed... in voices that would never cease to mourn... for this too, as painful as it was, was part of the story.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ For the close connection between the Montserrat masquerade bands and their counterparts in West Africa, see the articles by Simon Ottenberg, Phillips Stevens, Jr. and John C. Messenger in *African Arts*, 6, No. 4 (Summer 1973), pp. 32-35, 40-43, 54-57 153.

¹⁵² Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

History of the voice 1979/1981

The development of nation language in anglophone Caribbean poetry an electronic lecture

What I am going to talk about this morning is language from the Caribbean, the process of using English in a different way from the «norm». English in a new sense as I prefer to call it. English in an ancient sense. English in a very traditional sense. And sometimes not English at all, but *language*.

I start my thoughts, taking up from the discussion that developed after Dennis Brutus's very excellent presentation. Without logic, and through instinct, the people who spoke with Dennis from the floor yesterday brought up the question of language. Actually, Dennis' presentation had nothing to do with language. He was speaking about the structural condition of South Africa. But instinctively people recognized that the structural condition described by Dennis had very much to do with language. He didn't concentrate on the language aspect of it because there wasn't enough time and because it was not his main concern. But it was interesting that your instincts, not your logic, moved you toward the question of the relationship between language and culture, language and structure. In his case, it was English, and English as spoken by Africans, and the native languages as spoken by Africans.

We in the Caribbean have a similar kind of plurality: we have English, which is the imposed language on much of the archipelago. English is an imperial language,

as are French, Dutch, and Spanish. We have what we call creole English, which is a mixture of English and an adaptation that English took in the new environment of the Caribbean when it became mixed with the other imported languages. We have also what is called *nation language*, which is the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors. Finally, we have the remnants of ancestral languages still persisting in the Caribbean. There is Amerindian, which is active in certain parts of Central America but not in the Caribbean because the Amerindians are a destroyed people, and their languages were practically destroyed. We have Hindi, spoken by some of the more traditional East Indians who live in the Caribbean, and there are also varieties of Chinese.¹ And, miraculously, there are survivals of African languages still persisting in the Caribbean. So we have that spectrum –that prism– of languages similar to the kind of structure that Dennis described for South Africa. Now, I have to give you some kind of background to the development of these languages, the historical development of this plurality, because I can't take it for granted that you know and understand the history of the Caribbean.

The Caribbean is a set of islands stretching out from Florida in a mighty curve. You must know of the Caribbean at least from television, at least now with hurricane

¹ No one, as far as I know, has yet made a study of the impact of Asiatic language structures on the contemporary languages of the Caribbean, and even the study of the African impact is still in its infancy. For development of Anglophone Caribbean culture, see Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1974).

David (–) coming right into it. The islands stretch out on an arc of some two thousand miles from Florida through the Atlantic to the South American coast, and they were originally inhabited by Amerindian people, Taino, Siboney, Carib, Arawak. In 1492, Columbus «discovered» (as it is said) the Caribbean, and with that discovery came the intrusion of European culture and peoples and a fragmentation of the original Amerindian culture. We had Europe «nationalizing» itself into Spanish, French, English and Dutch so that people had to start speaking (and *thinking* in four metropolitan languages rather than possibly a single native language. Then, with the destruction of the Amerindians, which took place within 30 years of Columbus' discovery (one million dead a year), it was necessary for the Europeans to import new labour bodies into the Caribbean. And the most convenient form of labour was the labour on the very edge of the trade winds –the labour on the edge of the *slave* trade winds, the labour on the edge of the hurricane, the labour on the edge of West Africa–. And so the peoples of Ashanti, Congo, Nigeria, from all that mighty coast of western Africa were imported into the Caribbean. And we had the arrival in that area of a new language structure. It consisted of many languages, but basically they had a common semantic and stylistic form.² What these languages had to do, however, was to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples –the Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of

² See Alan Lomax, «Africanisms in New World Negro Music: a Cantometric Analysis», in *Research and Resources of Haiti*, Richard P. Schaedel (New York: Research Institute for the Study of Man, 1969) and in *The Haitian Potential*, Vera Rubin and Richard P. Schaedel (New York: Teachers College Press, 1975); Mervyn C. Alleyne, «The linguistic continuity of Africa in the Caribbean», *Black Academy Review* 1, no. 4, Winter 1970, 3-16.

the Congolese languages-. So there was a submergence of this imported language. Its status became one of inferiority. Similarly, its speakers were slaves. They were conceived of as inferiors -nonhuman, in fact-. But this very submergence served an interesting intercultural purpose, because although people continued to speak English as it was spoken in Elizabethan times and on through the Romantic and Victorian ages, that English was nonetheless, still being influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought. And that underground language was itself constantly transforming itself into new forms. It was moving from a purely African form to a form that was African, but which was adapting to the new environment and to the cultural imperatives of the European languages. And it was influencing the way in which the French, Dutch, and Spanish spoke their own languages. So there was a very complex process taking place which is now beginning to surface in our literature.

It the Caribbean, as in South Africa (and in any area of cultural imperialism for that matter), the educational system did not recognize the presence of these various languages. What our educational system did was to recognize and maintain the language of the conquistador -the language of the planter, the language of the official, the language of the Anglican preacher-. It insisted that not only would English be spoken in the anglophone Caribbean, but that the educational system would carry the contours of an English heritage. Hence, as Dennis said, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Jane Austen -British literature and literary forms, the models that were intimate to Great Britain, that had very little to do, really with the environment and the reality of the Caribbean-were dominant in the Caribbean educational system. People were forced to learn things that had no relevance

to themselves. Paradoxically, in the Caribbean (as in many other «cultural disaster» areas), the people educated in this system came to know more, even today, about English kings and queens than they do about our own national heroes, our own slave rebels -the people who helped to build and to destroy our society-. We are more excited by English literary models, by the concept of, say, Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood, than we are by Nanny of the Maroons, a name some of us didn't even know until a few years ago.³ And in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow for instance -the models are all there for the falling of the snow- than of the force of the hurricanes that take place every year. In other words, we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience;⁴ whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall. It is that kind of situation that we are in.

Now the creole adaptation to all this is the child who, instead of writing in an essay «The snow was falling on the fields of Shropshire» (which is what our children

³ The Maroons were Africans and escaped slaves who, after running away or participating in successful rebellions, set up autonomous societies throughout plantation America in marginal and certainly inaccessible areas outside European influence. See Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973). Nanny of the Maroons, an ex-Ashanti (?) Queen Mother, is regarded as one of the greatest of the Jamaica freedom fighters. See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Wars of Respect: Nanny, Sam Sharpe, and the Struggle for People's Liberation* (Kingston, Jamaica: Agency for Public Information, 1977).

⁴ But see Anthony Hinkson's Barbados hurricane poem, «Janet», in his unpublished collection «Slavation» (Bridgetown, Barbados: unpublished, c. 1976).

literally were writing until a few years ago, below drawings they made of white snow fields and the corn-haired people who inhabited such a landscape), wrote "The snow was falling on the cane fields."⁵ The child had not yet reached the obvious statement that it wasn't snow at all, but rain that was probably falling on the cane fields. She was trying to have both cultures at the same time. But that is creolization.

What is even more important, as we develop this business of emergent language in the Caribbean, is the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very body work, in a way, of the language. What English has given us as a model for poetry, and to a lesser extent, prose (but poetry is the basic tool here), is the pentameter: "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day." There have, of course, been attempts to break it. And there were other dominant forms like, for example, *Beowulf* (c. 750), *The seafarer*, and what Langland (1322?-1400) had produced:

*For trewthe telleth that love. is triacle of hevene;
May no synne be on him sene. that useth that spise,
And alle his werkes he wrougte. with love as him liste.*

Or, from *Piers the Plowman* (which does not make in into *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, but which we all had to "do" at school) the haunting prologue:

*In a somer seson. whan soft was the sonne
I shope me into shroudes. as I a shepe were*

⁵ I am indebted to Ann Walmsley, editor of the anthology *The Sun's Eye: West Indian Writing for Young Readers* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., 1968), for this example. For experiences of teachers trying to cope with West Indian English in Britain, see Chris Searle, *The Forsaken Lover: White Words and Black People* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) and *Okike* 15 (August 1979).

