

Caribbean Verse: History of Literature As History in Literature

Arturo Cattaneo

- Paula Burnett (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, Penguin Books, 1986.
Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1981.

In the summer of 1990 the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* could not be found in Milan, which after all is no cultural or editorial backwater. This was by no means due to a lack of interest in Caribbean literature as such: apart from the whole, or most, of the Heinemann *Caribbean Writers Series*, Derek Walcott's *Selected Poetry* or Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Sun Poem* could be easily purchased on the same market. The impossibility of getting hold of the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* (or of any other anthology of Caribbean verse, for that matter) was perhaps only natural: as with all emerging literatures, it is in the order of things that first good writers make an impact on the reading public and then collections of their works be put together. A tradition, to be born and fully appraised, needs individual talents after all.

Just as I was beginning to fear that this essay would develop into a Borges-like review of an imaginary work of art, the book was finally brought over to me from England, and my expectations checked by reality. The reality of words on the page was not disappointing: the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* displays a wide and well-chosen selection of the poetry written in the Caribbean in the last two centuries, most of which is very difficult or impossible to find outside Britain or the West Indies. But the first thing that should endear this anthology to lovers and students of poetry is that it opens with a substantial section devoted to the oral tradition: it is, to my knowledge, the first collection of its kind to do so, and the implications of this choice are far-reaching, not only for an historical assessment of Caribbean poetry but also for a careful consideration of modern culture.

Exploring the Caribbean oral tradition is not just a plunge into the past, back to the times when the African slaves sang their songs while working in the fields and tunes and words were handed down from one generation to the next. Contemporary Caribbean poetry forces us into recognition of the fact that modern culture (in the widest sense of the world) is in good part oral and visual, however much we may be loth to admit it. Audio-visual technology has recently again made of the

spoken word an essential instrument in diffusing ideas and sending out messages of all kinds, the poetic function being not the least in this process. Caribbean writers have responded to the change with particular interest, with such important phenomena as dub-poetry (poetry which is read out or improvised, often on the radio, over a musical accompaniment), which in its turn is a modern offspring of the old newspaper poetry (poems of a satirical or humorous character that used to appear in columns in the local papers before the advent of the radio, and which like Victorian novels or *feuilletons* would be read aloud to a still illiterate audience gathered for that purpose). And the diction and speech rhythms of the oral tradition have been taken over by, or rather have been growing into, the poetry of many good modern poets, as for instance in Edward Kamau Brathwaite. The literary tradition itself did in fact receive a big boost from the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices* in the years 1945-1958, helping, in V.S. Naipaul's words, to «spread a new idea of the value of writing».

It is perhaps less surprising here than elsewhere that the spoken word should have come back on the written one with such force and pervasiveness, almost with a vengeance one might say: in the Caribbean islands the oral tradition was not lost in the mists of time but rather lay dormant after a not-too-distant past in which it had been the only means of expression for most of the population. (As the lover in an anonymous song says, «Gal if yuh love me an yuh no write it/How me fe know?/... Gal if yuh write it an me cyaan read it/How me fe know?/... Gal if yuh write it an me cyaan read it/How me fe know?/Talk it ah mout!/Talk it ah mout!/Talk it ah mout!»: *PBCV*, 1.) A significant body of oral poetry has survived, from work-songs and dancing songs (often with sexual undertones) to response songs sung by the negroes at work in the days before slavery was abolished, as in «Guinea Corn» (recorded 1797): «Guinea Corn, I long to see you/Guinea Corn, I long to plant you/Guinea Corn, I long to mould you/Guinea Corn, I long to weed you...» and so on through the various phases of the working of corn till the closing line «Guinea Corn, I long to eat you» (*PBCV*, 4). This is the call-and-response structure of choral singing which came from Africa and is still found in Caribbean folk-songs. Its pervasive influence also on the literary tradition is testified by poems such as Alfred Cruickshank's «The Convict Song», one of the earliest attempts in this century at using the devices of the response song in setting forth social evils and the sufferings of the outcasts: «Hard stones! Hard stones!/My manhood draining!/The light in me is waning/Hard stones!/To lead me from the path of sin,/You make a hell and shut me in,/Hard stones» (*PBCV*, 138).

