

WHAT
THE
TWILIGHT
SAYS

Essays /

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux

New York

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1998

The Muse of History



History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

—JOYCE

I

The common experience of the New World, even for its patrician writers whose veneration of the Old is read as the idolatry of the mestizo, is colonialism. They, too, are victims of tradition, but they remind us of our debt to the great dead, that those who break a tradition first hold it in awe. They perversely encourage disfavour, but because their sense of the past is of a timeless, yet habitable, moment, the New World owes them more than it does those who wrestle with that past, for their veneration subtilizes an arrogance which is tougher than violent rejection. They know that by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it, that revolutionary literature is a filial impulse, and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor.

When these writers cunningly describe themselves as classicists and pretend an indifference to change, it is with an irony as true of the colonial anguish as the fury of the radical. If they appear to be phony aristocrats, it is because they have gone past the confrontation of history, that Medusa of the New World.

These writers reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of the race. For them history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory. Their philosophy, based on a contempt for historic time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old. Their vision of man is elemental, a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past. Yet the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction. In time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention. The further the facts, the more history petrifies into myth. Thus, as we grow older as a race, we grow aware that history is written, that it is a kind of literature without morality, that in its actualities the ego of the race is indissoluble and that everything depends on whether we write this fiction through the memory of hero or of victim.

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos. The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. This shame and awe of history possess poets of the Third World who think of language as enslavement and who, in a rage for identity, respect only incoherence or nostalgia.

II

The great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda, reject this sense of history. Their vision of man in the New World is Adamic. In their exuberance he is still

capable of enormous wonder. Yet he has paid his accounts to Greece and Rome and walks in a world without monuments and ruins. They exhort him against the fearful magnet of older civilizations. Even in Borges, where the genius seems secretive, immured from change, it celebrates an elation which is vulgar and abrupt, the life of the plains given an instant archaism by the hieratic style. Violence is felt with the simultaneity of history. So the death of a gaucho does not merely repeat, but is, the death of Caesar. Fact evaporates into myth. This is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as renewed. Like Borges, too, the poet St.-John Perse conducts us from the mythology of the past to the present without a tremor of adjustment. This is the revolutionary spirit at its deepest; it recalls the spirit to arms. In Perse there is the greatest width of elemental praise of winds, seas, rains. The revolutionary or cyclic vision is as deeply rooted as the patriotic syntax. What Perse glorifies is not veneration but the perennial freedom; his hero remains the wanderer, the man who moves through the ruins of great civilizations with all his worldly goods by caravan or pack mule, the poet carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered. His are poems of massive or solitary migrations through the elements. They are the same in spirit as the poems of Whitman or Neruda, for they seek spaces where praise of the earth is ancestral.

III

New World poets who see the "classic style" as stasis must see it also as historical degradation, rejecting it as the language of the master. This self-torture arises when the poet also sees history as language, when he limits his memory to the suffering of the victim. Their admirable wish to honour the degraded ancestor limits their language to pho-

netic pain, the groan of suffering, the curse of revenge. The tone of the past becomes an unbearable burden, for they must abuse the master or hero in his own language, and this implies self-deceit. Their view of Caliban is of the enraged pupil. They cannot separate the rage of Caliban from the beauty of his speech when the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor. The language of the torturer mastered by the victim. This is viewed as servitude, not as victory.

But who in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge? The pulse of New World history is the racing pulse beat of fear, the tiring cycles of stupidity and greed. The tongues above our prayers utter the pain of entire races to the darkness of a Manichean God: *Dominus illuminatio mea*, for what was brought to this New World under the guise of divine light, the light of the sword blade and the light of *dominus illuminatio mea*, was the same iridescent serpent brought by a contaminating Adam, the same tortured Christ exhibited with Christian exhaustion, but what was also brought in the seeded entails of the slave was a new nothing, a darkness which intensified the old faith.

In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World. That is our inheritance, but to try and understand why this happened, to condemn or justify is also the method of history, and these explanations are always the same: This happened because of that, this was understandable because, and in days men were such. These recriminations exchanged, the contrition of the master replaces the vengeance of the slave, and here colonial literature is most pietistic, for it can accuse great art of feudalism and excuse poor art as suffering. To radical poets poetry seems the homage of

resignation, an essential fatalism. But it is not the pressure of the past which torments great poets but the weight of the present:

*there are so many dead,
and so many dikes the red sun breached,
and so many heads battering hulls
and so many hands that have closed over kisses
and so many things that I want to forget.*

—PABLO NERUDA

The sense of history in poets lives rawly along their nerves:

*My land without name, without America,
equinoctial stamen, lance-like purple,
your aroma rose through my roots
into the cup I drained, into the most tenuous
word not yet born in my mouth.*

—PABLO NERUDA

It is this awe of the numinous, this elemental privilege of naming the New World which annihilates history in our great poets, an elation common to all of them, whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or to Friday and Caliban. They reject ethnic ancestry for faith in elemental man. The vision, the "democratic vista," is not metaphorical, it is a social necessity. A political philosophy rooted in elation would have to accept belief in a second Adam, the re-creation of the entire order, from religion to the simplest domestic rituals. The myth of the noble savage would not be revived, for that myth never emanated from the savage but has always been the nostalgia of the Old World, its longing for innocence. The great poetry of the New World does not pretend to such

innocence, its vision is not naïve. Rather, like its fruits, its savour is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience. In such poetry there is a bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue. It is the acidulous that supplies its energy. The golden apples of this sun are shot with acid. The taste of Neruda is citric, the *Pomme de Cythère* of Aimé Césaire sets the teeth on edge, the savour of Perse is of salt fruit at the sea's edge, the sea grape, the "fat-poke," the sea almond. For us in the archipelago the tribal memory is salted with the bitter memory of migration.