Which has recently inspired our own Derek Walcott to his first major nation language effort:

*In idle August, while the sea soft,
and leaves of brown islands stick to the rim
of this Caribbean, I blow out the light
by the dreamless face of Maria Concepcion
to ship as a seaman on the schooner Flight.*⁶

But by the time we reach Chaucer (1345-1400), the pentameter prevails. Over in the New World, the Americans -Walt Whitman- tried to bridge or to break the pentameter through a cosmic movement, a large movement of sound. Cummings tried to fragment it. And Marianne Moore attacked it with syllabics. But basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameter. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience. We have been trying to break out of the entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system that more closely and intimately approaches our own experience. So that is what we are talking about now.

It is nation language in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter. Nation language is the language that is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean

⁶ Derek Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*", in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Ciroux, 1979), p. 3. William Langland's prelude to *Piers the Plowman* is often softened into "In somer season, whan soft was the sonne/I shope me in shroudes as I shepe were", which places it closer to Walcott - and to the pentameter.

heritage. English it may be in terms of its lexicon, but it is not English in terms of its syntax. And English it certainly is not in terms of its rhythm and timbre, its own sound explosion. In its contours, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, would be English to a greater or lesser degree. And this brings us back to the question that some of you raised yesterday: can English be a revolutionary language? And the lovely answer that came back was: it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions.

I think, however, that language does really have a role to play here, certainly in the Caribbean. But it is an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people. It is what I call, as I say, *nation language*. I use the term in contrast to *dialect*. The word dialect has been bandied about for a long time, and it carries very pejorative overtones. Dialect is thought of as «bad» English. Dialect is «inferior» English. Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people's dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time. I am going to give you some examples. But I should tell you that the reason

I have to talk so much is that there has been very little written about our nation language. I bring you to the notion of nation language but I can refer you to very little literature, to very few resources. I cannot refer you to what you call an *establishment*. I cannot really refer you to authorities because there aren't any.⁷ One of our urgent tasks now is to try to create our own authorities. But I will give you some idea of what people have tried to do.

The forerunner of all this was, of course, Dante Alighieri who, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, argued, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304) for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular as the nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete, and accessible means of verbal expression. And the movement was, in fact, successful throughout Europe with the establishment of national languages and literatures. But these very successful national languages then proceeded to ignore local European colonial languages such as Basque and Gaelic, and to suppress overseas colonial languages wherever they were heard. And it was not until the appearance of Burns in the eighteenth century and Kothenberg, Trask, Vansina, Tedlock, Waley, Walton, Whallon, Jahn, Jones, Whitely, Beckwith, Herskovitz, and Ruth Finnegan, among many others in this century, that we have returned, at least to the notion of oral literature, although I don't need to remind you that oral literature is our oldest form of «auriture» and that it continues richly throughout the world today.⁸

⁷ But see the paragraphs and notes that follow.

⁸ See, for example, Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); idem, *Oral Poetry: its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1977); idem, ed., *Penguin Anthology of Oral Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis,

In the Caribbean, our novelists have always been conscious of these native resources, but the critics and academics have, as is often the case, lagged far behind. Indeed, until 1970, there was a positive intellectual, almost social, hostility to the concept of dialect as language. But there were some significant studies in linguistics, such as Beryl Lofton Bailey's *Jamaican Creole Syntax: a Transformational Approach*; also: F. G. Cassidy, *Jamaica Talk*; Cassidy and R. B. LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*; and still to come, Richard Allsopp's mind-blowing *Dictionary of Caribbean English*. There are three glossaries from Frank Collymore in Barbados and A. J. Seymour and John R. Rickford of Guyana; and studies on the African presence in Caribbean language by Mervyn Alleyne, Beverley Hall, and Maureen Warner Lewis.⁹

Somali Poetry: an Introduction (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: a Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); S. A. Babalola, *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); Ulli Beier, ed., *Yoruba Poetry: an Anthology of Traditional Poems* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); J. H. K. Nketia, *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (Achimota: n. p., 1955); I. & P. Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); B. A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967); Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: a Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1968); Dennis Tedlock, *Finding the Centre: Narrative Poetry of the Zuni Indians* (New York: Dial Press, 1972); R. Egudu and D. Nwoga, *Ibgo Traditional Verse* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1973); and the wonderfully rich literature on black culture in the Americas.

⁹ Frank Collymore, *Notes for a Glossary of Words and Phrases of Barbadian Dialect* (Bridgetown, Barbados: Advocate Co., 1955); A. J. Seymour, *Dictionary of Guyanese Folklore* (Georgetown, Guyana: National History and Arts Council, 1975); John

In addition, there has been work by Douglas Taylor and Cicely John, among others, on aspects of some of the Amerindian languages; and Dennis Craig, Laurence Carrington, Velma Pollard, and several others at the University of the West Indies' School of Education have done some work on the structure of nation language and its psychosomosis in and for the classroom.

Few of the writers mentioned, however, have gone into nation language as it affects literature. They have set out its grammar, syntax, transformation, structure, and all of those things but they haven't really been able to make any contact between the nation language and its expression in our literature. Recently, a French poet and

R. Rickford, ed., *A Festival of Guyanese Words: Papers on Various Aspects of Guyanese Vocabulary* (Georgetown, Guyana: University of Guyana [mimeographed], 1978); Mervyn Alleyne, «The cultural matrix of Caribbean dialects» (unpublished paper, University of the West Indies, Mona West Indies, n. d.); «What is "Jamaican" in our language?» a review of F. C. Cassidy and R. B. LePage's *Dictionary in Sunday Gleaner*, 9 July 1967. See also Maureen Warner Lewis (sometimes Warner), «African feasts in Trinidad», *ASAWI Bulletin* 5 (1972) and 6 (1973); idem, «Trinidad Yoruba notes on survival», *Caribbean Quarterly* 17 (1971); idem, *The Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina* (Mona, West Indies: Savacou Publications, 1977), also in *Savacou* 13 (1977); idem, *Notes to Masks* [a study of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poem] (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope Press, 1977). See also Edward Kamau Brathwaite, «Brother Mais», [a study of Roger Mais' novel, *Brother Man*] (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1974); idem, «Jazz and the West Indian novel», *Bim* 44-46 (1967-68); idem, «The African presence in Caribbean literature», *Daedalus* (Spring 1974), reprinted in *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism*, ed., Sidney Mintz (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1974), and trans. into Spanish in *Africa en America Latina*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals (Paris: UNESCO, 1977); idem, «Kumina: the spirit of African survival in Jamaica», *Jamaica Journal* 42 (1978), and (in an earlier version) in *The African Dispersal* (Brookline, Mass: Afro-American Studies Program, Boston University, 1979).

novelist from Martinique, Edouard Glissant, had a remarkable article in *Alcheringa*, a nation language journal published at Boston University. The article was called «Free and forced poetics», and in it, for the first time I feel an effort to describe what nation language really means.¹⁰ For the author of the article it is the language of enslaved persons. For him, nation language is a strategy: the slave is forced to use a certain kind of language in order to disguise himself, to disguise his personality, and to retain his culture. And he defines that language as «forced poetics» because it is a kind of prison language, if you want to call it that.

And then we have another nation language poet, Bruce St. John, from Barbados, who has written some informal introductions to his own work which describe the nature of the experiments that he is conducting and the kind of rules that he begins to perceive in the way that he uses his language.¹¹

I myself have an article called «Jazz and the West Indian novel», which appeared in a journal called *Bim* in the early 1960s,¹² and there I attempt to show that the connection between native musical structures and the native language is very necessary to the understanding of nation language. That music is, in fact, the surest threshold to the language that comes out of it.¹³

¹⁰ Edouard Glissant, «Free and Forced Poetics», *Alcheringa* 2 (1976).