The vitality and strength of the oral tradition in Caribbean poetry emerges from the numerous ballads in four-line stanzas, in the hymnodic devices and rhythms of the songs, in the iterative structures. Its musical quality is apparent in the refrains, in the ejaculations, in the «oh's» «hey-ho-day's» and «mm's» of many lines, and becomes obvious when the poems are read aloud. (Which is also, incidentally, the right key to an understanding of an otherwise often perplexing spelling.) The extempore quality of many pieces in the oral tradition is also evident, and is borne out by the remarks of the early historians: «The songs of the Negroes are commonly *impromptu*, and there are amongst them individuals, who resemble the *improvisatori*, or extempore bards of Italy»¹. The story of several of these «oral poets» does indeed read like a modern tropical version of the troubadours' or bards' lives: such is the

case of James Martinez (1860-1945, born in Belize), who followed his father round the logging camps of the mahogany forests and has left poems like «My Little Lize», a negro popular rendering of the traditional blazon of the lady's beauty («Her skin is black an smooode as silk;/Her teet' is jus' as white as milk;/Her hair is of dem fluffy kin',/Wis curls a-hangin, black an shine»: *PBCV*, 21), which ends in the assertion, common to both popular and Renaissance love poetry, that the girl's graces are more than can be told.

In a poet like Martinez we see an example of the blues-like quality of some early Caribbean poetry, visible also in his «Dis Time No Stan' Like Befo' Time»: «Sometime I sit an wonder long;/True, true./Dere's somet'ing sure is going wrong;/True, true./De time is sur'ly getting bad./It's nough to mek a feller mad-/I r'ally now am feeling sad;/True, true» (*PBCV*, 19). This is the kind of sadness which modulates itself into song, a need to cry and yet an unwillingness to be numbed by despair which constitute the very essence of the blues. (For an early 19th century definition, couched in pre-Romantic terms, one may turn to Robert Renny: «it is impossible to hear this music, and remain unaffected with the dismal melody produced by the Negro, who, sitting in the door of his cabin, enjoying the coolness, and delighting in the stillness of evening, accompanies it with a melancholy song, expressive of his feelings. The melody, simple as it is, touches the heart, and cannot fail to draw tears from the affectionate, the melancholy, or the contemplative»².)

This voice is so consonant with the Caribbean soul that it makes itself heard inside the modern literary tradition too, from Una Marston's blues poems, clearly reminiscent of those of the American poet Langston Hughes, to the full realization of its potentialities in Edward Kamau Brathwaite, whose «Starvation and Blues», written in the Jamaican vernacular, combines an English literary tradition wholly digested and made new (the opening line, «This is no white man lan'» is clearly modelled on, and subtly played against, Yeats's «Sailing to Byzantium»'s «That is no country for old men») with a blues section of great rhythmical facility and intensity of feelings: «this place is empty bottles/this place is a woman satisfied/this place is empty bottles/this place is a woman satisfied/she drink muh sugar water/till muh sunshine died/i woke up this morning/sunshine int showin underneath my door/i woke up this morning/sunshine int showin underneath my door/she gone an left me empty/and i should a died...» (*PBCV*, 259-60).

It is quite clear, from the evidence of Caribbean poetry and music, that the blues is a genre which is not just peculiar to North America but rather manifests itself whenever African black communities have been forcefully taken away from their homeland and transplanted elsewhere. We may perhaps allow for an exchange of experiences between the United States and the Caribbeans in the tradition of oral and popular poetry, and this not necessarily in a one-way direction from north to south. In the first decades of the 20th century many Caribbean writers headed north for the States, many of them, like Claude McKay, taking part in the Harlem Renaissance, and some even making an impact on American popular culture: Jamaica's black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey's «Keep Cool», for instance, was set to music and became a hit there in 1927. In it we find lines that are simple yet moving, as well as others that seem to anticipate the diction of both modern Jamaican reggae singers, such as Jimmy Cliff, and of the Nashville country western songs; or even, possibly via the latter, Bob Dylan's early middle-phase.

As the 20th century progresses Caribbean oral poetry (and the editor of the *PBCV* has rightly chosen to include under that heading only verse that was originally meant to be orally delivered, through whatever medium) takes on what is its truest and most characteristic trait, the one that, for me, represents its main strength: a seriousness of concern for the painful side of life which does not detract from its liveliness and musical charm. Poems like Bruce St. John's «Bajan Litany» apply the antiphonal structure of a traditional litany to a sharp criticism of the social and political situation of the Caribbeans, with asides setting the pace of the poem, as in:

«Jamaica got bauxite?	(Silence)
(Louder) Jamaica got bauxite?	Yes, Lord
Choke 'e collar, hang 'e tie, trip 'e up trousers, t'row 'e down boots	O Lord
Trinidad got army?	(Silence)
(Louder) Trinidad got army?	O Lord
We got too	Yes, Lord
Stop friggin' spiders fuh twice de increase	O Lord»

(*PBCV*, 39).

