1988

Book Review, NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol10/iss3/16

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Book Review


This second volume of poetry follows the important collection of David Dabydeen in 1984 entitled *Slave Song* which won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize the same year. This second collection represents an interesting shift of focus away from the use of creole to explore the slave past of Guiana, the land of the author’s birth, towards an examination of the black West Indian identity in a remote, cold and indifferent English society where he has come to live and teach. Here, the historical identity of the West Indian and Guyanese heritage has to be carefully protected and fostered for, as he proclaims in the sparkling introductory poem ‘Coolie Odyssey’,

In a winter of England’s scorn
We huddle together memories, hoard them from
the opulence of our masters.

The engagement of any black writer with the post imperial culture of contemporary Britain sooner or later necessitates the confrontation with a literary problematic of colonialism. As George Lamming pointed out in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), the colonial relationship of Prospero and Caliban is one that renders the latter a ‘child of nature’ and one furthermore which makes him ‘eternally without the seed of a dialectic which makes possible some emergence from Nature’. As successive black writers since the 1950s from the Caribbean have discovered in Britain, the ambivalent cultural status of blacks in English society continually threatens to reduce black literature to that of marginal exiles who have no moral anchorage point to engage with the literary mainstream of English culture. It is still a major obstacle despite the more recent emergence of a vocabulary of multiculturalism in English education and the increasing visibility of formal concern to incorporate West Indian and South Asian literature and history into the school curriculum.

Dabydeen has seen one way through this entrenched burden of colonial stereotyping by a direct engagement with English movements in poetry. In the 1950s at the time of the first generation’s engagement with English culture there was a self-conscious lurch going on in English writing into a conservative provincialism epitomised by the novels of Kingsley Amis and John Wain and the ‘movement poetry’ of Philip Larkin, Donald Davie and their acolytes. However, since the 1970s new poetic forms are being experimented with, ‘Poetry bubbles from peat bogs’ and even in English poetry itself there is a growing willingness to employ imaginative language epitomised by Craig Raine and the ‘Martian poets’. As a ‘real’ alien, Dabydeen has the advantage of being able to perceive English society from a concrete standpoint and not that of an imaginary Martian, though this enterprise is to some extent viewed sceptically given the tendency for active cultivation of black poets who can now perform
In rare conceits
To congregations of the educated
Sipping wine, attentive between courses —
See the applause fluttering from their white hands
Like so many messy table napkins.

At several points in the volume, the complex historical relationship between England and the Caribbean is explored, such as in ‘Burning Down the Fields’ in which the imagery of the burning of the sugar cane is transferred to the streets of the inner cities where

...the wood-chips on the black people’s shoulders
Will heap up huge bonfires around which
The wretched will gather to give praise
To the overpowering love of God
Who will not forsake the aim of his people
But will guide the stone to thinnest point of glass,
Bank, Bingo Hall, Job Centre, and a Bookshop
Selling slim volumes of English verse.

There is a reflection of bitterness and disillusion in many of these poems exemplified by ‘London Taxi Driver’ who ‘has come far and paid much for the journey/ From some village in Berbice’ but who

...grunts rebellion
In backstreet discount sex
With the night’s last whore.

Sexual relationships too with English women reveal a conflict of expectations and dreams as in ‘Water With Berries’ when

...so afterwards she confessed it
Taking the home train to Cheltenham
From his basement in Balham
Never again wanting to meet.

There is at points an exploration of self-delusion as in ‘Coolie Son’ when a toilet attendant writes home ‘Englan nice, snow and dem ting,/ A land dey say fit for a king’.

The chief importance of this volume can be seen in its contributing to a new language through which to explain and understand the West Indian presence in Britain. In this project the language itself has been to a considerable extent taken up by Caliban and employed not merely to curse but usurp several dominant literary conventions based on a depoliticised relationship to nature and natural forces, as in the poetry of Ted Hughes, or a fatalistic acceptance of the post-war English ‘compromise’ of town and countryside and suburbia as in Philip Larkin. Dabydeen shares a similar position to the Ulster poets like Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin in being able to appeal back to a vital folk culture and a life rooted in the soil, though it is a specifically Indian one guided by the conventions of Hinduism. Here the language of poetic memory crackles and spits:
Jasmittie live in bruk —
Down big hut like Bata shoebox
Beat clothes, weed yard, chop wood, feed fowl

or as Old Dabydeen

Washed obsessively by the canal bank,
Spread flowers on the snake-infested water,
Fed the gods the food that Chandra cooked
Bathed his tongue of the creole
Babbled by low-caste infected coolies.

On occasion, though, the language shows tendencies of lapsing into the melodramatic as in ‘The Sexual Word’ where the poet is envisaged

...stuttering out his dream
Of journeys ended:
The howling oceanic thrust of history
That heaved forth savages in strange canoes
Weighed with magical cannon and muzzle and anklechain.

Many of the poems, indeed, seem weighed down by the dominance of racist imagery in English society and are unable to usurp or transcend this. The racism stretches down into the colonial society itself as Old Dabydeen

...called upon Lord Krishna to preserve
The virginity of his daughters
From the Negroes.

This is in many ways an honest exploration of one’s own folk roots that avoids the all-too-frequent tendency at idealisation and romanticisation. However, the long shadow of ethnic separatism stretches too from the Caribbean to England in this volume and it is by no means clear that an alternative bardic vision is offered to indicate where the future of black literary culture in England can be seen to lie.

PAUL RICH
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STEPHEN GRAY is a South African novelist and poet. He lectures in Johannesburg.

ALAMGIR HASHMI is a Pakistani poet and academic. He has lectured both in Switzerland and Pakistan.

ANNAMARIE RUSTOM JAGOSE teaches at the University of Wellington, New Zealand.

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TOLOLWA MARTI MOLLEL is a Tanzanian student in Drama doing his doctoral studies in Edmonton, Canada. His stories have been broadcast on the BBC and published in Greenfield Review, Kunapipi, Okike and Edges.

MARK O'CONNOR is an Australian poet.

JAN OWEN is Australian. She divides her time between writing and teaching creative writing. She has won several awards for her writing and her last collection of poems, Boy with a Telescope was widely acclaimed.

BENITA PARRY has written on British writing about India, Forster, Kipling, Conrad and Imperialism, and colonial discourse theory.

VICTOR RAMRAJ teaches at University of Calgary, Canada.

DAVID REITER is a Canadian writer whose fiction and poetry has appeared in numerous magazines, amongst those Outrider, The Fiddlehead, Canadian Forum and Kunapipi.

PAUL RICH is a South African academic lecturing in English and New Literatures in English.

KIRPAL SINGH teaches at University of Singapore.

PETER O. STUMMER teaches at the University of Munich.

THORELL TSOMONDO teaches at the University of Zimbabwe.

ROBIN VISEL lectures at the department of English at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.
FICTION
David Reiter, 'Touching Bear'; Tololwa Marti Mollel, 'The Seasons'.

POEMS
Jan Owen, Heather Cam, Stephen Gray, Mark O'Connor, Katie Campbell, John Barnie.

ARTICLES

THE YEAR THAT WAS

BOOK REVIEW

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