Caligula's Horse

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Abstract
If I had not been, since boyhood, sceptical of all forms of address, by which I mean prose spoken in public, I would not have been invited to address you this morning, since the honour you have paid me is the very one I have been determined to avoid because I write verse. Public prose contains in it an affability, in fact, a superiority that is political. It must contain charm, however contorted its syntax; it must communicate, however high-pitched its subject; and most horrible of all to a poet (a word that makes me nauseous when I apply it to myself), it must make sense. It is the very opposite of the perpetual ignorance of poetry, the induced chaos from which a poem begins. I am perhaps perpetuating this chaos now, because it is very difficult, almost impossible, not in my nature, to make sense. Because I do not know what sense is, certainly because I know it is not common but rare, I have avoided writing critical or philosophical prose for all of my life.

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Opening address delivered at Eight Conference on West Indian Literature, Mona, Jamaica, May 1988.

If I had not been, since boyhood, sceptical of all forms of address, by which I mean prose spoken in public, I would not have been invited to address you this morning, since the honour you have paid me is the very one I have been determined to avoid because I write verse. Public prose contains in it an affability, in fact, a superiority that is political. It must contain charm, however contorted its syntax; it must communicate, however high-pitched its subject; and most horrible of all to a poet (a word that makes me nauseous when I apply it to myself), it must make sense. It is the very opposite of the perpetual ignorance of poetry, the induced chaos from which a poem begins. I am perhaps perpetuating this chaos now, because it is very difficult, almost impossible, not in my nature, to make sense. Because I do not know what sense is, certainly because I know it is not common but rare, I have avoided writing critical or philosophical prose for all of my life.

Typing this last word I made an error. I wrote the word 'love' instead of the word 'life', and have corrected it to mean what I intended. To mean what I intended is what this public prose would have me believe, but to discover, through a typographical error, what is accidental but also true is to leave in the error and write 'I have avoided writing critical or philosophical prose for all of my love'. That is one part of the poetic process, accident as illumination, error as truth, typographical mistakes as revelation. Auden once received proofs of a poem called 'Iceland', or about Iceland, in which he had originally written 'and the poets have names for the sea' but which came back from the printer as 'and the ports have names for the sea', so Auden seized on the printer's error with a spasm of revelation equal in its shock of delight to the laser beam that unhorsed Saul on the Damascus road, and kept the typo. 'And the poets have names for the sea' is very good but pompous, but 'the ports have names for the sea' is not only epical but fantastically accurate. The provinciality and hermetic variations of the separate, terrified or possessing faith of those small wharves for that eternal force outside their ragged limits, the bays like mouths all pronouncing the
Besides I have always thought in two margins. It has been the rigid benediction of my life, and to think in two margins – one on the right, and one on the left, obviously – is to serve a life-long sentence. To live out a pun. By a life-long sentence I mean both the sweet and chafing prison which the soul chooses and which it calls (since apparently everything must have its noun) poetry, but it is also to see poems as simply parentheses, asides of that life-long sentence, as now a phrase of Dylan Thomas’s springs to mind: ‘that poetry is statements made on the way to the grave’. So, you see what happens when poets are asked to think with only one margin, that of the left, unless they are Korean, or Hebrew, writing in the wrong direction, but still with the sense of that other approaching margin, that versus at the end of which the plough turns, those primary gardens always laid in squared furrows; but to be a creature who always thinks of two margins, left and right as the poem is being made, who believes as much in the right-hand margin as he or she does in the left, is more than a pun about politics. The business of politics is the business of discourse, and the language of discourse is prose, the language of one margin only, and that one margin, in politics, may be called right when it is left and left when it is right.

This is not only what confuses those who listen to political addresses but what reduces cities to rubble and incinerates generations who mistake the margins. But also, this business of margins, of making sense, of saying what one means, is the occupation of tyrants, of those who can make four-hour tirades without interruption, without self-contradiction, without that ignorance which the poet believes in, without a sense of horizon, and certainly from the conviction that the tyrant-speaker must believe that he owns both margins. If tyrants had to compose their tirade in verse, if critics had to write criticism in regular metre, we would have less argument and more accidental, even contradictory, essays. Pope said it in one couplet; but the proper study of mankind, as he points out, is an inferior occupation compared to the question of God.

Because this is an injunction to critics: that their subject is not literature but God, or the gods, that poets should be judged by their approach towards this subject, and the source of that subject is chaos, ignorance, and its emblem is (how sweet Latin sounds in such contexts) Dominus illuminatio mea, Lord, who art the light of my life. The moment when Auden, in a flash that is like a seam in this chaos, like a light that comes from what he had no intention
of writing, wrote the word 'ports' for the word 'poets' - that is what I would be more happily engaged in this morning.

But there also comes a time when we pay for all we have tried to do by being asked to practise, to honour, its opposite, when a poet who has earned some respect from his colleagues is asked by critic-philosophers this question: 'Yes, we know you can write poetry, but can you think?' And I confess with a right-hand margin and left-hand margin combination of arrogance and humility that I do not know how to think. Not to know what to think is the bewilderment of the normal human predicament in a political context. And so we are told what to think by popes, by parsons, by lecturers, and apparently now by me. Because my position here is elective, political, with frightening dangers, the most honest posture I could assume is that of a shrug. For that shrug - whether it be the grunt of a furrowed-forehead primate or of a hermit who has taken a vow of exterior silence - is what angers systems, what infuriates the right-hand margin. The poet chooses his prison so early that it makes the prison cell of the tyrant a repetition, it makes the cell of the monk theatrical. Besides, the silence of the hermit is what makes him loquacious, garrulous in his conversations with the silent language of trees, seas, stars, crabs, his ancestors, stones and squirrels, and God.