In poems like this a bitter vein of irony makes itself felt so strongly that the political thrusts do not clog up the rhythm nor dull the images. St. John's «Wisdom» is a case in point: «You t'ink we foolish?/We gine ban South Africa an invite the U.S.A./We gine kill apartheid an lick up black power;/Ashe cyaan play nor Sobers needuh./You t'ink we foolish?» (*PBCV*, 40).

The caustic spirit of the Caribbean oral tradition (which ultimately derives from African slave songs and has eventually come to influence more consciously literary works too) has its closest antecedents in the Carnival and Calypso songs, the two being closely related. The latter developed when freed slaves began to celebrate Carnival with street dancing and processions in which songs of comment and abuse were prominent. The exotic names and flamboyant personalities of many Calypsonians (lead singers) still ring high in the Caribbean, especially Trinidadian, lore, from Lord Kitchener, who sang about a Miss Tourist who asks the local boy «I heard about bacchanal/And the Trinidad carnival./So I come to jump in the fun/And I want you to tell me how it is done» (*PBCV*, 41), to the more biting poem-songs of the Mighty Sparrow or the Mighty Chalkdust. The former's «The Yankees Back», for instance, sings of the Americans' settling in the Caribbeans after the Second World War as a mixed, if a not dubious, blessing, in stanzas bursting with energy and full of pointedness: «Since the Yankees come back over here/They buy out the whole of Pointe-a-Pierre./Money start to pass, people start to bawl,/Pointe-a-Pierre sell, the workmen and all./Fifty cents a head for Grenadians./A dollar a head for Trinidadians;/Tobagonians free, whether big or small;/But they say, they ain't want Barbadians at all» (*PBCV*, 43). The Mighty Chalkdust's «Brain Drain» wryly comments on the Trinidadians' dependence on the U.S.A. and the Western world, in lines where the voice of protest boldly asserts itself: «And when foreign artistes come/They does get lump sum,/While calypsonians must sing for rum;/And when steelbandmen teach outsiders/To tune a pan for kisses and favours-/All that is what I call Brain Drain» (*PBCV*, 46).

Since the late fifties many of the Calypsonians' best songs have been recorded and widely circulated, both within the islands and outside, thus providing a link with the new trends of Caribbean folk music, reggae first of all. As Paula Burnett writes in her excellent Introduction to the *PBCV*, «where most popular music was content to be entertainment, Caribbean popular music developed a significant political content, sometimes a simple protest against poverty... and sometimes a complex satire» (*PBCV*, xl-xli). The old vocal-music tradition revives today in the songs of reggae musicians, some of them world famous like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh. The latter's «African» is a wonder of energy. To appreciate it fully one should of course listen to its recorded version, where the refrain stanza («Don't care where you come from/As long as you're a black man, you're an African/No min' your nationality/You have the identity of an African»: *PBCV*, 62) is followed by a series of powerfully rhythmical assertions of personal and racial identity: «Cos if you come from Clarendon, you are an African/And if you come from Portland, you are an African/And if you come from Westmoreland, you are an African...» (etc., to include Trinidad, Nassau, Cuba, Brixton, Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, Miami, Taiwan, the Catholic and Methodist Churches, and so on.) The modern folk singer knows he has to entertain his audiences before he can get their attention, and that comes more readily with the help of the music; then the serious side of the song is more easily driven home, the words become important as more than simple staves to the tune, and the above quoted lines reverberate in the ears and mind of the listener/reader with the strength of Biblical *hyperbatons*.

But the closest and most fertile interaction of the spoken word with music in modern Caribbean poetry is perhaps represented by what has come to be called «dub poetry». The term comes from the Jamaican disk-jockeys' habit of talking and improvising words over the instrumental version of a song, the vocal track having been removed or dubbed out. The next step was taken by writers who were interested in the power of both music and technology as a help not just to the diffusion of their work but also as a means of artistic expression. Apparently about 1970 several young Jamaican artists began consciously and consistently to use oral delivery as their favourite medium to reach ever growing audiences, in live performances or in dubbing sessions of their poems over a musical accompaniment. One of the great merits of the *PBCV* is to have accorded ample room to these young, vital poets, who seem to me to be among the truest and most original experimentalists of our age.