To such survivors, to all the decimated tribes of the New World who did not suffer extinction, their degraded arrival must be seen as the beginning, not the end, of our history. The shipwrecks of Crusoe and of the crew in *The Tempest* are the end of an Old World. It should matter nothing to the New World if the Old is again determined to blow itself up, for an obsession with progress is not within the psyche of the recently enslaved. That is the bitter secret of the apple. The vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time, of a dominated future. Its imagery is absurd. In the history books the discoverer sets a shod food on virgin sand, kneels, and the savage also kneels from his bushes in awe. Such images are stamped on the colonial memory, such heresy as the world's becoming holy from Crusoe's footprint or the imprint of Columbus's knee. These blasphemous images fade, because these hieroglyphs of progress are basically comic. And if the idea of the New and the Old becomes increasingly absurd, what must happen to our sense of time, what else can happen to history itself, but that it, too, is becoming absurd? This is not existentialism. Adamic, elemental man cannot be existential. His first impulse is not self-indulgence but awe, and existentialism is simply the myth of the noble savage gone baroque. Such

philosophies of freedom are born in cities. Existentialism is as much nostalgia as in Rousseau's sophisticated primitivism, as sick as recurrence in French thought as the isle of Cythera, whether it is the tubercular, fevered imagery of Watteau or the same fever turned delirious in Rimbaud and Baudelaire. The poets of the "New Aegean," of the Isles of the Blest, the Fortunate Isles, of the remote Bermudas, of Prospero's isle, of Crusoe's Juan Fernandez, of Cythera, of all those rocks named like the beads of a chaplet, they know that the old vision of Paradise wrecks here.

*I want to hear a song in which the rainbow breaks
and the curlew alights among forgotten shores
I want the liana creeping on the palm-tree
(on the trunk of the present 'tis our stubborn future)
I want the conquistador with unsealed armour
lying down in death of perfumed flowers,
the foam censing a sword gone rusty
in the pure blue flight of slow wild cactuses*

—AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

But to most writers of the archipelago who contemplate only the shipwreck, the New World offers not elation but cynicism, a despair at the vices of the Old which they feel must be repeated. Their malaise is an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture and a melancholy at the new, and this can go as deep as a rejection of the untamed landscape, a yearning for ruins. To such writers the death of civilizations is architectural, not spiritual; seeded in their memories is an imagery of vines ascending broken columns, of dead terraces, of Europe as a nourishing museum. They believe in the responsibility of tradition, but what they are in awe of is not tradition, which is alert, alive, simultaneous, but history, and the same is true of the new magnifiers of Africa. For these their deepest loss

is of the old gods, the fear that it is worship which has enslaved progress. Thus the humanism of politics replaces religion. They see such gods as part of the process of history, subjected like the tribe to cycles of achievement and despair. Because the Old World concept of God is anthropomorphic, the New World slave was forced to remake himself in His image, despite such phrases as "God is light, and in Him is no darkness," and at this point of intersecting faiths the enslaved poet and enslaved priest surrendered their power. But the tribe in bondage learned to fortify itself by cunning assimilation of the religion of the Old World. What seemed to be surrender was redemption. What seemed the loss of tradition was its renewal. What seemed the death of faith was its rebirth.

IV

Eliot speaks of the culture of a people as being the incarnation of its religion. If this is true, in the New World we have to ask this faceted question: (1) Whether the religion taught to the black slave has been absorbed as belief, (2) whether it has been altered by this absorption, and (3) whether wholly absorbed or absorbed and altered, it must now be rejected. In other terms, can an African culture exist, except on the level of polemical art or politics, without an African religion, and if so, which African religion?

The spectacle of mediocre talents raising old totems is more shameful than the faith of the convert which they ridicule, but the flare of a literary religion is brief, for faith needs more than style. At this stage the polemic poet, like the politician, will wish to produce epic work, to summon the grandeur of the past, not as myth but as history, and to prophesy in the way that Fascist architecture can be viewed as prophesy. Yet the more ambitious the zeal, the more diffuse and forced it becomes, the more it roots into

research, until the imagination surrenders to the glorification of history, the ear becomes enslaved, the glorifiers of the tom-tom ignoring the dynamo. These epic poets create an artificial past, a defunct cosmology without the tribal faith.