¹¹ See Bruce St. John's Introduction to his «Bumbatuk» poems, *Revista de Letras*, Mayaguez, University of Puerto Rico, 1972.

¹² Brathwaite, «Jazz and the West Indian Novel».

¹³ Extended versions of this lecture attempt to demonstrate the link between music and language structures: e. g. Edward Kamau Brathwaite and *kaiso*, *aladura*, *sookee*, sermon, post-bop; Shake Keane and jazz, *cadence* and *anansesem*; Kwesi Johnson

So that is all we have to offer as authority, which isn't very much, really. But that is how it is. And in fact, one characteristic of nation language is its orality. It is from «the oral tradition» and therefore you wouldn't really expect that large, encyclopedic body of learned comment on it that you would expect for a written language and literature.

Now I'd like to describe for you some of the characteristics of our nation language. First of all it is from as I've said, an oral tradition. The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say), then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning. Which is, again, why I have to have a tape recorder for this presentation. I want you to get the sound of it, rather than the sight of it.

Now in order to break down the pentameter, we discovered an ancient form which was always there, the calypso.¹⁴ This is a form that I think everyone knows

and Oku Onoura and reggae/dub; Michael Smith and ring-game and drumbeat; Malik and worksong; Paul Keens-Douglas and *conte*; Louise Bennet (Miss Lou) and folksay and street shout; Bruce St. John and litany. Recent developments in kaiso (Shadow/*Bass Man*, Short Shirt/*Tourist Leggo*, Sparrow/*Music an Rhythm; How you Jammin so*) suggest even more complex sound/shape developments.

¹⁴ The calypso (kaiso) is well treated in historical and musicological perspective by J. D. Elder, *Evolution of the Traditional Calypso of Trinidad and Tabago: a Socio-historical Analysis of Song-change* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms, 1967), and by Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival* (Austin: University of Texas

about. It does not employ the iambic pentameter. It employs dactyls. It therefore mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way, the use of sound in a certain way. It is a model that we are moving naturally toward now.

(Iambic Pentameter) To be or not to be, that is the question

(Kaiso) The stone had skidded arc'd and
bloomed into islands
Cuba San Domingo
Jamaica Puerto Rico

Not only is there a difference in syllabic or stress pattern, there is an important difference in shape of intonation. In the Shakespeare (above), the voice travels in a single forward plane toward the horizon of its end. In the kaiso, after the skimming movement of the first line, we have a distinct variation. The voice dips and deepens to describe an intervallic pattern. And then there are more ritual forms like *kumina*, like *shango*, the reli-

Press, 1972). But it is Gordon Rohlehr, a critic and Reader in English at the University of the West Indies, who, apart from a few comments by C. L. R. James and Derek Walcott, is almost the only major Caribbean writer to have dealt with the literary aspects of kaiso, and with the relationship between kaiso (and reggae) and literature. Among Rohlehr's articles are: "Sparrow and the language of calypso", *CAM Newsletter* 2 (1967), and *Savacou* 2 (1970); "Calypso and morality", *Moko* (17 June 1969); "The calypso as rebellion", *S.A.G.* 3 (1970); "Sounds and pressure: Jamaican blues", *Cipriani Labour College Review* (Jan. 1970); "Calypso and politics", *Moko* (29 Oct. 1971); "Forty years of calypso", *Tapia* (3 and 17 Sept. 1972 and 8 Oct. 1972); "Samuel Selvon and the language of the people", in Edward Baugh, ed., *Critics on Caribbean Literature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), pp. 153-161; and "The folk in Caribbean literature", *Tapia* (17 Dec. 1972).

gious forms,¹⁵ which I won't have time to go into here, but which begin to disclose the complexity that is possible with nation language. What I am attempting to do this morning is to give you a kind of vocabulary introduction to nation language, rather than an analysis of its more complex forms. But I want to make the point that the forms are capable of remarkable complexity, and if there were time I could take you through some of the more complex musical/literary forms as well.

The other thing about nation language is that it is part of what may be called *total expression*, a notion that is not unfamiliar to you because you are coming back to that kind of thing now. Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where the meaning truly resides. And this total expression comes about because people live in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty, because people come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their own breath patterns rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums. They had to depend on *inmanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves.

Let me begin by playing some West Indian poets who are writing in standard English. The first poet is

¹⁵ See G. L. Simpson, *Religious Cults of the Caribbean* (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: Institute of Caribbean Studies of the University of Puerto Rico, 1970); Honor Ford-Smith, "The performance aspect of kumina ritual", Seminar Paper, Department of English, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica (1976); and works by Brathwaite and Warner Lewis, as cited in note 9 above.

Claude McKay, who some people think of as American. He appears in American anthologies, especially anthologies of black writing. (Until recently, American anthologies hardly ever contained black writers, except perhaps Phillis Wheatley.) But McKay (1889-1940) was born in Jamaica and was a policeman in the constabulary there for some years before emigrating to the States where he quickly became a leading figure in what has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. But although he is very much identified with the black movement, he was, except perhaps during the most productive years of his life, rather ambivalent about his negritude.¹⁶ And in this recording made toward the end of his life in the forties, when he had moved from communism to catholicism, for instance, he is saying in this lead-in to his most famous and militant poem, «If we must die», a banner poem if ever there was one (it is a counter-lynching poem), that he is a *poet*, not a *black* poet, and not, as he said in those days, a «coloured» poet. And he goes on to recount the story of how a copy of «If we must die» was found on the body of a dead (white) soldier during the First World War. The newspapers recorded the occasion and everyone started quoting the poem. But no one, McKay says, said —«perhaps they did not even know» — that he was black. Which was okay by him, he says, because it helped ensure his «universality». (Winston Churchill also quoted this poem—, without attributing it to the author who, when he had gone to Bernard Shaw for encouragement in earlier days, had been advised by the Grand Old Man [after Shaw had taken a shrewd look at him] that he'd better try it as a boxer!).

Well, that's the first stage and story of our literature. We want to be universal, to be universally accepted. But

¹⁶ See Wayne F. Cooper. *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912-1948*, New York, Schocken Books, 1973.

it's the terrible terms meted out for «universality» that interest me. In order to be «universal» McKay forsook his nation language, forshook his early mode of poetry and went to the sonnet.¹⁷ And his sonnet, «St. Isaac's Church, Petrograd», is a poem that could have been written by a European, perhaps most intimately by a Russian in Petrograd. It certainly could have been written by any poet of the post-Victorian era. The only thing that retains its uniqueness here (in terms of my notion of nation language) is the tone of the poet's voice. But the form and the

¹⁷ Claude McKay's first two books of poetry (1912), written in Jamaica, are unique in that they are the first all-dialect collections from an anglophone Caribbean poet. They are, however, *dialect* as distinct from *nation* because McKay allowed himself to be imprisoned in the pentameter; he did not let his language find its own parameters, though this raises the tricky question of *critical relativity*. Could McKay, in the Jamaica of 1912, have done it any different — with a Svengali like Walter Jekyll, for instance, plus his *Dan-is-the-man-in-the-van* schoolteacher brother? We can certainly note the results of his literary colonialism in the primordial (?) anglicanism of *Constab Ballads* (London: Watts, 1912) and *Songs of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Aston W. Gardner, 1912):

*I've a longin' in me dept's of heart
 dat I can conquer not,
 'Tis a wish dat I've been havin' from since
 I could form a t'o't,
 Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London walk
 An' to see de famous sights dem
 'bouten which dere's so much talk...*
 («Old England», *Songs*, p. 63)