The poetry of Delano Abdul Malik de Coteau, born in Grenada but active in Trinidad, offers us some of the best specimens of this newly-founded genre. His «Motto Vision 1971» is craftily poised between dialect, music and modern poetic techniques, rapping out its meaning in short lines, with occasional spellings in capital letters: «I born/from/a force/ripe/small/Island/and ah bitter/naw/like a paw-paw/seed/SPIT ME OUT/buh Grenada soil/plant dey/on mih mind too/an miles ah sea/rough un time/in me...» (*PBCV*, 50). The whole poem displays great power, abounds in rhythmical inventions, and strikes the reader for the hard clarity of its words, lifting up the voice of protest to a level where political slogans fade into the lyrical solution of the poem: «THE WEST INDIES/WILL BE WEST INDIAN/NOW/Fuh dis MOTTO VISION/speed boat/load up wid/-ALL POWER TO THE/PEOPLE-/an it ruffling up/ideas,/Hope dazzling/mih eyes/like a new day/by de sea/an hearing waves/an echoes/of West Indian/Voices/returning» (*PBCV*, 55).

A couple of points should be made here. In the first place, in the best examples of Caribbean poems in the modern oral tradition dissatisfaction with the social and political situation, though spelled out loud and clear, does not turn into propaganda and does not obstruct the course of poetry, being of a kind, in inspiration if not in poetical accomplishment, with Brathwaite's or Edward Lucie-Smith's more literary works. Secondly, most contemporary poets in the oral tradition have deliberately chosen to use the spoken word (which very often, but not always, entails the choice of the vernacular too) instead of the written one. They are, that is, poets in their own right, often with a formal education, at times teachers themselves. In the Caribbeans the wheel has thus come full circle from the days of the slave songs, when oral composition and delivery was a necessity, whereas today it is a matter of personal decision for the poet whether to stay or not in this most vital of traditions.

So much so that it has been difficult, in the past twenty years, to draw a clear line between the oral and the literary traditions; or, in the words of a poet usually referred to as belonging to the latter, «there's no such thing as 'only literature'». In the West Indies the two traditions are now richly interwoven, their common link being the language spoken by the people, the dialect, or vernacular as some prefer to call it, and it is sometimes hard to tell who belongs where. I cannot help thinking that Bongo Jerry (Robin Small, born in Jamaica in 1948) is a consummate modernist poet who makes use of a language which is tense, tightly-packed with meaning, hermetic, at times obscure, positioning words and letters on the page (his poems eventually do get printed, as is the case for most «oral poets») in unusual patterns and mass dispositions which recall experimental, vortical, and futurist art techniques. Let us consider his «Mabrak»:

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

HOW ELSE?... MAN must use MEN language to carry dis
message:

SILENCE BABEL TONGUES; recall and
recollect BLACK SPEECH.

Cramp all double meaning
an'all that hiding behind language bar,

for that crossword speaking
when expressing feeling

is just English language contribution to increase confusion in
Babel-land tower –
delusion, name changing, word rearranging
ringing rings of roses, pocket full of poses

(PBCV, 70).

Here the use of the rhymes, both internal and at the end of the lines, is meant to reinforce meaning, often giving it an ironic twist after the lesson of the early T.S. Eliot. Only the Babel allusions and the Rastafarian ethos, perhaps, mark this poem off as distinctly «oral». (Though both traits are to be found in poems of the literary tradition too.)

If I have spent so much time on the oral tradition in the English-speaking Caribbean poetry, it is because I believe that there lies its greatest strength, and that its peculiar clearly modulated voices spring from a very stimulating tension between a standard language (BBC English, to give it a name) and the language of the ordinary people, the latter being close to the former yet different in its immediacy and ever changing vitality. The question of an oral language, popular in the wider sense of the term, as opposed to a literary, or official, language is by no means an exclusive problem of the English-speaking Caribbeans. French Haitians have invented the word *oraliture* to indicate this particular type of *littérature*, thus stating their intention not to leave the field of oral creation or composition. In the French-speaking Caribbeans the lack of respect, subjection indeed, in which the *créole*, or patois, is held constitutes for many the most dramatic cultural and therefore literary problem to be solved. The Haitian poet, novelist and essayist Edouard Glissant laments in his *Le discours antillais* the existing gap between creole and French, which results in the younger people growing up with divided minds and linguistic responses: at school they are made to learn French (the exact useful language) while at home and during recreation they hear and speak creole (which is therefore associated to leisure, play, *insouciance*, and so on). Glissant observes:

La source principale de notre préjugé est que nous voyons bien en effet qu'en Martinique aujourd'hui la langue créole est une langue dans laquelle nous ne produisons plus rien. Et une langue dans laquelle un peuple ne produit plus est une langue qui agonise. Le créole s'appauvrit parce que des termes de métier disparaissent, parce que des essences végétales disparaissent, parce que des espèces animales disparaissent, parce que toutes les séries de locutions qui étaient liées à des formes de responsabilité collective dans le pays disparaissent avec ces responsabilités. L'étude sociolinguistique des termes tombés en désuétude et qui ne sont remplacés par rien montre qu'ils le sont parce que les Martiniquais en tant que tels ne font plus rien dans leur pays. Le patoisement qui en provient retentit sur le continu syntaxique de la langue: elle s'appauvrit. Ainsi passe-t-on peu à peu des blocages dans la formation de l'enfant à la disparition de la Martinique en tant que collectivité -ne trouvant en place qu'une collection d'individus sans liens, ni avec leur terre, ni avec leur histoire, ni avec eux-mêmes (DA, 345).

What Glissant proposes is not a creolisation of French but rather an exploration of the possibilities of a conscious use of the standard language by Martiniquans (what he calls «la pratique créatrice»), in order to overcome that dissociation which Aimé Césaire has clearly identified within himself: «Ensuite, chez moi, tout discours est affaire de réflexion, c'est une oeuvre conceptuelle, alors, il faut que je le fasse en français. Voyez-vous, le créole, c'est la langue de l'immédiateté, la langue du folklore, des sentiments, de l'intensité» (quoted in DA, 346). In the face of this state of things a writer like Glissant, who has long meditated upon the linguistic problem of the French Caribbeans (and not with regard to literature alone), warns against the illusion of giving French a coating of patois, or of reserving the latter for folkloristic uses. The real crux lies elsewhere:

Le langage de la nation est le langage dans lequel la nation *produit*... Le particulier dans les Antilles francophones est que la langue officielle est une langue *de consommation*. La situation qui en résulte est que le locuteur est déporté entre et par ces deux impossibles: le caractère 'en suspension' d'une langue qui ne sert pas à produire ni à créer quoi que ce soit (le créole), le caractère 'irresponsabilisé' d'une langue qui ne sert qu'à consommer (le français) (DA, 357).

In the English-speaking Caribbean islands the situation is apparently different. In the past twenty or thirty years the standard language and the vernacular seem to have come to terms with each other, at least as far as literature goes. Could it be that the pervasive and fruitful influence (but the proper word is *presence*) of the oral tradition in contemporary English Caribbean poetry is partly, or largely, due to the fact that the popular language there somehow belongs in the mainstream of the English language and thus, to take up Glissant's argument, to the most formidable factor of economic and financial cohesion within the Western world? If we must trust the poets of the post World War II period the answer to the question is not ambiguous but certainly complex. That there is awareness among Caribbean poets of an ambivalence within English as the language of expression (in whatever form, dialect included) and as the language of colonisation, or of economic oppression at large, is obvious. The relation is clearly stated in some famous lines of Derek Walcott, which betray a lucid yet dramatic historic consciousness: «how choose/Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?/Betray them both, or give back what they give?/How can I face such slaughter and be cool?/How can I turn from Africa and live?» («A Far Cry from Africa», *PBCV*, 243). And poems of protest in the literary tradition, even when they do not seem to object to the linguistic medium they are using, often reveal a conscience of not belonging to, at times a desire not to be confused with, the world of white native speakers. In Claire Harris's «Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case», for instance, this conscience flashes out suddenly in an incidental but highly revealing clause: «This is a poem black in its most secret self» (*PBCV*, 280).