What remains in the archipelago is the fragmentation into schisms, the private cosmology of the wayside preacher. Every day in these islands the sidewalk blossoms with such victims, minds disfigured by their attempt to comprehend both worlds unless they create a heaven of which they are the centre. Like the wayside prophets, the "epic" poet in the islands looks to anthropology, to a catalogue of forgotten gods, to midden fragments, artifacts, and the unfinished phrases of a dead speech. These engage in masochistic recollection. The epic-minded poet looks around these islands and finds no ruins, and because all epic is based on the visible presence of ruins, wind-bitten or sea-bitten, the poet celebrates what little there is, the rusted slave wheel of the sugar factory, cannon, chains, the crusted amphora of cutthroats, all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history, not as masochism, as if the ovens of Auschwitz and Hiroshima were the temples of the race. Morbidity is the inevitable result, and that is the tone of any literature which respects such a history and bases its truth on shame or on revenge.

And yet it is there that the epic poetry of the tribe originates, in its identification with Hebraic suffering, the migration, the hope of deliverance from bondage. There was this difference, that the passage over our Red Sea was not from bondage to freedom but its opposite, so that the tribes arrived at their New Canaan chained. There is this residual feeling in much of our literature, the wailing by strange waters for a lost home. It survives in our politics, the subdued search for a Moses. The epic concept was compressed in the folk lyric, the mass longing in chapter

and chorus, couplet and refrain. The revivalist poems drew their strength from the self-hypnotic nature of their responses, interminable in monody as the tribal hope.

*I know moonrise, I know star-rise,
Lay this body down,
I go to my Lord in the evening of the day,
Lay this body down.*

But this monody is not only resigned but martial:

*Joshua fit de battle of Jericho,
Jericho, Jericho,
Joshua fit de battle of Jericho,
And the walls come tumbling down.*

The epic poem is not a literary project. It is already written; it was written in the mouths of the tribe, a tribe which had courageously yielded its history.

v

While the Old Testament epics of bondage and deliverance provided the slave with a political parallel, the ethics of Christianity tempered his vengeance and appeared to deepen his passivity. To his masters this world was not new but an extension of the old. Their vision of an earthly Paradise was denied him, and the reward offered in the name of Christian suffering would come after his death. All this we know, but the phenomenon is the zeal with which the slave accepted both the Christian and the Hebraic, resigned his gaze to the death of his pantheon, and yet deliberately began to invest a decaying faith with a political belief. Historians cannot chronicle this, except they go by the statistics of conversion. There is no moment of a mass tribal conversion equal to the light's unhorsing

of Saul; what we were told to believe instead was a slow, massive groan of surrender, the immense laborious conversion of the defeated into good niggers, or true Christians; and certainly songs such as this one seem to be the most contemptible expression of the beaten:

*I'm going to lay down my sword and shield,
Down by the riverside, down by the riverside . . .*

*I ain't going study war no more,
Study war no more . . .*

How can we teach this as history? Aren't those the words of the whitewashed, the defeated, isn't this the Christian treachery that seduces revenge, that led the exhausted tribes to betray their gods? A new generation looks back on such conversion with contempt, for where are the songs of triumph, the defiance of the captured warrior, where are the nostalgic battle chants and the seasonal songs of harvest, the seeding of the great African pastoral? This generation sees in the epic poetry of the work song and the early blues self-contempt and inertia, but the deep truth is that pinioned and humiliated in body as the slave was, there is, beyond simple fortitude, a note of aggression, and what a later generation sees as defeat is really the willing of spiritual victory, for the captured warrior and the tribal poet had chosen the very battleground which the captor proposed, the soul:

*I am a warrior, out in the field,
And I can sing, and I can shout,
And I can tell it all about that Jesus died for me,
When I get over yonder in the happy paradise,
When I get over yonder in the field.*

What was captured from the captor was his God, for the subject African had come to the New World in an elemental intimacy with nature, with a profounder terror of blasphemy than the exhausted, hypocritical Christian. He understood too quickly the Christian rituals of a whipped, tortured, and murdered redeemer, though he may have recoiled at dividing and eating his flesh, for in primal cultures gods defeat each other like warriors, and for warriors there is no conversion in defeat. There are many such warriors in the history of the archipelago, but the true history is of the tribe's conversion, and it is this which is our concern. It returns us to Eliot's pronouncement, that a culture cannot exist without a religion, and to other pronouncements irradiating that idea, that an epic poetry cannot exist without a religion. It is the beginning of the poetry of the New World. And the language used is, like the religion, that of the conqueror of the God. But the slave had wrested God from his captor.