By the time we reach Louise Bennet in the forties there is much less of a problem. Although the restrictive forms are still there, there is a world of difference in the activity of the language, and one suspects that this very restriction (the formal meter) is used as an aid to memory i performance. Many less adventurous spirits in the fifties attempted dialect in their first editions but revised them upward in subsequent versions. We are fortunate to have for purposes of comparison, in N. R. Millington's *Linge-*

content are very closely connected to European models. This does not mean that it is a bad poem or that I am putting it down. I am merely saying that, aesthetically, there are no unique elements in this poem apart from the voice of the poet reciting his own poem. And I will have a musical model that will appear after you have listened to the poem, and you can tell me whether you think I am fair or not. (On tape: McKay reading his sonnet followed by the «Agnus Dei» from Faure's *Requiem*).

ring Thoughts (Bridgetown, Barbados: privately published, 1954), two versions of «On return from a foreign land» (the dialect is entirely absent from subsequent editions):

*Oh, what a rare delight
To see you once again!
Your kindly, strong, familiar face
Comes easily to my remembrance.
Our last meeting was on Roebuck Street
which used to be so rutty.
The mule-drawn car is gone;
Gone, too, the railway;
Running on the tarmac
Are the tussy buses.
Small estates are combining into large...*
(p. 40)

*«Who you and whay you come from?
Yuh voice soun' Bajun
An' yuh face iamiliuh
Las' time I see yuh was 'pon Roebuck Street,
Dat use' to be suh full o' holes
But now uh hear dat all de roads been tar
De tramcars gone, de train gone too
An' buses runnin' everywhay
At any owuh o' de day.
De little estates all shut down,
An' everybody rush to town...»*
(p. 43)

Two more points are that Millington places the dialect version in quotes to signal (for him) its dramatic/conversational mode; and, at a reading of this poem by the author in 1979, he removed the awkward standard English «rutty» and imported from the dialect version the more natural «full of holes».

*Bow down my soul in worship very low
And in the holy silences be lost
Bow down before the marble Man of Woe,
Bow down before the singing angel host...*¹⁸

The only trouble is that McKay had «trouble» with his syllables, his Clarendon syllables are very «evident», and he didn't always say «the», but sometimes said «de» which is a form in nation language. And these elisions, the sound of them, subtly erode, somewhat, the classical pentametric of his sonnet...

Our second poet is George Campbell, also of Jamaica. In 1945, Jamaica was, after a long history of struggle, granted by Britain the right to move toward self-government and independence with a new political constitution and the formation of the People's National Party. George Campbell was very moved by, and involved in, these events, and he wrote what I consider his finest poem:

*On this momentous night O God help us.
With faith we now challenge our destiny.
Tonight masses of men will shape, will hope,
Will dream with us; so many years hang on
Acceptance. Who is that knocking against
The door? ... is it you
Looking for a destiny, or is it
Noise of the storm?*¹⁹

¹⁸ Claude McKay, «St. Isaac's Church, Petrograd», first published in *Survey Graphic* 53 (1925), and subsequently in *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1953), p. 84, and in Cooper, ed., *Passion of Claude McKay*, p. 127; it was also read and recorded by the author in Arna Bontemps, ed., *Anthology of Negro Poets* (New York: Folkways Records, FL 9791, 1966).

¹⁹ George Campbell, «On this night», in *First Poems*, Kingston, Jamaica, privately published, 1945, p. 67.

Now you see here a man who is becoming conscious of his nation. But when he comes to write his greatest poem, he is still writing a Miltonic ode; or perhaps it is because he's writing his greatest poem that it must be given that kind of nobility.²⁰ And it is read by our Milton of the Caribbean, George Lamming, our great organ voice, a voice that Lamming himself, in his book *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) recognizes as one of the finest in English orature. But the point is that from my perspective, George Campbell's ode, fittingly read by George Lamming, isn't giving us any unique element in terms of the Caribbean environment. But it is still a beautiful poem wonderfully read. (On tape: Lamming reading Campbell's poem...)

*Must the horse rule the rider of the man
The horse.
Wind where cometh the fine technique
Of rule passing through me? My hands wet with
The soil and I knowing my world*

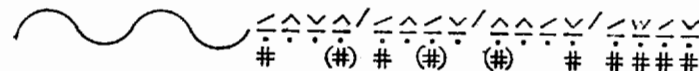
[The reading was followed by the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony].²¹

The models are important here, you see. The McKay

²⁰ See the discussion of the issue of McKay and *critical relativity* in note 17, above.

²¹ The tape recordings used in this lecture were taken from a wide variety of sources: long-playing albums (LPs), field recordings, copies from radio broadcasts, interviews, etc. The Lamming recording is from one of our finest radio programmes, *New World of the Caribbean*, a series sponsored by Bookers of Guyana and broadcast on Radio Guyana in 1955-56. It was conceived and written by Lamming and Wilson Harris and produced for radio by Rafiq Khan. The Lamming reading of Campbell's poem had as background the theme music of the entire series, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.

can be matched with Faure, Campbell/Lamming with Beethoven. What follows next on the tape, however, is equally important because our local Beethoven employs a completely different model. I'm not saying his model is equal to the Fifth Symphony, but it makes a similar statement, and it gets us into what I now consider the nation or native language. Big Yout's sound poem, «Salaman Agundy», begins with a scream (On tape: Big Yout's «Screamin, Target»/«Salaman Agundy» from the LP *Screamin' Target* [Kingston, c. 1972]), followed by the bass-based reggae canter of downbeat on the first «syllable» of the first and second bars, followed by a syncopation on the third third, followed by full offbeat/downbeats in the fourth:



The other model that we have, and that we have always had in the Caribbean, is the calypso, and we are going to hear now the Mighty Sparrow singing a kaiso which came out in the early sixties. It marked, in fact, the first major change in consciousness that we all shared. And Sparrow made a criticism of all that I and Dennis have been saying about the educational system. In «Dan is the man in the van» he says that the education we get from England has really made us idiots because all of those things that we had to read about: Robin Hood, King Alfred and the Cakes, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, all of these things really haven't given us anything but empty ideas. And he did it in the calypso form. You should hear the rhyme scheme of this poem. He is rhyming on «n's» and «l's», and he is creating a cluster of syllables and a counter point between voice and orchestra, between individual and community, within

the formal notion of «call and response», which becomes typical of our nation in the revolution.

(Solo) Accordin to de education you get when you small.

You(!!) grow up wi(th) true ambition an respect for one an all But in MY days in school they teach me like a fool THE THINGS THEY TEACH ME A SHOULDA BEEN A BLOCK-HEADED MULE

(Chorus) Pussy has finish his work long ago
An now he restin an ting
Solomon Agundy was born on a MunDEE
DE ASS IN DE LION SKIN...²²

I could bring you a book, *The Royal Reader*, or the one referred to by Sparrow, *Nelson's West Indian Reader* by J. O. Cutteridge, that we had to learn at school by heart. It contained phrases like; «the cow jumped over the moon», «ding dong bell, pussy in the well» and so on. I mean, that was our beginning of an understanding of literature. Literature started (startled, really) literally at that level, with that kind of model. The problem of transcending this is what I am talking about now.