This double conscience is a truth now explicitly or implicitly acknowledged by all Caribbean artists writing in verse or prose. It became historically relevant in the first half of our century, when using the dialect or not still meant to see or represent the world through Caribbean or European eyes respectively. The vernacular was precisely what helped Louise Bennett reach her identity as a poet and write of herself and her mother country, Jamaica, in a language and a poetic vision that left behind at a stride two hundred years of colonial writing, with its representations of the Caribbeans as an exotic Arcadia peopled by coloured swains and nymphs. One has only to look at the first stanza of her poem «Back to Africa» to realize the difference: «Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?/You no know wha you dah seh?/You haf fe come from somewhe fus/Before you go back deh!» (*PBCV*, 31). Caribbean poetry came in fact to maturity from the fifties onward, when for the first time in history it was possible for West Indian writers to choose between standard English and the vernacular, and to switch from the one to the other without necessarily having to cut themselves off from a portion of the reading public in the case of either choice.

The most significant contemporary poet in this process of creation of a Caribbean poetical tradition based on a language that is both received (indeed imposed) and created, and which is also, to borrow Glissant's terminology, a «producer's lan-

guage» (however indirectly), has so far probably been Edward Kamau Brathwaite. He «responded to the apparent void in the region by exploring the creolising process itself and seeing in the adjustments and adaptations to slavery and colonisation, creative possibilities that could provide a context of history and a source for a tradition of poetry. His trilogy: *Rights of Passage, Masks and Islands* recreated and appraised the New World experience, revealing its manifestations in the variety of Caribbean musical structures and in the very language of the creolised folk with its distinctive core of perception and sensibility»³. This resulted in the establishment of a new tradition which was both oral and written, one to which the writers of the seventies and eighties could refer with the sense and confidence of resting on indigenous familiar soil. Brathwaite's «Harbour» is indicative in this respect. It depicts none of the bustle and lively talk going on in Caribbean ports so common to earlier idealized views of the islands. Here the harbour becomes one of the many stages on which life's drama is being played, as it is clear from the beginning: «But love curdles to milk in this climate/love of companion to distrust/love of good woman to lust/love of the good soil/to rust» (*PBCV*, 261). And the conclusion is a heightened vision of forests, waters and beaches that amounts to a vision of the Caribbean nature as the place itself hardly knows, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot on metropolitan life: «forest, canefields, move over the waters/seeds of the dead fruit: cashew, grape, guinep,/with their blind tendrils of freedom;/a long way the one eyed stare of the coconut will travel/steered by its roots, what its flag and its cross-/sword, its mailed head and chained feet/walks over the arawaks beaches» (*PBCV*, 263).

A linguistic awareness of the self is not only an affirmation of the individual conscience, but a recognition of its place in space and time. Both are closely interwoven in the Caribbean mind. As Edouard Glissant says: «Notre paysage est son propre monument: la trace qu'il signifie est repérable par-dessous. C'est tout histoire» (DA, 21). And the Jamaican poet Dennis Scott in his «Homecoming», after being startlingly taken from his reveries of distant countries («The wind is making countries/in the air, clouds dim,/golden as Eldorado voyages») by the «hot and coffee streets» that reclaim his love, concludes: «It is time to plant/feet in our earth. The heart's metronome/insists on this arc of islands/as home» (*PBCV*, 300).

Lines like the ones just quoted seem to me of the greatest significance (apart from their poetic value, which is real) in that they clearly express a conscience of history as transversality, spatial rather than temporal. The poet has revealed that notion, peculiarly Caribbean, that Edouard Glissant has defined as *transversalité*, according to which the diversified histories of the several Caribbean countries have produced a «convergence souterraine». Or rather, as Edward Kamau Brathwaite once wrote in the *Savacou* magazine speaking of the region's history, «the unity is submarine». On this definition Glissant comments:

Je ne traduits... cette proposition qu'en évoquant tant d'Africains lestés de boulets et jetés par-dessus bord chaque fois qu'un navire négrier se trouvait poursuivi par des ennemis et s'estimait trop faible pour soutenir le combat. *Ils semèrent dans les fonds les boulets de l'invisible*. C'est ainsi que nous avons appris, non la transcendance ni l'universel sublimé, mais la transversalité. Il nous a fallu bien du temps pour le savoir. Nous sommes les racines de la Relation (DA, 134).