In tribal, elemental poetry, the epic experience of the race is compressed in metaphor. In an oral tradition the mode is simple, the response open-ended, so that each new poet can add his lines to the form, a process very much like weaving or the dance, based on the concept that the history of the tribe is endless. There is no dying fall, no egotistical signature of effect; in short, no pathos. The blues is not pathos, not the individual voice, it is a tribal mode, and each new oral poet can contribute his couplet, and this is based on the concept that the tribe, inured to despair, will also survive: there is no beginning but no end. The new poet enters a flux and withdraws, as the weaver continues the pattern, hand to hand and mouth to mouth, as the rockpile convict passes the sledge:

*Many days of sorrow, many nights of woe,
Many days of sorrow, many nights of woe,
And a ball and chain, everywhere I go.*

No history, but flux, and the only sustenance, myth:

*Moses lived till he got old,
Where shall I be?*

The difference is in the intensity of celebration. The pietistic rhythm of the missionary is speeded to a martial frenzy which the slave adapts to a triumphal tribal mode. Good, the missionary and merchant must have thought, once we've got them swinging and clapping, all will be peace, but their own God was being taken away from merchant and missionary by a submerged force that rose at ritual gatherings, where the subconscious rhythm rose and took possession and where, in fact, the Hebraic-European God was changing colour, for the names of the sub-deities did not matter, Saint Ursula or Saint Ursulie; the Catholic pantheon adapted easily to African pantheism. Catholic mystery adapted easily to African magic. Not all accepted the white man's God. As prologue to the Haitian revolution, Boukman was invoking Damballa in the Bois Cayman. Blood sacrifices, warrior initiations, tortures, escapes, revolts, even the despair of slaves who went mad and ate dirt, these are the historical evidence, but what is finally important is that the race or the tribes were converted, they became Christian. But no race is converted against its will. The slave master now encountered a massive pliability. The slave converted himself, he changed weapons, spiritual weapons, and as he adapted his master's religion, he also adapted his language, and it is here that what we can look at as our poetic tradition begins. Now began the new naming of things.

Epic was compressed in the folk legend. The act of imagination was the creative effort of the tribe. Later such legends may be written by individual poets, but their beginnings are oral, familial, the poetry of firelight which illuminates the faces of a tight, primal hierarchy. But even

oral literature forces itself towards hieroglyph and alphabet. Today, still in many islands, the West Indian poet is faced with a language which he hears but cannot write because there are no symbols for such a language and because the closer he brings hand and word to the precise inflections of the inner language and to the subtlest accuracies of his ear, the more chaotic his symbols will appear on the page, the smaller the regional dialect, the more eccentric his representation of it will become, so his function remains the old one of being filter and purifier, never losing the tone and strength of the common speech as he uses the hieroglyphs, symbols, or alphabet of the official one. Now two of the greatest poets of this archipelago have come from French-patois-speaking islands. St.-John Perse, born and reared until late adolescence in Guadeloupe, and Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquan. Both have the colonial experience of language, one from privilege, the other from deprivation. Let it not be important for now that one is white, the other black. Both are Frenchmen, both are poets who write in French. Well, to begin with, it is Césaire's language which is the more abstruse, more difficult, more surrealist, while Perse's French is classic. Césaire has not written his great poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, in dialect, but we must pay attention to its tone. For all the complexity of its surrealism, its sometimes invented words, it sounds, to at least one listener familiar with French patois, like a poem written tonally in Creole. Those tonal qualities are tartness and impatience, but the language of Césaire in this great revolutionary poem, or rather a poem partially appropriated by revolutionaries, is not proletarian. The tone of Perse is also majestic, it marches a path of inevitable conquest appropriating as it proceeds; and to the reader trying to listen purely to the language of either poet without prejudice, without subliminal whispers of history, they have at least one thing in common: authority. Their diction has

other similarities, for instance, form. In *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, as well as in the prose poems of Perse from the Antillean *Eloges* to *Chronique* and beyond, there is a strict, synonymous armature shared within the tradition of the metropolitan language, and which both must have felt to be an inheritance despite their racial and social differences, despite the distance of Perse from the dialect of house servants and of fishermen, despite the fealty of Césaire to that dialect. The sources of that diction are both ancient and contemporary: the Bible and the tribal ode as well as French surrealist poetry, the proletarian hymns of Whitman, and the oral or written legends of other civilizations, for Perse the East and the Mediterranean, for Césaire the Hebraic Mediterranean and Africa. In visual structure the poetry of both shares the symmetry of the prose ode, the appearance of translation from an older epic which invests their poems with an air of legend. Now here are two colonials or, more precisely, two poets whose formative perceptions, whose apprehension of the visible worlds of their very different childhoods, were made numinous by their elation in the metropolitan language, and whose very different visions created indisputable masterpieces, and, here is the point, without doing violence to the language itself, in fact perpetuating its grandeur through opposite beliefs, Perse through prophesy and nostalgia, Césaire through nostalgia and polemic. Yet, as a translator, I would rather attempt an equivalent in English to Perse than to Césaire, for the simple reason that Perse is perhaps simpler, for where his language grows abstruse in the vocabularies of archaeology, marine biology, botany, and so forth, the language of Césaire skims the subtleties of modern surrealism. Yet as an Antillean, I feel more akin to Césaire's tone.

