

1998

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Recommended Citation

Hogan, Patrick Colm, CARIBBEAN DEDALUS, *Kunapipi*, 20(2), 1998.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss2/5>

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Abstract

In the end, most went down to the ships. Some we name. Others drowned in the straits, or were abandoned at the early ports of call, pronounced anathema for an unhealing wound; some sought oblivion themselves, forgot after long pain, the final dream that would have made mere Purgatory of Inferno. First, there was the petrifying gaze and the crowd of faces pale as woodlice.

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Some we name. Others drowned in the straits,
or were abandoned at the early ports of call,
pronounced anathema for an unhealing wound;
some sought oblivion themselves, forgot
after long pain, the final dream
that would have made mere Purgatory of Inferno.
First, there was the petrifying gaze
and the crowd of faces pale as woodlice.
Then there was the cold, the longing for sun.
The promise, each year, of the voyage back,
of pounds set by from pay, or windfall –
imaginary as home or providence, it never came.
Life and craft stilled as the Sargasso Sea.
Even those who opened mouths to say or sing,
lacked, before all else, right words
for their imaginings, marooned already at the first port.
Uttering, they loathed the sounds that tumbled from their lips,
hated the language of their mother and their brothers, hated
equally the language of Kensington or Trench Town,
of Cambridge or of Monkey Hill – one too English,
the other not English enough, but stuff
of travesty, all broken vocables, ludicrous
transliteration for the comic pages: mockery
of legends below a simian caricature in *Punch*.
Home, God Ale, Man, Master,
how differently the words sound, here
and there, in London or in the windward village:

At dawn, scattered seawrack and peeling hulls,
churn of waves, struggle with the tightening net;
at night, beachfires, drink, the searing of scales –
things and acts no less sublime
than characterless towns of ragged Ithaka
that Homer sung. But years of Hellenism,
made alien Homer's voice and provenance.

The sounds jarred; the meanings would not hold.
The most admired models, the exemplary
forebears fused into the grotesque single form
of Iago with a pen and 500 a year.
Where griots sang like Homer, now lines
of blood dried to indecipherable alphabets.
Like Dhaka artisans, whose hands were severed at the thumb
by British blades, so that they would no longer weave
muslin thin as air – so too
it was as if the vocal chords of Antillean
bards were severed, centuries before;
the long sword cracking open the jaws,
plunging down into the lungs, and deep into the heart.

How, then, to shape the air of speech,
to recollect one's part in a continuing song.
Once, the heart of all was numinous Ife,
allmother and allfather, origin
of humankind, where dark, revered Oduduwa
touched earth and brought us forth.
There land and sky were reconciled,
celebrated generation, foreswore scarcity.
There the ancestors, with arms and words,
marked out the living place, named
the clans, contoured bronzes sensuous as Arp,
animate as Phidias. There, in unscripted epics
of home and voyage and now-nameless gods,
the muse of memory spoke customs of place
into the fragile permanence of passing words.
But a ghostly tribe appeared, white as leprosy,
deadly as Sonponna. They heard the song, bound
the singer at the pivot of the land and tore her tongue
out at the root. Like Philomel. The rest seemed
silence only – obliquity of gesture, mute
tracing of lips; the brute cry too
stifled at the throat in thick swells of blood.

In time, all could set out to write
against the colonial strain, 'write back',
crack the smooth surface of celebratory verse,
skew the regulated lines of rhyme and number.
But, equally, all needed to 'write through',
to organize the present life by gathering the past,
as one gathers flowers in a vase upon a table,
to make the *one* horizon of immediacy and of tradition

as the eye draws the wide expanse of sea
back to a single shore, or the mind centres
about the Oba's hut: deities, ancestors, great
rooted blossomers and the circulating life of beasts.
From need, these displaced makers sought to forge
once more the severed links, think
back through fathers and through mothers
to the pristine state, and from the numinous soil
of the early place unearthen, still whole,
the mould of forms, to shape new figures
out of foreign clay. But, for some,
the cast was shivered and the shards could not
be reconciled to the bells of vases or of funerary urns,
or organized for common use by epoch or by region.
Too many names were swallowed by the sea;
too many practices of daily work
and mastery of art were shackled to the hold.
And who would pay their final passage
back to re-incarnate sacred words,
almost remembered skills of stress and sound?