A more complex form by Sparrow is this next poem, «Ten to one is murder». Now it's interesting how this goes, because Sparrow has been accused of shooting

²² The Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco), «Dan is the man in the van», on an EP (extended play, 45 rpm) recording (Port of Spain, Trinidad: National Recording Co., 1958?). The fourth line of each quatrain, shouted by Sparrow on this recording, represents the «response» part of this form and is sometimes sung by chorus and/or audience, for tex of this kaiso, see *One Hundred and Twenty Calypsoes to Remember . . . by the Mighty Sparrow* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: National Recording Co., 1963), p. 86.

someone on the eve of Carnival, just before Lent. (Kaiso and Carnival are two of our great folk expressions.) Now Sparrow apparently shot someone, but because of the popular nature of the calypsonian, he was able to defend himself long before he got into court by creating the scenario for the reason why he shot the man. He shot the man, he says, because for no reason at all, ten irates suddenly appear one night, surround him, and started throwing stones. The one in front was a very good pelter, and Sparrow didn't know what to do. He couldn't even find shelter. So he ran and ran and ran until finally he remembered that he had a gun (a wedger) in his pocket. He was forced to take it out and shoot (pow pow pow) and the crowd start to scatter. As a result he had the community on his side before the trial even started. But even if he hadn't written the song, he would have had the community on his side because here you have a folk poet; and folk poets are the spokesmen whose whole concern is to express the experiences of the people rather than the experiences of the elite. But here is «Ten to one is murder». Each slash phrase is an impressionistic brush stroke:

About ten in de night on de fifth of October
Ten to one is murder!
Way down Henry Street, up by H. G. M. Walker
Ten to one is murder!
Well, de leader of de gang was a hot like a pepper
Ten to one is murder!
An every man in de gang had a white-handle razorrr
Ten to one is murder!
They say ah push a gal from Grenada
Ten to one is murder! . . .²³

²³ The Mighty Sparrow, «Ten to one is murder» (EP recording) (Port of Spain, Trinidad, National Recording Co., 1960). For the text see *One Hundred and Twenty Calypsoes*, p. 37.

Now that is dramatic monologue which, because of its call-and-response structure (in addition, of course, to its own intrinsic drama), is capable of extension on stage. There is in fact a tent form known as calypso drama, which calls upon Trinidadian nation forms like *grand charge*, *picong*, *robber talk*, and so on, which Sparrow is in fact consciously using in this calypso, and which some of the younger Trinidadian nation poets like Malik, Questel, and Christopher Laird, for example, are bringing into play in their poetry.

*Man a start to sweat. Man a soakin wet
Mama so much threat: that's a night a can never forget
Ten to one is murder! . . .*

Next we have the poet who has been writing nation all her life and who, because of that, has been ignored until recently: the poet Louise Bennett (Miss Lou) of Jamaica. Now this is very interesting because she is middle class, and «middle class» means brown, urban, respectable, and standard English, and «the snow was falling in the canefields».²⁴ It certainly doesn't mean an entrenched economic/political position, as in Europe. For instance, Miss Lou's mother's and Miss Lou's own upbringing was «rural St. Mary», hence the honourable Louise's natural and rightful knowledge of the folk.²⁵ (It was not until the post-independence seventies that she was officially—as distinct from popularly—recognized and given the highest honours, including the right to the title of Ho-

²⁴ For the role of colour in the Caribbean, see Fernando Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1953).

²⁵ See the Ph. D. dissertation (in progress) by Mary Jane Hewitt (Department of English and History, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica), on Louise Bennet and Zora Neale Hurston as «cultural conservators».

nourable). But one is supposed, as V. S. Naipaul once said at a memorable Writers Conference in Jamaica, to graduate out of these things;²⁶ therefore there is no reason why Louise should have persisted with Anancy and Auntie Roachie and *boonoonoonoos an parangles an ting*, when she could have opted for «And how are you today», the teeth and lips tight and closed around the mailed fist of a smile. But her instincts were that she should use the language of her people. The consequence was that for years (since 1936?) she performed her work in crowded village halls across the island, and until 1945 could get nothing accepted by *Gleaner* the island's largest, oldest (estab. 1854), and often only newspaper. (Claude McKay²⁷ had been published in Kingston, including in the *Gleaner*, in 1912, but he had an influential white sponsor, the Englishman Walter Jekyll, compiler of *Jamaican Song and Story* [1907].) And although by 1962 she had already published nine books,²⁸ Miss Lou does not appear among the poets in the *Independence Anthology of Jamaican Poetry*, but is at the back of the book, like an afterthought if not an embar-

²⁶ ACLALS (Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Societies) Conference held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, in January 1971; see Edward Kamau Brathwaite, «The love axe/1: developing a Caribbean aesthetic», in *Reading Black: Essays in the Criticism of African, Caribbean, and Black American Literature*, ed., Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 20-36; also published in *Bim* 61-63 (1977-78).

²⁷ McKay's relationship with Jekyll is recorded in McKay's autobiography, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann Educational Books [Caribbean] Ltd., 1979), pp. 65-72, 76-79. For a useful note on Jekyll, see Cooper, *Passion of Claude McKay*, pp. 318-319.

²⁸ Ms. Bennett's first book of poetry, *Dialect Verses*, was printed for the author in Kingston, Jamaica, by the *Gleaner* Co., in 1940—five years before the editor of the *Gleaner* recognized her.

rassment, under «Miscellaneous». She could not be accepted, even at the moment of political independence, as a poet. Though all this, as I say, is dramatically altered now with the Revolution of the late sixties, her consciousness of this unfortunate situation remains where it hurts most: «I have been set apart by other creative writers a long time ago because of the language I speak and work in. . . From the beginning nobody recognized me as a writer».²⁹ I couldn't satisfactorily reproduce in print Miss. Lou's «Street cries» played for the lecture from her long-playing album *Miss. Lou's views*.³⁰ Here instead are two examples of her more «formal verse from the book collection *Jamaica Labrish*, recordings from which, Miss Lou informs me, should be available alongside the revised edition of *Labrish* quite soon.³¹ First, «Pedestrian crosses»:

*If a cross yuh dah-cross,
 Beg yuh cross mek me pass.
 Dem yah crossin' is crosses yuh know!
 Koo de line! Yuh noh see
 Cyar an truck backa me?
 Hear dah hoganeer one deh dah-blow!*

*Missis, walk fas' an cross!
 Pickney, cross mek me pass!
 Lady, galang an mine yuh business!
 Ole man mek up yuh mine
 Walk between dem white line!
 Wat a crosses dem crossin yah is!*

...

²⁹ Louise Bennett, *Caribbean Quarterly* 4, n. 1 and 2, March-June 1968, p. 98.

³⁰ Federal 204, Federal Records, Kingston, Jamaica, 1967.

³¹ Personal communication, Louise Bennett Coverley, 25 Sept. 1978.

*Dis crossin a-stop we from pas mek dem cross,
 But nutten dah-stop dem from cross mek we pass,
 Dem yah crossin is crosses fe true!*³²

And «Dutty tough» begins:

*Sun a-shine but tings noh bright,
 Doah pot a-bwile, bickle noh nuff,
 River flood but water scarce yaw,
 Rain a-tall but dutty tuff!*

And ends on this note of social commentary:

*De price o' bread gan up so high
 Dat we hafte agree,
 Fe cut we y'eye pon bread an all
 Tun dumplin refuge!*

*An all dem mawga smaddy weh
 Dah-gwan like fat is sin,
 All dem-deh weh dah fas' wid me,
 Ah lef dem to dumplin!*

*Sun a-shine an pot a-bwile, but
 Tings no bright, bickle no nuff!
 Rain a-tall, river dah-flood, but
 Wata scarce an dutty tuff!*³³

³² Louise Bennett, «Pedestrian crosses», in *Jamaica Labrish*, Kingston, Jamaica, Sangster's Book Stores Jamaica, 1966, p. 74.

³³ Louise Bennett, «Dutty tough», in *Jamaica Labrish*, pp. 120-121. Although the tyranny of the pentameter can be seen quite clearly here, Miss Lou erodes and transforms it with the sound of her language. Her «riddims» set up a counterpoint against the pentameter: River flood but water scarce/yaw; yuh noh see/Cyar an truck backa me». The Africanisms *koo de, galang, yah, yaw, noh nuff, deh dah-blow*, and *fe*, for example, carry this even further,

These are the models that we have, and I could give you more complex examples than the ones you have so far heard. What I am going to do now, however, since there is a constraint on time for this session, is give you an idea of how the «mainstream» anglophone Caribbean poets reached the stage signalled by Miss Lou.

The mainstream poets who were moving from standard English to nation language were influenced basically, I think (again the models are important), by T. S. Eliot. What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone.³⁴ That is what

crystallizing in brilliant roots images such as *like fat is sin* and *tun dumplin refugee*, which not only has its «English» meaning, but its folk-speech underdrone of African sound words for food: *tun, tum, tuntum* and *tungee*. A whole essay could (and should) be written on the phonemic structure of nation language and how this relates to syntax and prosody...