I do not know if one poet is indebted to the other, but whatever the bibliographical truth is, one acknowl-

edges not an exchange of influences, not imitation, but the tidal advance of the metropolitan language, of its empire, if you like, which carries simultaneously, fed by such strong colonial tributaries, poets of such different beliefs as Rimbaud, Char, Claudel, Perse, and Césaire. It is the language which is the empire, and great poets are not its vassals but its princes. We continue to categorize these poets by the wrong process; that is, by history. We continue to fiddle with the obvious limitations of dialect because of chauvinism, but the great poem of Césaire's could not be written in a French Creole dialect because there are no words for some of its concepts; there are no equivalent nouns for its objects, and because even if these were suddenly found, they could not be visually expressed without the effort of an insane philologist. Both poets manipulate a supreme, visionary rhetoric that carries over into English. Sometimes they sound identical:

1. *Narrow path of the surge in the blur of fables . . .*

—CÉSAIRE

2. *Wandering, what did we know of our ancestral bed, all blazoned*

though it were in that speckled wood of the Islands? . . .

There

was no name for us in the ancient bronze gong of the old family house. There was no name for us in our mother's

oratory

(jacaranda wood or cedar), nor in the golden antennae

quivering

in the head-dresses of our guardians, women of colour. We

were

not in the lute-maker's wood, in the spinet or the harp:

nor . . .

—PERSE

3. *I want to hear a song in which the rainbow breaks
and the curlew alights along forgotten shores
I want the liana creeping on the palm-tree
(on the trunk of the present 'tis our stubborn future)
I want the conquistador with unsealed armour
lying down in death of perfumed flowers,
the foam censing a sword gone rusty
in the pure blue flight of slow wild cactuses.*
—CÉSAIRE

4. *Master of the three roads a man stands before you who
walked much,
Master of the three roads a man stands before you
who walked on hands who walked on feet who
walked on the belly who walked on the
behind.
Since Elam. Since Akkad. Since Sumer.
Master of the three roads a man stands before you who
has carried much.
And truly, friends, I carried since Elam, since Akkad, since
Sumer.*
—CÉSAIRE

Perse and Césaire, men of diametrically challenging backgrounds, racial opposites, to use the language of politics, one patrician and conservative, the other proletarian and revolutionary, classic and romantic, Prospero and Caliban, all such opposites balance easily, but they balance on the axis of a shared sensibility, and this sensibility, with or deprived of the presence of a visible tradition, is the sensibility of walking to a New World. Perse sees in this New World vestiges of the Old, of order and of hierarchy, Césaire sees in it evidence of past humiliations and the need for a new order, but the deeper truth is that both poets perceive this New World through mystery. Their language tempts us to endless quotation; there are moments

when one hears both voices simultaneously, until the tone is one voice from these different men. If we think of one as poor and the other as privileged when we read their addresses to the New World, if we must see one as black and one as white, we are not only dividing this sensibility by the process of the sociologist, we are denying the range of either poet, the power of compassion and the power of fury. One is not making out a case for assimilation and for the common simplicity of all men; we are interested in their differences, openly, but what astonishes us in both poets is their elation, their staggering elation in possibility. And one is not talking of a possible ideal society, for you will find that only in the later work of Perse, a society which is inaccessible by its very grandeur, but of the elation in presences which exists in *Éloges* and in *Pour fêter une enfance*, the possibility of the individual Caribbean man, African, European, or Asian in ancestry, the enormous, gently opening morning of his possibility, his body touched with dew, his nerves as subtilized to sensation as the mimosa, his memory, whether of grandeur or of pain, gradually erasing itself as recurrent drizzles cleanse the ancestral or tribal markings from the coral skull, the possibility of a man and his language waking to wonder here. As the language of Perse later becomes hammered and artificial, so does the rhetoric of Césaire move towards the heraldic, but their first great work is as deeply rooted and supple as a vine.

But these poems are in French. The fact that they have now begun to influence English poetry from the archipelago is significant, because they are powerful works and all power attracts to itself, but their rhetoric is unmanageable for our minor "revolutionary" poets, who assume a grandeur without a language to create it, for these imitators see both poems through history, or through sociology; they are seduced by their subjects. Therefore, there is now a brood of thin, querulous fledglings who

steal fragments of Césaire for their own nests, and yet these fledglings will condemn Perse as a different animal, a white poet. These convulsions of bad poetry appear when the society is screaming for change.

Because we think of tradition as history, one group of anatomists claims that this tradition is wholly African and that its responses are alerted through the nostalgia of one race, but that group must allow the Asian and the Mediterranean the same fiction, and then the desolate terraces of Perse's epic memory will be as West Indian to the Middle Easterners among us as the kingdoms of the Guinea coast are to Césaire or the poetry of China is to the Chinese grocer. If we can psychologize, divide, trace these degenerations easily, then we must accept the miracle of possibility which every poet demonstrates. The Caribbean sensibility is not marinated in the past. It is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexity, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new. Its traces of melancholy are the chemical survivals of the blood which remain after the slave's and the indentured worker's convalescence. It will survive the malaria of nostalgia and the delirium of revenge, just as it survived its self-contempt.