So some sought models in another island,
blasted too for centuries by canons of dominion:
dark Ireland, and its people, the 'black Irish',
black at Howth, black at Phoenix Park –
blacker still in steady progress to the West,
the 'index of negresence' rising through the bogs
toward Aran, toward apeneck Sweeney,
toward the 'White Hottentots' of Munster.
An Indian civil servant outside the Pale
observed the natives in their natural state.
I fancy him glimpsing, through a carriage window,
my father's father's father, blind, illiterate,
Gaeilgeoir agus Brigid, bean an tí,
seated before the two-room cottage in Culleen,
rented from the Big House on a footsoldier's pension
(my only link, the ledger of colonial census,
County Clare, 1901).
Emerging from the tír, this nation's guest confided
loathing in a sasanach's ear: *I cannot bear
to treat these Irish like white men.*

Both Celt and Caribbean lost language,
lost the rhythm and engagement of a practiced culture,
lost a sense of home and being at home.

For one brace of heritage, they substituted
 self-doubt, nagging as an abusive parent;
 exile, with its dull ache always at the root;
 and a pang of shame at the sound of their own voice.

My father seeking to erase from all his speech
 the trace of Ennis; seated with the grammar book
 and with the dictionary of pronunciation;
 he mouthed out the 'correct' way of saying,
 word by word – Christ, home, master.

He foreswore sounds he could not
 wrap his lips around in the American manner,
 would not speak words which still
 maintained the lilt and cadence of the Gaelic tongue.

An oddity to say: I've never heard
 my father speak such a common word as 'cook'.

Words, then, first: their shape and order.

In part by Synge – though Langston Hughes
 and others too – they were released to celebrate the rude,
 low, rustic talk of western isles,
 like Mallarmé, *purifier le dialecte de la tribu* –
 the bastard speech born of penal grammar
 and the attenuated recollection of lost words
 (a continuing habit of sound, a passing down
 of parts and of occluded patterns long after
 the whole has disappeared or the original fallen into desuetude);
 so now they could transcribe from the common tongue,
 not parodic babel and brute cries,
 but the voice of lost Mnemosynes, its inflections and its human
 pitch: poem against the sentences of empire.

Themes came too, by the same route;
 topics, and strategies. In Trinidad, the brothers
 Walcott made again the Abbey theatre
 with early plays of struggle against the sea –
 fishermen already Greek, already
 raised to tragical intensity, terrible beauty.

Then, after Synge and Yeats, came Joyce:
 'our age's Omeros', Walcott christens him:
 'undimmed Master'. How differently
 the word sounds here and there – master;
 an apostrophic echo of Dante to Virgil:
 '*Lo mio maestro e lo mio autore*':
 And, Virgil-like, 'Joyce/led us all'.

The first task is seeing epos in routine:
 A fisherman works the fraying cross of knots,
 unfolds and tests the net's tensile hold,
 another aligns his craft's prow and heaves
 out against the white breast of the dim sea;
 these two remake Hector and Achilles –
 not less *spoudaios* than their eponyms,
 not less large in spirit and in character,
 not less noble in action or in speech.
 (And yet not Joyce – not this negative of the ironic,
 this recursion to eulogy, and agon, and the scene of suffering.)
 They struggle for as great a prize as that contested
 by solitary Menelaus and doe-eyed Paris,
 or by gentle Bloom and all-conquering Boylan:
 they combat for the hand of dark-hued Helen.

Character too, and circumstance, he saw
 through Joyce's eyes, moreso than Homer's:
 Plunkett translates Deasy – colonizer and native,
 Protestant, widower, pedant, amateur, mock
 epic *miles gloriosus* of the master race.
 But here too parody's soothed with pathos,
 as in the memory drawn from Molly on Howth Head,
 a cliff, unconsummated farewell before the war –
 both scene and style mime 'Penelope'.