³⁴ For those of us who really made the breakthrough, it was Eliot's actual voice –or rather his recorded voice, property of the British Council (Barbados)– reading «Preludes», «The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock», *The Waste Land*, and later the *Four Quartets* –not the texts– which turned us on. In that dry deadpan delivery, the «riddims» of St. Louis (though we did not know the source then) were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy, and Klook. And it is interesting that, on the whole, the establishment could not stand Eliot's voice –and far less jazz. Another influence must have been the voice of John Arlott, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) test cricket commentator, who stunned, amazed, and transported us with his natural, «riddimic» and image-laden tropes in his revolutionary Hampshire burr, at a time when BBC meant Empire and Loyal Models and Our Master's voice, and cricket, especially against England, was the national sport– our solitary occasions for communal catharsis one way or the other. Not only was Arlott «good» (all our mimics tried to imitate him), but he subverted the establishment with the way he spoke and where: like Eliot, like jazz...

really attracted us to Eliot. And you can see how the Caribbean poets introduced here have been influenced by him, although they eventually went on to create their own environmental expression.

The first poet (writing in the forties) is a magistrate and historian from Barbados, called H. A. Vaughan, and he is reading a sonnet called «For certain demagogues». It is a «standard English» poem except for a passage toward the end when the image of blackbirds appears. Here, suddenly for the first time, and rare in Vaughan's poetry, he imitates the sound and the motion, the movement of the hopping of these peculiar birds and gets this into his poetry, which becomes one of the first and early stages of nation language: *mimesis*. In fact, had I not heard this poem, I might never have «recognized» it.

*«We love the people, sir!» You do?
You ought to! nay, indeed, you must
Shouting their needs has brought a new
Elation to your fickle dust*

.....
*You prey, but not like beasts of prey;
The cobblers fly too far to be
Your emblem; in a higgling way
You have a place in history;*

*Like blackbirds in their shiny coats
Prinking and lifting spry, proud feet,
Bickering and picking sodden oats
From horses' offal in the street.³⁵*

³⁵ H. A. Vaughan, «For certain demagogues», read by the author on the recording, *Poets of the West Indies Reading their Own Works* (New York: Caedmon TC 1379, 1971), and printed in *Sandy Lane and other Poems* (Bridgetown, Barbados: privately publish-

Now we must also hear from Frank Collymore,³⁶ who is a schoolmaster and editor of the magazine *Bim* that I mentioned earlier. Here is the conversational tone of the early fifties. He is talking about going back to school and the materialist dangers of scholastic education, continuing the theme, in fact, that is being raised by Dennis Brutus' lecture, and Sparrow's calypso, and big Yout's «Salaman Agundy», but getting it all into a wonderfully achieved conversational style and tone. There is, however, no nation language as such here; no unique element similar to Vaughan's «blackbirds», for instance. But the conversational mode can have a corrosive effect on the tyranny of the pentameter:

*In a couple of weeks' time school will reopen
 If not with a flourish of trumpets at least with a shout
 From the several hundred boys gathered together in the
 building,
 And though a few perhaps may wonder what it's all
 about . . .
 The fuss of education, I mean . . . their parents and the
 others
 Who have to fit the bill of books and shoes
 Will be prouder than ever that their young are well on
 the road
 To knowledge – not that they'll be caring particularly
 who's*

ed by author, 1945), and in *Caribbean Voices: an Anthology of West Indian Poetry*, ed. John Figueroa (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1970), pp. 71-72; my italics. By *cobblers* Vaughan does not mean ye old English shoemakers, but (scavenger) seabirds (corbeaux). Vaughan's reading of the italicized stanza is especially interesting.

³⁶ Frank Collymore died in July 1980, while this edition of my talk was being prepared. I should like here to pay tribute to his warmth, kindness, and humanity, and to his enormous contribution to Caribbean literature.

*Going to dish out the stuff, or even what it is for that
 matter,*

*Only the platters have got to be licked clean,
 And afterwards with the School Certificate nicely framed
 And the New Order hovering suspiciously near the
 scene!*

French irregular verbs, quadratic equations,

*Maybe a century in the first division . . . who knows?
 And for those who can't take it all in by the prescribed
 method*

*There's a road to the brain through the backside by
 blows . . .³⁷*

Our third established poet, John Figueroa, writing in the late sixties, now begins to use nation language, and he uses it as a very self-conscious and formal contrast to standard English, as a reaction, no doubt to the folk/nation rupture (I won't say irruption, though some hoped that it was merely an *interruption* that had taken place in our poetry with the publication of my *Rights of Passage* (London, 1967), and the effects of the great literary debate that had taken place a few years before that on the issue of literature and dialect (1965) when it was demonstrated, for perhaps the first time (at last), that a nation language poem could be serious and employ not only semantic but sound elements: in this case, the sound-structure of Rastafarian drums and the «Dry bones» spiritual:

*Watch dem ship dem
 come to town dem*

³⁷ Frank Collymore, «Voici la plume de mon oncle», in his *Collected Poems* (Bridgetown, Barbados: privately published, 1959), p. 92; read by the author on the *Poets of the West Indies* recording.

full o' silk dem
full o' food dem

an' dem plane dem
come to groun' dem

full o' flash dem
full o' cash dem

silk dem food dem
shoe dem wine dem

dat dem drink dem
an consume dem

*praisin' de glory of the Lord...*³⁸

This «riddmic» aspect for Caribbean nation language was to be further extended in the late seventies by the Jamaican reggae/dub poets Oku Onoura (Orlando Wong), Michael Smith (whom we shall hear from later), and Linton Kwesi Johnson of Black London. This is from «Five nights of bleedin», Johnson's LP *Dread Beat an Blood*:

night number one was in BRIX-TON
SOFRANO B sounn sys/tem
was a-beatin out a riddim/wid a fyah
commin down his reggae-regae wyB(ah);

it was a sounn shakin doun you spinal column
a bad music tearin up you flesh;
an th'rebels-dem start a-fightin
th'yout dem jus tunn wild

³⁸ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, «Wings of a dove», in his *Rights of Passage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 44; also printed in his *The Arrivants: a New World Trilogy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 45; and read by the author on the recordings *Rights of Passage* (London: Agro Records, Argo DA 101 and DA 102, 1969; re-pressed on DA 1110 and DA 1111, 1972).

it's waar amongst th'rebels
mad/ness... mad/ness... waaar...

And

so wid a flick
a de wrist
a jab an a stab

th'song of blades was soun/ded
th'bile of oppression was vom/ited

an two policemen woun/ded

*righteous righteous war.*³⁹

But nation language isn't confined, as you must have recognized by now, to rhythmic variations. Miss Lou follows the traditional Scots tune very nicely, thank you, with her *Every secky got him jeggeh/Every puppy got him flea*; while I got pretty close to Bajan country speech (free cadence and vocabulary) in «The dust», also from *Rights of Passage*, where some women are recalling a volcanic irruption in another island:

Some say
is in one o' dem islands away

where they language tie-tongue
an' to hear them speak so
in they St. Lucia patois
is as if they cah'n unnerstar'

a single word o' English.
But uh doan really know. All uh know

³⁹ Linton Kwesi Johnson, «Five nights of bleeding», on the LP recording *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Virgin records, FL 1017, 1978); for text see *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications Ltd., 1975), pp. 15-16.

is that one day suddenly so
this mountain leggo one brugg-a-lung-go

whole bloody back side
o' this hill like it blow
off like they blastin' stones
in de quarry.

rocks big as you sow pen hois'
in de air as if they was one
set o' shingles. That noise,
Jesus Chrise, mussa rain down

splinter an' spark
as if it was Con-
federation.⁴⁰

The roots and underground link to all these emerging forces was the now almost legendary Rastafarian poet, Bongo Jerry, whose revolutionary mis/use of Babylonian English was practically apocalyptic:

MABRAK

Lightring
is the future brightening,
for last year man learn
how to use black eyes.
(wise!)