The notion of transversality, of history felt in space, however variously expressed is, I think, central to West Indian poetry written in English. One finds it, for instance, in Jan Carew's celebration of the mass suicide (rather than be taken and enslaved by the Europeans) of the Carib warriors who jumped off the cliffs at Manzanilla, eastern Trinidad: «To be or not to be a slave/left you no choice save suicide/My Carib ancestors I swear/I'll not forget/the green years of your saga/in an ocean sea/that bears your name/eternally» (*PBCV*, 212). And a similar episode of the history of the European conquest of the Caribbeans (which took place at the Morne des Sauteurs in Grenada) is sung by Derek Walcott in *Another Life*.

We must be careful, though, not to read into Carew's or Walcott's poems on the heroic death of their Carib ancestors an interest which is merely patriotic or historical in the traditional sense of the terms, though both aspects are obviously present in their works. As they are, even more obviously, in a politically oriented writer like the Montserratian Howard Fergus (born 1937), whose vivid and brilliant «Ethnocide» recounts how «The willing Arawak/Kissed by the lily lips of Spain/Demonstrated his belief/In Christianity/And self-extermination» (*PBCV*, 276), while «the hostile Carib/Dodged the holy hand of Spain/Affirming his belief/In ethnocide/And self-determination/Caonabo fed/His godly guests/The poisoned juice of cassareep/In a calabash of gold/The gods of Anaconda drank/Their blood and thundered/Righteous laughter». Is Fergus's poem what may be called a lesson in history? Rather, all these poems testify to a new vision of history. At least since Martin Carter's *Poems of Resistance* (1954),

for the creative writer... the apprehension of history was particularly problematic since the past as manifested in the present seemed both negative and uncreative. West Indian history conceived in terms of progress and development seemed short, uncreative, fragmentary and dependent on values implicit in the language and culture of a colonising power⁴.

It is the very concept of history that is being questioned here. If Hegel set the African peoples in the «unhistorical», the Amerindians in the «pre-historical», reserving History (with a capital H) for the Europeans, this hierarchic and linear notion of history is refused, almost instinctively, by the Caribbean conscience: «L'Histoire est un fantôme fortement opératoire de l'Occident, contemporain précisément du temps où il était seul à 'faire' l'histoire du monde» (*DA*, 132). When Jamaica Kinkaid vents out her indignation at having «met the world through England»⁵ what she means is that she refuses to be made part of a history and be forced into logical and analytical categories alien to her indigenous Caribbean culture.

The effort to escape ready-made chronological and linguistic classifications has for the Caribbean poet a cogent and dramatic significance, as it involves a definition of the self at the same time. This three-dimensional search for the self in space and history is well documented in the Caribbean verse in English of the past 40 years, at least, and not just in the best known works of poets such as Derek Walcott or Edward Kamau Brathwaite. The *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse's* excellent selection offers ample scope to examine this point in some detail. It is already possible to detect a change of attitude of the writer versus history when we confront two poets who are almost exact contemporaries and who both come from Jamaica: Louis Simpson (born 1923) and Evan Jones (born 1927). The former is the

better poet (world-known and winner, among other awards, of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry), with a highly developed gift for language, a firm control of metrical forms, and a sure grip on the tradition of English poetry (lines like «I gazed away, to the Palisades.../behind them a sleeve of smoke/unravelling... a ship at sea» in «A Fine Day for Straw hats», in *PBCV*, 203, for instance, make use of a Wordsworthian, and ultimately Virgilian, image with absolute originality). Simpson's poem «Jamaica» is possibly one of the best in West Indian English poetry, and is thoroughly history-minded; yet most of his Caribbean fellow writers have preferred not to follow his way of dealing with history. (Though many have also been indebted to him in various ways). It is easy, in my opinion, to see why. A stanza like «This island seemed emerald in the steel furnace flame/To the pirate... Port Royal... his ship shed clothes as she came/To lie in the bay's blue arms, lazy, lean,/And gold glowed through the hull with a death sheen» (*PBCV*, 198), is, however beautiful, too Poundian, representing the Jamaican counterpart of «a poem including history». Now, to resound a notion of history which is still *linguistically* put in European or North American terms is precisely what the most inventive Caribbean writers have refused to do. (Whether or not it has been or will be possible for them to detach themselves completely from the mental and sensorial categories of the language they use is another matter.)