Thus, while many critics of contemporary Commonwealth verse reject imitation, the basis of the tradition, for originality, the false basis of innovation, they represent eventually the old patronizing attitude adapted to contemporary politics, for their demand for naturalness, novelty, originality, or truth is again based on preconceptions of behaviour. They project reflexes as anticipated as the exuberance, spontaneity, and refreshing dialect of the tribe. Certain performances are called for, including the fashionable incoherence of revolutionary anger, and everyone is again appeased, the masochist critic by the required attack on his "values," the masochist poet by the approval of his victim. Minstrel postures, in their beginnings, are hard to identify from private truths, but their

familiarity soon establishes the old formulae of entertainment. Basically, the anger of the black is entertainment or theater, if it makes an aesthetic out of anger, and this is no different in its "naturalness" than the legendary joy or spontaneous laughter of the minstrel. It is still nightclub and cabaret, professional fire-eating and dancing on broken bottles. The critic-tourist can only gasp at such naturalness. He wouldn't care to try it himself, really. We are back to Dr. Johnson's female preacher.

The liberal warms to the speech of the ghetto in a way quite contemptible to the poet, for the benignity of the liberal critic perpetuates the sociological conditions of that speech, despite his access to anger. What he really preaches again, but this time through criticism, is the old separate-but-equal argument. Blacks are different, and the pathos is that most blacks have been led to believe this, and into the tragedy of proclaiming their difference. The theories clash, for the radical seeks to equate the deprived up to the status of the privileged, while the liberal and his unconscious accomplices, the poets of the ghetto and of "revolutionary rhetoric," fear to lose "their own thing" if they let thought and education widen by materialist benefits. Often it is the educated and privileged poet who masks his education and privilege behind a fake exoticism of poverty and the pastoral. They write one way and speak another. There has been the treason of clerks, and now we have the treason of the intellectuals.

The degeneration of technique, when technique is an open question, hides itself in originality. Bad verse written by blacks is better than good verse written by whites, because, say the revolutionaries, the same standards do not apply. This is seen as pride, as the opposite of inferiority. So too, one can isolate in this writer's general demeanor of style that belligerent naïveté or a joy unqualified which characterizes a pubescent literature. One which accepts subconsciously a condition of being praised or corrected,

which may resist, but also insinuates by resistance, the correctives of a "superior" or at least an older discipline or tradition. It is a flaw which also sees history as a ladder of achievement, but it is a competitive energy which either fails often from exhaustion or amazes by its prolixity. It is manic, it is inferior, but it is certain of its direction and challenges. It engages its peers. For purity, then, for pure black Afro-Aryanism, only the unsoiled black is valid, and West Indianism is a taint, and other strains adulterate him. The extremists, the purists, are beginning to exercise those infections, so that a writer of "mixed," hence "degenerate," blood can be nothing stronger than a liberal. This will develop a rich individualism through a deeper bitterness, it will increase egocentricity and isolation, because such writers and poets already have more complex values. They will seem more imperialistic, nostalgic, and out of the impetus of the West Indian proletariat, because they cannot simplify intricacies of race and the thought of the race. They will become hermits or rogue animals, increasingly exotic hybrids, broken bridges between two ancestries, Europe and the Third World of Africa and Asia; in other words, they will become islands. Because of this isolation their ironic fate will be to appear inaccessible, irrelevant, remote. The machinery of radicalism which makes culture heroes of more violent writers and which makes a virtue of immediacy will not include them. They are condemned to middle age.

And all of this has sprung, at the root, from a rejection of language. The new cult of incoherence, of manic repetition, glorifies the apprentice, and it also atrophies the young, who are warned against assimilation. It is as if the instinct of the black is still escape, escape to the labyrinth, escape to a special oblivion removed from the banalities of poverty and from the weight of a new industrial imperialism, that of absentee "power structures" which

control the archipelago's economy. That there will always be abrupt eruptions of defiance is almost irrelevant itself, because the impulse of such eruptions, their political philosophy, remains simplistic and shallow. That all blacks are beautiful is an enervating statement, that all blacks are brothers more a reprimand than a charter, that the people must have power almost their death wish, for the real power of this time is silent. Art cannot last long in this shale. It crumbles like those slogans, fragments and shards of a historical fault. Power now becomes increasingly divided and tribal when it is based on genetics. It leads to the righteous secondary wars of the Third World, to the self-maiming of civil wars, the frontier divisions of third-rate, Third World powers, manipulated or encouraged by the first powers. Genocides increase, tribal wars increase and become increasingly hallucinatory and remote. Nigeria, Bangladesh, Vietnam, the Middle East, Greece, the Spains of our era. The provincial revolutions can only spare a general compassion because they know who manages or stages such things. They believe that the same manipulation is beneath them.

The revolution is here. It was always here. It does not need the decor of African tourism or the hip postures and speech of metropolitan ghettos. Change the old word "slum" for the new word "ghetto" and you have the psychology of funk, a market psychology that, within a year of the physical revolution, has been silently appropriated by Mediterranean and Asian merchants. Soul is a commodity. Soul is an outfit. The "metropolitan" emphasis of the "revolution" has clouded the condition of the peasant, of the inevitably rooted man, and the urban revolutionary is by imitation or by nature rootless and a drifter, fashionably so, and in time a potential exile. The peasant cannot spare himself these city changes. He is the true African who does not need to proclaim it.