But now it has happened: the seduction of authority. Now I am like the tyrant, the orderer, the one who says 'Listen, I will reveal, I shall guide, I shall confirm expectation, I shall play by the rules.' The tyrant mounts the platform and the hundreds of thousands in the public square are crying 'Convince me', the parson ascends the pulpit and the congregation is praying 'Convert me', the poet ascends to the lectern and the moment he is bemedalled or laurelled like a competing athlete, or some betting pool of literature's favourite horse, he becomes the pet of the crazy emperor, he becomes a critic. He has sublimated himself.

How obvious this is, that a poet should sneer at critics. You see, even in this, behaviour of a certain predictability is confirmed. Critics have their own form of masochism, because once they have elected the tyrant to pronounce, the parson to preach, the medalled and laurelled athlete or the crowned horse of Caligula to say a few words into the microphone like Mr. Ed, they are also saying with the penitential fury of their self-Inquisition 'Insult us, tell us we are dirt, preserve that sublimity to which we have elevated you once you remember that we, who supposedly speak sense on behalf of the mob, can bring you down as fervently, remember we are the ones who make sense, the ones who preferred that you think for us.'
This too is theatrical, and only part of the truth. The margin on the right has dissolved like a horizon in a fog of its own making, a required performance of a half-lie – because since boyhood I have delighted in criticism. I cherished the essays of Eliot not because of his perceptions but because of their quotations. They induced in me the truest humility: that is, the desire to imitate, to imprison myself within those margins. Since then a lot of dead fish have beached on the sand. Mostly the fish are French fish, and off their pages there is the reek of the fishmonger's hands. I have a horror not of that stink, but of the intellectual veneration of rot, because from the far-off reek which I get from the stalls of the Academy, there is now a school of fishermen as well as schools of fish, and these fishmongers are interested in examining the disembowelled entrails of poetry, of marketing its guts and its surrounding conversation of flies. When French poetry dies the dead fish of French criticism is sold to the suckers. 'Moby Dick is nothing but words, and what are words, and what do I mean when I say Moby Dick, and if I say Moby Dick what exactly do I mean?' It convinces one that Onan was a Frenchman, but no amount of masturbation can induce the Muse. What do I mean by masturbation? Well, you take your hand and you write from the left-hand margin and stop when you have achieved some spasm of self-recognition that may not breed but will appear to conceive, and that is known as literary philosophy and without any danger of arrest by the spiritual police, it is what I am demonstrating now.

I cannot think because I refuse to, unlike Descartes. I have always put Descartes behind the horse, and the horse is Pegasus – not the hotel I am staying in at the moment, but the other Pegasus, the one with the wings. What I believe is: I don't know how to think therefore I am. I am one who cannot accept these processes, of games of self-contradiction, of essays on poetry, any more than I can accept the right-hand margin of History, which begins, in our language, from the left and proceeds without trim, without metre, without that closing question of the couplet until it satisfies itself with cause and effect. This ignorance is old. It is the future of the Caribbean.

Historians say now, it all depends on what you mean by History. To me that is no different from saying it all depends on what you mean by prison, what you mean by church, what you mean by a cobbled alley in Lisbon, an abandoned barracoon at the back of a plantation which tourists photograph. The real question is 'What do you mean by Time?' And it is here that historians had better secure their wristwatches or sundials, because we have to be careful of blasphemy, those of us whose religion is verse. The imagination is a territory as subject to invasion and seizure as any far province of Empire, so today when the sellers of dead fish claim whatever
they claim (because honestly I never think of them), and when historians are willing to join poets in defining history as one aspect of imagination — that is, memory — it is then that poets have to be mauled and abused. Tyrants are failed artists. They paint in secret, they compose verses in secret, but they sculpt their own images publicly. The last thing they have, like historians, is imagination. A historian dare not imagine, a poet dare not think, certainly not in the way that he is expected to. That is Stalin murdering Mandelstam. History is memory, but it is not creative memory.

And what is the difference between what the historian (and literary criticism is a branch of history) remembers, and what the poet remembers? Time. To the dictator time is a given period of which he is terrified — for him there is no consolation in the fact that his bronze image will be at least bad art or that the bard who sings his achievements can take permanent revenge by writing badly about him. The superficial idea of art as immortal is not what I mean: this is a prosaic idea of time, the immortality of art. To the poet, there is no word for this dimension of memory, and the wonder of poetry is that it does not mean time to be defined temporally any more than God dare be defined by that sense of moving from the left margin to the right to arrive at some proof.

The young poet is a blessed being. If there is one now in this audience, I invite him or her to sneer, to turn away from these linear pronouncements with that sacred contempt with which I refused, by the grace of God, to believe, to prefer instead the grace that waits for the accidents of the print-setter who changed poets to ports, to the earlier error I made when I wrote either life for love or love for life, I have now forgotten which, and to see, as something of a public figure but still I hope, a hermit, a hider, a protector of silences, the vow I took as a boy not to listen. I have a friend in Saint Lucia who lives in a wonderful cove over the hill from a luxury beach-hotel. He wrote poetry once, and he is also an important official in Government, and in fun once I called him the only public hermit I know. That is what, I am sure, in spite of the honour, you would have me remain. Thank you.