MABRAK:

NEWSFLASH!

«Babylon plans crash»
Thunder interrupt their programme to
announce:

⁴⁰ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, «The Dust», in *Rights of Passage*, pp. 66-67, and in *The Arrivants*, pp. 65-66; read by the author on the Argo 102 and 1111 recordings.

BLACK ELECTRIC STORM
IS HERE

How long you feel «fair to fine»
(WHITE) would last?

How long in darkness
when out of BLACK
come forth LIGHT?

MABRAK is righting the wrongs and brain-whitening...
Not just by washing out the straightening and wearing
dashiki t'ing:

MOSTOFTHESTRAIGHTENINGISINTHETONGUE -
so...

Save the YOUNG
from the language that MEN teach,
the doctrine Pope preach
skin bleach...

MAN must use MEN language
to carry dis message:

SILENCE BABEL TONGUES; recall and
recollect BLACK SPEECH.⁴¹

Now Figueroa's nation language, and that of many of the other established poets who followed, was very likely a reaction to (and against) all this. But it all had its effect, its influence; though the difference at this stage between Figueroa/mainstream and the natives (the cultural gorillas) per se, was that, while for the natives nation language informs the very shape and spirit of

⁴¹ Bongo Jerry, *Savacou* 3/4 (1970/1971), pp. 13-15. At the Harvard lecture, a tape recording of Bongo Jerry reading his poem, with *tunde* and *repeater* drums, at a rasta *grounation* (Kingston, 1969) was used; also Jerry's slide trombone tribute to Don Drummond, Bob Marley's musical and spiritual ancestor. The influence of this *roots underground* is described in Brathwaite, «Love axe/1».

their poems, for Figueroa in «Portrait of a woman», for instance, the contol and narrative, the «classical», even Prosperian element –the most part of the poem– is in English. The marginal bit, that of the voice and status of the domestic helper, the house slave, Caliban's sister, is in nation, but a nation still sticky and wet with dialect; though Figueroa might claim that the glory of Caribbean English is that it has a wide range of resources and we should use them all:

*Firmly, sweetly
refusing...*

*Tall for seventeen fit
for a tumble*

*(A' guess hard time
tek er') she said
referring to
her mother's misfortune
(Her strict mother whose
three men had left
her holding five pledges to fortune.)*

*She came easily into
my arms
refusing only to kiss*

*('any familiarity an
we stop right now')*

*Dixerat – as lacrymae rerum used to say.
She's in the public domain
she's lost her patent rights...*

*You have bad min'
doan tell nobody
doan tell nobody
doan mek me do it
mek mi*

*doan mek me do it
mek mi
lawd!
You see I intend to be
a nurse'*

*No need to apologise
(Lawd it sweet!)
'But if you try to kiss
me I will scream'.⁴²*

Next Derek Walcott, the Caribbean's most accomplished poet/playwright, with a poem about a little night-violence in New York called «Blues», which is not blues at all; it doesn't have that form. But it is a wonderfully speech-textured piece, giving form to Collymore's conversational style. And the blues is there in Walcott's voice. You will hear in his reading the sound of Don Drummond's trombone...

*Those five or six young guys
hunched on the stoop
that oven-hot summer night
whistled me over. Nice
and friendly. So I stop.
MacDougal or Christopher
Street in chains of light...⁴³*

⁴² John Figueroa, «Portrait of a woman», *Savacou* 3/4 (1970/1971), pp. 138-139; read by the author on the recording *Poets of the West Indies*...

⁴³ Derek Walcott, «Blues», in his *The Gulf and other Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969); also found in *The Gulf* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), p. 67; read by the author on the recording *Poetry International '69*, ed. Peter Orr (London: Argo Records, HPK 262 and 263, 1970). In my presentation, Walcott's reading was followed by Don Drummond's «Green island» solo from the LP recording in *Memory of Don Drummond* (Kingston, Jamaica: Studio One, 1965?)

Don Drummond, Jamaican ghetto/culture hero of the fifties and early sixties, was a jazz musician of genius (I would compare him with J. J. Johnson) who was, at the same time, one of the originators of *ska*, the native sound at the yardway of the cultural revolution that would lead eventually to Bob Marley, reggae, and *The Harder they Come*.⁴⁴ It is a connection of Caribbean and Harlem/New Orleans which Buddy Bolden and Congo Square knew about, which McKay was to carry forward, and which in this poem, among some others (see especially *The Gulf*), Derek Walcott continues. And it is this connection which brings in the influences of Langston Hughes for instance, and Imamu Baraka, and Sonia Sanchez, and Miles Davis, which further erodes the pentameter . . .

*My face smashed in, my bloody mug
pouring my olive-branch jacket saved
from cuts and tears,
I crawled four flights upstairs . . .*

I

*remember a few watchers waved
loudly, and one kid's mother shouting*

⁴⁴ The premiere of the Jimmy Cliff roots/reggae film, *The Harder they Come* (Kingston, Jamaica: Perry Henzell, 1972, marked a dislocation of the sociocolonial pentameter in the same way that its music, and its stars, and their style marked a revolution in the hierarchical structure in the arts of the Caribbean. At the premiere, the traditional "order of service" was reversed. Instead of the elite moving from their cars into the Carib cinema, watched by the poor and admiring multitude, the multitude took over—the car park, the steps, the barred gates, the magical lantern itself—and demanded that they see what they had wrought. "For the first time at last" it was the people (the raw material), not the critics, who decided the criteria of praise, the measure and grounds of qualification; "for the first time at last", a local face, a native icon, a nation language voice was hero. In this small corner of our world, a revolution was as significant as emancipation.

*like "Jackie" or "Terry",
"Now that's enough!"
It's nothing really.
They don't get enough love.*

*You know they wouldn't kill
you. Just playing rough
like young America will.
Still, it taught me something
about love. If it's so though,
forget it.*⁴⁵

Today we have a very confident movement of nation language. In fact, it is inconceivable that any Caribbean poet writing today is not going to be influenced by this submerged culture, which is, in fact, an emerging culture. And it is obvious now to most Caribbean writers, I would say, except perhaps some of the exiled,⁴⁶ that one has to communicate with the audience. No one is going to assert that a poet cannot live in his ivory tower, or that a poet cannot be an individual—all that we have been through already. But the point is that for the needs of the kind of emerging society that I am defending—for the people who have had to recite "The boy/stood on/the burn/ing deck" for so long, who are unable to express the power of the hurricane in the way that they write their words—at last our poets today are recognizing that it is essential that they use the resources that have always

⁴⁵ Walcott, *Blues* (New York ed.), p. 68; and on the *Poetry International* recording.

⁴⁶ Exile is the first significant feature of Anglophone Caribbean writing: it is the need—or the imagined need—to emigrate to metropolitan centres in order to exist as writers. Our native literature begins with McKay the exile (see his *Home to Harlem* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928]); and it is ending its first phase with Lamming, *Pleasures of Exile* and V. S. Naipaul (see *Newsweek*, 18 August 1980).

been there, but which have been denied to them— which they have sometimes themselves denied.

I shall end with the violet and red extremes of the spectrum. Here, first, is fundamental nation, the language of a *kumina* queen, with its *kikongo* base. Again, although there is no question about the beauty and power of Miss Quennie's language and images —she is, after all, priestess, prophet, and symbolist, without hearing her (seeing her of course completes the experience because then you would know how she uses her eyes, her mouth, her whole face; how her arms encircle or reject; how her fingers can become water or spear), but without hearing her, you would miss the dynamics of the narrative— the blue notes of that voice; its whispers and pauses and repetitions and stutters and eleisons; its high pitch emphases and its low pitched trails; and that hoarse quality which I suppose you know from Nina Simone. With Miss Queenie we are in the very ancient dawn of nation language, and to be able to come to terms with oral literature at all our critics must be able to understand the complex forces that have led to this classical expression...