ON HISTORY AS EXILE

Postures of metropolitan cynicism must be assumed by the colonial in exile if he is not to feel lost, unless he prefers utter isolation or the desperate, noisy nostalgia of fellow exiles. This cynicism is an attempt to enter the sense of history which is within every Englishman and European, but which he himself has never felt towards Africa or Asia. There develops the other sense, that the history of Africa or of Asia is inferior, and we see how close we draw to madness here, for this sense qualifies not the significance of an event but the event itself, the action of the event as second class. The exile will not be argued out of this. He has chosen to see history this way, and that is his vision. The simplifications of imperialism, of the colonial heritage, are more dignified, for these gave brutish tribes their own dignity. But even less honest than the colonial in exile is the generation after him, which wants to effect a eugenic leap from imperialism to independence by longing for the ancestral dignity of the wanderer-warrior. Mysterious customs. Defunct gods. Sacred rites. As much as the colonial, however, they are children of the nineteenth-century ideal, the romance of redcoat and savage warrior, their simplification of choosing to play Indian instead of cowboy, filtered through films and adolescent literature, is the hallucination of imperial romance; the posture is melodramatic, the language of its stances idealized from the literature of exploration remembered from Captain Marryat, Kipling, or Rider Haggard. It continues the juvenile romance of savage drums, tribal rites, barbarous but sacred sacrifices, golden journeys, lost cities. In the subconscious there is a black Atlantis buried in a sea of sand.

The colonial is tougher. He sees history for what it is in the world around him, an almost inexpressible banality.

He sees the twentieth century without self-deceit and juvenile fantasy. The other curses the banality and chooses myth. Poets of the second group now begin to see poetry as a form of historical instruction. Their target is the officialized literature of the schools, the sociologists, their fellow historians, and, above all, the revolution. They become fascinated with the efficacy of poetry as an aspect of power not through its language but through its subject. Their poetry becomes a kind of musical accompaniment to certain theses, and as history it is forced to exclude certain contradictions, for history cannot be ambiguously recorded. Whatever its motive, either this happened or it did not. All piety is seen as villainy, all form as hypocrisy.

Inevitably, these poets grow obsessed with the innovation of forms, but this innovation is seen as critical strategy, for it will need to attack others as well as defend its position, if it is to be seen as spontaneous choice. Conservatively, it imitates what it believes to be the tribal mode, and it makes no distinction between the artificiality of the high style of tribal ceremony and the language which it employs to achieve this. It may even use fragments of the original language to adorn itself, even if such language is not its natural tongue. A new conservatism now appears, a new dignity more reactionary and pompous than the direction of the language used. It moves manically between the easy applause of dialect, the argot of the tribe and ceremonial speech, the "memory" of the tribe; that is, between the new dignity and the popular, and in between there is nothing. The normal voice of the poet, his own speaking voice is lost, and no language is writ.

No, if we look for the primal imagination in West Indian literature, its "revolutionary" aspect, we find it crucially evolving in West Indian fiction, the poetic principle is more alert in our best prose, and whatever ethnic impulse drives this imagination examines the roots of con-

temporary man with the same force as poets of a different race using English. In the Guyanese novelist Denis Williams's *Other Leopards* there is this passage:

Now, having removed my body and the last traces of it, I am without context clear. Going up this new tree, picking the thorns bare, one by one, I am in a darkness nowhere at all, I am nothing, nowhere. This is something gained. Hughie has not found me; I have outwitted him. I have achieved a valuable state: a condition outside his method. Only remains now to remove my consciousness. This I can do whenever I wish. I am free of the earth. I do not need to go down there for anything.

In "Wodwo" by Ted Hughes there is:

*What am I? nosing here turning leaves over
following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge
I enter water . . .*

*I seem
separate from the ground not rooted but dropped
out of nothing casually I've not threads
fastening me to anything I can go anywhere
I seem to have been given the freedom
of this place what am I then . . .*

which, excuse the broken quotations, is the tone of the whole poem, language, tone, hesitation, and assurance, the deliberate picking out of names, the numinous process in Williams of a man reduced, in Hughes of a man evolving, the passage from the novel and the whole of Hughes's poem are the same. They are not merely the same in subject, anthropology; in fact, they are different in structure obviously, and there is absolutely no question of exchanged influences except Hughes had read Williams, whose book appeared some years before, but what is there is the displaced, searching psyche of modern man, the re-

version of twentieth-century man, whether in Africa or in Yorkshire, to his pre-Adamic beginning, to pre-history, and this shared contagion of madness exists universally in contemporary poetry, and particularly in a poet like Samuel Beckett.