And, lastly, structure. Not Homer only,
 but the oneiric catastrophe at the farthest point:
 Achille ascends into a Paradiso of Mother Africa.
 But the dream recedes in unpurged images
 (like a wasted body in loose brown graveclothes).
 The sun sears his sleeping brain, sacred
 horror at his father's father's father manacled,
 with daimon-haunted men and girls, fishers,
 weavers, casters of bronze, and bards, transmuted
 into shackled beasts by a blue-eyed Circe.
 A nightmare from which he is trying to awaken: History.

Others saw in Stephen their own poetic
 selves, a mirrored model for the painter, painting.
 For Lamming, in part, a model too removed
 from grit of labour, from bosses and from demagogues –
 but, still, biographies told in mouldering clothes,
 with families' ragged stuffs heaped on a cart.
 For him, the seantithe razed, the carts

trascined up rutted paths, jostling
 loads of private history above the shore
 and waiting ships. Then English faces
 grinning at the open windows of rude cars,
 high, wild voices and strange noise.
 All things that bruised a young boy
 into poetry. *In the Castle of My Skin*: Lamming
 tells again the slow estrangement from mother
 and from motherland, the rough recoil of the mind, the spasm
 in the heart, the refusal to accept and serve all
 that had a part in making this condition, however named.
 His choice too, the voyage out.
 But, before, the dialectic of unequal mates,
 the matching up of Socrates with Glaucon,
 intervenes with its rememoration and its moral theme.
 Trumper calls him from the past, like Cranly or like Davin.
 But Trumper is Socrates in this exchange, and teaches
 that to know oneself is to feel affinity of skin
 in the group act, to see 'marvel of blackness' –
 the ending of *A Portrait*, pivoted upon a word,
 'race' fixed, all else moved
 in orbit around this one centre until
 the political design aligns with sense of art;
 all now is negritude and being one
 in race with Africa, with all the islands, with America –
 that only is his means for forging conscience, and for song.

Kincaid too. Sick, and pained to art,
 in *Annie John*: the utter hardening of her heart
 against her mother and against the intimate past,
 the construction and the final shape of her events
 formed and measured to the models of Lamming and of Joyce.
 But here again a divagation from the source:
 not refusal of obedience for the sake of art –
 or not that only. Not a sudden break
 or slow drift from the vocation of religious life,
 not tense uncertainty which strangulates devotion.
 And not mass struggle with landlord and with factory.
 Instead a girlwomar's outgrowing of the common ways,
 experience speaking, in daily acts, a dialect
 unknown to mother or to mother's mother, dialect
 they decry, to make what was unsaid by them remain
 unsaid – while she is moved to touch and salty,
 soft taste with another of her form and place.
 What all desired for her, she did not;

instead a Red Girl's cruel pinch,
then tears and warm, gluey girlr lips
caressing the offended spot. Or Gweneth Joseph
for whom she would abandon every aspect and relation,
excepting this one ecstasy of injury and balm.
His arm, Cranly's arm. Wilde's
love that dare not speak its name.
In Joyce, hints only – twist of recognition,
model of her life at once forming and re-formed.

She too, in the end, went down to the ships,
to eat salt bread in a foreign land.
Before descent, she sought out Gwen –
entangled in the net of family: engaged to wed;
estrangement more total than Stephen from Cranly.
Annie feels the vertigo of dissolution at the base,
the plummeting of Icarus or Satan into a wasteful deep.
A different ending still, not Joyce nor Lamming,
uncertain both of high art and of revolution,
her face a grimace forced against expected sentiment;
then the cradle of a sea-cabin, or the bier,
and she, a fallen vessel, 'slowly emptying out'.

For each, perhaps, the sense is typical, all
sharing in the common lot: the vacancy of hope,
the loss of home and home's imagination,
even the concrete act of boarding ships.
But not the speaking of that commonality,
the public voice to say the isolated place,
to bound with words the small space of hurt
in which each lives, forgetful of the rest,
and map it onto shared geography.
To fashion shapes of speech into memorial is rare,
and rarer still the social testament
that re-forms, and thus assuages, pain to beauty.
For most, there is no voice,
and no defining name. The memory remains
severed from the speaking part. Like Philomel.