One day...

*a remember one day a taen some lillies...
an a plant de lillies-dem in row
an one Sunday mornin when a wake...
all de lillies blow...
seven lillies an de seven a dem blow...*

*an a leave
an guh dung in de gully bottom...
to go an pick some quoquonut
an when a go
a see a cottn tree an a juss fell right down...
at de cottn tree root...*

.....
*in de night
in de cottn tree comin like it holloow
an Hi hinside there
an you have some grave arounn dat cottn tree
right rounn it
some tombs...*

*but dose is
some hol-time Hatrican
yu unnerstann...?*

*well dose tombs arounn de cottn tree...
an Hi inside de cottn tree lay down
an a night-time a sih de cotton tree light hup wit
cyandles an...
a restin now
put me an dis way an sleepin...*

*an a honly hear a likkle vice
come to mih
an dem talkin to mih
but dose tings is spirit talkin to mih...
an dem speakin to me now
an seh now...*

*'Is a likkle nice likkle chile
an oo gwine get im right up now...
in de Hatrican worl...
because you brains
you will take something...
so derefore...
we gine to teach you someting...'*

*Well de firs ting dat dem teach me is
s'wikkidi...*

*s'wikkidi lango
which is sugar an water...*

sih?

an dem teach me dat...

an dem teach me m'praey-ers...

which is...

Kwale kwale n'den den de
Bele ko lo mawa kisaŋaya

Pem legele
Len legele

Luwi za'kwe n'da'kwe so
Be'lam m'pese m'bambe

which is de same Hour tader's Praeyer...⁴⁷

Michael Smith (b. Kingston, Jamaica, 1954) is such an intransigent sound poet that he's not concerned with written script at all. He «publishes», like a calypsonian, at his public poetry readings at Zinc Fence Theatre or School of Drama auditorium or, like the early Louise Bennett, in all the large or little places throughout Jamaica where he's constantly invited to appear. But where as it was years before Louise was recognized, Smith, like Bob Marley and the reggae kings (almost tautology), is a pop star, as are Oku Onoura and Paul Keens-Douglas, two other very popular sound poets who have actually appeared in performance with Marley and Tosh and Sparrow. The sound/poems of Linton Kwesi Johnson are on the charts in Great Britain.⁴⁸ For these inheritors

⁴⁷ Mrs. Imogene Elizabeth Kennedy (Miss Queenie), tape recorded conversation with Maureen Warner Lewis and Monica Schuler (Kingston, Jamaica, June 1971). See Brathwaite, «Kumina», pp. 45-63; and Warner Lewis, *The Nkuyu*.

⁴⁸ All of Kwesi Johnson's LP recordings to date —*Dread Beat an' Blood* (1978), *Forces of Victory* (1979), *Bass Culture* (1980)— have been on the British reggae charts. *Bass Culture* was ranked number 3 in June 1980 (see *Black Music and Jazz Review* [June

of the revolution, nation language is no longer anything to argue about or experiment with; it is their classical norm and comes out of the same experience as the music of contemporary popular song. They use the same «rid-dims», the same voice spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinato, syncopation, and pauses, along with, in Smith's case, a quite remarkable voice and breath control, accompanied by a decorative S90 *noise* (the S90 is an admired Japanese motorbike) which after a time becomes part of the sound structure and therefore meaning of the poem.⁴⁹ On the page, Smith's *Lawwwwwwwd* is the S90. He also, like Big Yout and Sparrow and Miss Lou, uses ring-game refrain and proverb as reverb/eration with again amen and amen to the pentameter/computer.

*Mi sey mi cyaan believe it
mi sey mi cyaan believe it*

*room dem a rent
mi apply widin
but as mi go in
cockroach an scarpian also come in*

1980], p. 12). Oku Onoura has performed with Bob Marley; Paul Keens-Douglas with The Mighty Sparrow and with Miss Lou; Brathwaite with the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari and with Light of Saba; Michael Smith with Light of Saba (on the recording *Word Sound* [Kingston, Jamaica: Light of Saba 002, 1978]); and Malik (of Trinidad) has presented several elaborate concerts with his own musicians. For more on these developments, see Edward Kamau Brathwaite, «Explosion of Caribbean sound poetry», *Caribbean Contact* (1978), p. 9.

⁴⁹ The concept of *noise* as part of the music of the oral tradition has pervaded (for several reasons) this presentation. I am indebted to Kwabena Nketia for clarifying for me the idea. Noise is that decorative energy that invests the nation performance. Unnecessary but without which not enough. Whistle, grater, scraper,

*an mi cyaan believe it
one likkle bwoy come blow im orn
an mi look pan im wid scorn
an mi realize ow mi fine bwoy pickney
was a victim a de trix*

*dem kall partisan pally-trix
an mi ban mi belly an mi baaal
an mi ban mi belly an mi baaal
lawwwwwd
mi cyaaan believe it*

*Mi dawta bwoyfren name is sailor
an im pass trew de port like a ship
more gran pickney fi feed
but de whole a wi need
wat a night wat a plight an we cyaan get a bite/mi life
is a stiff fite*

an mi cyaaan believe it...

*Hi bwoy
yes man
Hi bwoy
yes man
yu clean up de dwag shit?
yes man
an mi cyaan believe it*

*Doris a moder a four
get a wuk as a domestic*

shak-shak, shekesheke, wood block, gong gong, the cheng-cheng of the steel band, the buzz of the banjo or cymbal, the grill of the guitar, vibrato of voice, sax, sound system, the long roll of the drum until it becomes noise, Coltrane sheets of sound, Pharoah Sander's honks and cries, onomatopoeia, congregational kinesis...

*boss man move in
an baps si sicai she pregnant again
baps si sicai an she pregnant again
an mi cyaaan believe it...*

lawwwwwwwwwwwd...

*but mi know yu believe it
lawwwwwwwwwwwwad
mi know you believe it...⁵⁰*

A full presentation of nation language would, of course, include more traditional (ancestral/oral) material (e. g. shango, *anansesem*, Sipiritual [Aladura] Baptist services, grounnations, yard theatres, ring games, tea-meeting speeches, etc., none of which I've included here) as well as the extended performances by Malik, Paul Keens-Douglas and the Barbados Writers Workshop, and others. In addition to the influence of Caribbean music on Caribbean poetry, there has also been that of jazz, for example, and the wonderful speech rhythm effects being achieved in a formal context by Morris, Scott and Derek Walcott.

*O so yu is Walcott?
You is Roddy brother?
Teacher Alex son?⁵¹*

And Tony McNeill's

*Strange my writing to you
Can I say a cliché*

⁵⁰ Michael Smith, "Mi cyaan believe it", on *Word Sound*, with written version from draft by Smith and transcription by Brathwaite, in Edward Kamau Brathwaite, ed., *New Poets from Jamaica*, *Savacou* 14/15 (1979): 84-86.

Never thought I would see the day when you would cut
me glimpsed
you in should have said at should have said near a bank
one day;
smiled; waved; and you cut me
Catherine name from the north

.....
Catherine name like a fir
The leaves turn with a fine cadence The dancers touch
hands under
the elms

.....
I cry to the stones because I am lonely, the girl said to
the dark
Perhaps if I look through this file I will find her charred
letter

Catherine and Natalie, moving
The most beautiful virgin weeps in the rain
Catherine if I talked to a fern do you think it would
answer if

I stopped at your window that
Hyacinths... I dial a number soft click
A thrush glides in slow circles over the brook
Catherine stands by the fence, watching a leopard
I call you from fire in the white wheel
I give you the valley
Tony McNeill.⁵²

⁵¹ Derek Walcott, "Sainte Lucia", in his *Sea Grapes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 46.

⁵² Anthony McNeill, *Credences at the Altar of Cloud*, Kingston, Jamaica, Institute of Jamaica, 1979, pp. 134-135.