The words jerk, the search is anguished, the pronouncing of chosen nouns, the cynical or violent rejection of the named thing itself, or the primal or the final elation of the power or of the decadence of the Word itself, the process is shared by three utterly different writers, one Guyanese-African, one English-Celtic, the third Irish-Celtic. What is shared is more than the language; it is the drilling, mining, molelike or mole-cricketlike burrowing into the origins of life or into its detritus. Logos as excrement, logos as engendering spasm. In the sense that these three are black writers, we can only use the term "black" to imply a malevolence towards historical system. The Old World, or visitors to the Old World, or those who exist in the Old World, whether it is Africa, or the Yorkshire submarine world deep as England, or Beckett's unnamed, unnameable gray world of a wrecked civilization, these who are embittered by those worlds write blackly, with a purging pessimism which goes beyond the morbid. In the New World there is the same process in writers with an optimistic or visionary force, there is the same slow naming. This exists wholly in Wilson Harris. But this blackness is luminous. The black in Williams returns in his madness to beginning again. He climbs his thorn tree, he reverts to the anthropological origins of all mankind, no doubt he will descend again, and like Hughes's medieval monster undergoing his thrilling metamorphosis from demon to man as he begins to name things, and he may wreck and destroy civilization and its languages again like those crawlers through primordial and post-atomic mud in Beckett, but these three elemental cycles are the common agency of three racially different writers. These crude cycles

are the poet's knowledge of history. So what does this prove? It proves that the truest writers are those who see language not as linguistic process but as a living element; it more closely demonstrates the laziness of poets who confuse language with linguistics and with archaeology. It also annihilates provincial concepts of imitation and originality. Fear of imitation obsesses minor poets. But in any age a common genius almost indistinguishably will show itself, and the perpetuity of this genius is the only valid tradition, not the tradition which categorizes poetry by epochs and by schools. We know that the great poets have no wish to be different, no time to be original, that their originality emerges only when they have absorbed all the poetry which they have read, entire, that their first work appears to be the accumulation of other people's trash, but that they become bonfires, that it is only academics and frightened poets who talk of Beckett's debt to Joyce.

The tribe requires of its poets the highest language and more than predictable sentiment. Now pardon this excursion into autobiography. I knew, from childhood, that I wanted to become a poet, and like any colonial child I was taught English literature as my natural inheritance. Forget the snow and the daffodils. They were real, more real than the heat and the oleander, perhaps, because they lived on the page, in imagination, and therefore in memory. There is a memory of imagination in literature which has nothing to do with actual experience, which is, in fact, another life, and that experience of the imagination will continue to make actual the quest of a medieval knight or the bulk of a white whale, because of the power of a shared imagination. The world of poetry was natural and unlimited by what no child really accepts as the actual world, and of course, later disenchantment and alienation will come. But these are not altogether important, they become part of maturity. To simplify: once I had decided to make the writing of poetry my life, my actual, not my

imaginative life, I felt both a rejection and a fear of Europe while I learned its poetry. I have remained this way, but the emotions have changed, they are subtler, more controlled, for I would no longer wish to visit Europe as if I could repossess it than I would wish to visit Africa for that purpose. What survives in the slave is nostalgia for imperial modes, Europe or Africa. I felt, I knew, that if I went to England I would never become a poet, far more a West Indian, and that was the only thing I could see myself becoming, a West Indian poet. The language I used did not bother me. I had given it, and it was irretrievably given; I could no more give it back than they could claim it. But I fear the cathedrals, the music, the weight of history, not because I was alien, but because I felt history to be the burden of others. I was not excited by continuation of its process but by discovery, by the plain burden of work, for there was too much to do here. Yet the older and more assured I grew, the stronger my isolation as a poet, the more I needed to become omnivorous about the art and literature of Europe to understand my own world. I write "my own world" because I had no doubt that it was mine, that it was given to me, by God, not by history, with my gift. At that time nobody anatomized the honesty of my commitment, nobody urged me to reject old values, but such people would have to go through an anguish of rejection and arrogant self-assertion later. These are qualifications of faith, but they are important. We are misled by new prophets of bitterness who warn us against experiences which we have never cared to have, but the mass of society has had neither the interest nor the opportunity which they chose. These preach not to the converted but to those who have never lost faith. I do not mean religious faith but reality. Fisherman and peasant know who they are and what they are and where they are, and when we show them our wounded sensibilities we are, most of us, displaying self-inflicted wounds.

I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper "history," for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. You were when you acted your roles, your given, historical roles of slave seller and slave buyer, men acting as men, and also you, father in the filth-ridden gut of the slave ship, to you they were also men, acting as men, with the cruelty of men, your fellowman and tribesman not moved or hovering with hesitation about your common race any longer than my other bastard ancestor hovered with his whip, but to you, inwardly forgiven grandfathers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks. I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift.

(1974)

The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory



Felicity is a village in Trinidad on the edge of the Caroni plain, the wide central plain that still grows sugar and to which indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation, so the small population of Felicity is East Indian, and on the afternoon that I visited it with friends from America, all the faces along its road were Indian, which, as I hope to show, was a moving, beautiful thing, because this Saturday afternoon *Ramleela*, the epic dramatization of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, was going to be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on a field strung with different-coloured flags, like a new gas station, and beautiful Indian boys in red and black were aiming arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light. Low blue mountains on the horizon, bright grass, clouds that would gather colour before the light went. Felicity! What a gentle Anglo-Saxon name for an epical memory.

Under an open shed on the edge of the field, there were two huge armatures of bamboo that looked like immense cages. They were parts of the body of a god, his calves or thighs, which, fitted and reared, would make a gigantic effigy. This effigy would be burnt as a conclusion