To resume the point, it thus happens that between Simpson and Jones it is the latter who announces the modern Caribbean poet's true (in the sense of most typical) voice: one which is distinctly non-Western but at the same time uses a literary language that is unmistakably English. His «Genesis», behind the apparently colloquial tone and the ironic innuendoes, is a deeply-thought deeply-felt poem about a young god who, after completing his work of Creation, «wasn't sure/Not quite sure, even when he had finished,/Especially then,/That he had solved such questions as/The relation of stability to change...» (*PBCV*, 220). The last line poses, in the end, a problem which is central to much poetry concerned with history and its ethics, from Spenser's *Four Hymns* to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Jones's poem is, of course, a far cry from the two just mentioned, but the questioning impulse behind it is fundamentally the same while reflecting at the same time a Caribbean turn of mind.

The ways in which the problem of coming to terms with history is put forward by contemporary Caribbean poets are various and interesting. In Daniel William's «We Are the Cenotaphs» the linear conception of history is rejected, but the past is still felt as a heavy heritage of which it is not easy to know how to dispose: «We are all time;/Yet only the future is ours/To desecrate./The present is the past,/And the past/Our fathers' mischief» (*PBCV*, 234). The ethical and religious implications of existence, especially of past existence as bearing an awful impact on the present, often necessarily pass through a lesson of the Bible, as in Kevyn Arthur's «Gospel», where a series of ironically tense reflections on the history of the islands are brought in the end to focus on «that fantastic minute when Vermejo shouted 'Land!» (*PBCV*, 313), that is on the moment America was discovered. Or, family history and the history of the race may be felt as one and the same, as in Olive Senior's «Ancestral Poem», with its beautiful ending: «Now against the rhythms/of subway trains my/heartbeats still drum/worksongs. Some wheels/sing freedom, the others:/home./Still, if I could balance/water on my head I can/juggle worlds/on my

shoulders» (PBCV, 321). Finally, historical events, language, literature, customs may be decomposed from history and brilliantly questioned in their collective meaning, as in Marlene Philip's «Oliver Twist», which starts out as a nursery rhyme or a jocular song, proceeds rhythmically swinging off bits of history of English colonisation in the West Indies, and concludes on a stream-of-consciousness-like deadly serious note: «jus' like all dem school girls/roun' de empire/learning about odes to nightengales/forget hummingbirds,/a king that forgot/Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth/and burnt his cakes,/about princes shut in towers/not smelly holds of stinking ships/and pied piper to our blackest dreams/a bastard mother, from her weaned/on silent names of strager lands» (PBCV, 334).

These poems are culturally relevant, it must be noted, in the first place because the poetry is good. They do not rave about revolution nor whimper about in-volution, do not speak the politician's cant or the highbrow's jargon. Even when the cry of protest is couched in a language that derives from the speaking voice of the Caribbean peasant or urban poor and takes on a political meaning, the result is poetry. When the Trinidadian poet and film-maker Roger McTair says «Dem who was to solve de problem/become de problem now,/Dem who was to re-make history/Fighting history -an' how!» (PBCV, 318) the rhythm and speech are recognizably those of poetry. The cry of protest has articulated itself into words that may be accepted or rejected, but not ignored, by a whole culture. As Edouard Glissant puts it in his poetic prose: «Quitter le cri, forger la parole. Ce n'est pas renoncer à l'imaginaire ni aux puissances souterraines, c'est armer une durée *nouvelle*, ancrée aux émergences des peuples» (DA, 19).

On the other hand, it can hardly be denied that West Indian English poetry is good and vital precisely *because*, like all great poetry in the past, it includes ethics and politics, and its authors are agreed that «poetry matters, and has a crucial role to play in making an unjust world more just» (PBCV, 1xiv). Many of the poems in the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse* have only historical interest, at most, for being exotic counterparts of Augustan or Romantic or late Victorian sensibilities, just as some of the modern Caribbean poetry included in the anthology is fragmentary and narrowly personal. But the best of it has in abundance that gift which in Western art has become so rare: the willingness, in fact the urge, to take a moral stand and commit oneself to judgements, without for this lapsing into particularism or being sectarian or becoming dogmatic. In a word, without ceasing to be a poet.

Arturo Cattaneo

*teaches at the Università Cattolica of Milan
and is a specialist in Renaissance Literature.*

NOTES

- ¹ Robert Renny, *A History of Jamaica*, London, 1807, p. 168.
- ² Renny, *A History of Jamaica*, p. 168.
- ³ David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black English Literature*, Kingston-Upon-Thames, Dunganoo Press, 1987, p. 20.
- ⁴ Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, *A Reader's Guide*, p. 16.
- ⁵ *A Small Place*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1988, p. 33.