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TOWARDS A NATIONAL CARIBBEAN EPIC

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Is the epic a relevant form in poetic practice as we inhale the smoke of this new century? Or is it a mere nostalgic throw-back to a passé age? What contemporary conditions make the epic an invalid or valid form in which to write? How may its relevance be measured in relation to the Caribbean “post-colonial” experience? And what qualities, ultimately, are necessary for an epic’s consummation? These questions may only be meaningfully approached by establishing the congruous content and formal elements which characterize the epic, from the unknown author of *The Epic of Son-Jara* (also known as *Sunjata*) through Homer through William Carlos Williams, Derek Walcott, and Lisa Robertson; and by accessing the nationalistic conditions which birthed and shaped the epic to determine whether some or all of those conditions still exist among a group or a people.

Let me say, at the outset, that while I admire Walcott's magnificent achievement in *Omeros* with regard to epic content, Walcott's poem only begins the journey towards a truly national Caribbean epic. It does not consummate the epic's nationalistic intent in terms of poetic form.

The ancient epic, in its subject matter, had, among its features, the depiction of an idealized age, where ordinary everyday things juxtaposed with lofty language and heroism. It began in medias res, invoked a muse or ancestral spirit, featured cataloguing and use of epithets, depicted aspects of worship, narrated a quest characterized by a separation, initiation, and a return. Further, in the traditional epic, emotional depictions superceded historical detail; it purveyed a people's customs, was very lengthy (*The Epic of Son-Jara* consists of over 3000 lines; *The Iliad*, over 15,000 verses), and, of utmost importance, it emerged out of a need for honor and self-definition both at the personal and national levels. The epic was mostly concerned with depicting a society the way it wanted to see itself and the way it wanted the rest of the world to perceive it.

According to Gilbert Murray, Greek epic poetry was concerned with the "ennobling and enriching of the content of life,..."(10), the poet being measured by his service to the community and to humanity through his artistic skill and his wisdom. It sought to chronicle, "the strength of the human soul towards freedom and ennoblement" (3) and to elevate "the unregenerative human animal" (3) whose savagery Greek Hellenic hegemony simultaneously felt close to and opposite from (3), a notion only too graphically portrayed in *Omeros* through the lecher-turned-quack-historian, Denis Plunkett.

In *The Choice of Achilles*, Susan Lindgren Wofford underlines such ironic, contradictory impulses underpinning the epic subject by examining

the way expressed moral and political values,
generate a poetics of division and disruption
while articulating constraints that limit such
alternative politics or demystifying effect. (1)

Expressed values. Expressed constraints that neutralize those expressed values. A bond with savagery and a distancing from savagery. The manifesto of Western civilization. Thus, the epic “can express an entire cultural system while also revealing its contradictions...”(2).

The epic’s main features and goals have really remained unchanged through the centuries. In relation to the American epic bard, Jeffrey Walker notes that “the bardic poet, if [he] is to fulfill [the] role as educator of the polis, or as proponent of the true national ethos, must address the many and not the few” (235). This is not necessarily a statement on commercialism, but rather an underscoring of the epic’s nationalistic sweep, its desire to articulate a “true national ethos.”

So the epics we’ve come to admire (ancient and modern; Western and non-Western) embody an acute nationalism reflective of their countries of origin. And their nationalist consummation is achieved not only through the poem’s subject matter but through the poem’s form as well. Virgil used Homer’s dactylic hexameter; Milton, blank verse; the anonymous author of *Son-Jara*, a prosody based on textual as well as actual or imagined musical rhythms. In each case, the poem’s form was based on the indigenous rhythms of the poet. The epic poem was not merely influenced by indigenous rhythms but was

structured on those rhythms in a way that made the identification of such formal elements (traditional or exploratory) possible and therefore capable of being learnt and used by any writer, in any language, in any part of the world.

William Carlos Williams once said that Americans didn't think in iambs and therefore shouldn't write in them, and in that remark, made a pertinent observation of the nationalistic tendencies required of bardic composition. The "free-verse" poetic revolution thus became a very American revolution directly related and structured on the rhythms of the polis and to their very psychology. In his epic, *Patterson*, Williams is thus seen to use "a variable foot, which relies on accentual rather than syllabic stress and seems to be particularly suited for conveying the nuances of American idiom" (Mervyn, 64).

And that American idiom appeared after the American War of Independence as neo-Roman, an Eighteenth Century Renaissance with an echo of Europe's Sixteenth Century Renaissance. This neo-Roman quality of U.S. public life, without any native literary tradition, allowed for a unique blending of European literary devices and techniques. It became an idiom which allowed for exploration and, in the end, a greater variety of formal poetic elements. "Free Verse" did not, as so many practicing poets still insist, free the American bard from form; it freed the poet to explore and create new forms. Williams's "variable foot." For all of his inventiveness, some of Williams most memorable and enduring works (poems such as "The Yachts" and "Mental Hospital Garden") rest on clearly defined formal elements. This implicit mnemonic quality is, after all, essential in creating enduring poetry.

On the other hand, a large part of the disappointment with Hart Crane's *The Bridge* lay in the poet's imitative use of the Pindaric structure articulated in an archaic English style. Crane's epic fails in large measure because it lacks a nationalistic form.

Contemporary Canadian poet Lisa Robertson, in her exciting *Debbie: An Epic*, in terms of content works off the grain of patriarchy and hegemony to revise/restructure the notion of sovereignty (and hence the notion of freedom and enslavement) both at the personal, public, and literary levels. Her heroine, Debbie, is both subverted Virgilian shepherdess and audacious post-modern woman.

I wondered if it could be possible to undo the monumentality of political origin by figuring the monument as a decorative structure that could admit differences as the shared experience of political being and desire. I wanted to see if feminist desire (political, erotic, aesthetic) might de-authenticate the idea and ideology of origin. (Author's interview, 26.2.2003.)

So the content and sovereign aim of *Debbie: An Epic* are congruous with the epic's age-old declamation of individual, and by extension, national liberation. Debbie's quest is for sovereignty against patriarchal restraints, a quest for a revision of language unbiased by paternal argument, a rhetoric of freedom. These notions mingle with the epic's traditional characteristics: the cataloguing, the battle scenes, the invocation of muses.

How does *Debbie: An Epic* represent a Western nationalistic form? It does so by employing decasyllabic line units. This ten-syllable line unit was used by Renaissance translators of Virgil's *The Aeneid* after early attempts at reproducing Virgil's Latin meter proved inadequate. "The meter didn't transpose into English and retain any textual

movement. A decasyllabic line was reached as the best tool for translating the push and energy and suppleness of Virgil's text. So I took this on as my line as well. The regularity admits much variety, quick shifts...' (interview). As with Williams, Robertson employs a neo-Roman formality in epic structure. Coupled with an employment of her daring "quantum" poetics, she thus makes the "borrowing" entirely her own.

African-American experiments in the epic mode also seek to represent a national ethos. The vision and subject matter of Robert Hayden's *Middle Passage*, Melvin B. Tolson's *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, and Clarence Major's, *The Slave Trade: View from the Middle Passage* are impressive and laudable examples of the epic will "that is necessary if the forces ranged against liberty are to be overcome" (Woodson 161). Strictly speaking, Hayden's work is more a modern poetic sequence in the Eliot tradition; Tolson's, a Pindaric lyric; Major's, a modern narrative in a distinctly African-American voice. All three of these works have epic scope in terms of subjects and in their objectives towards a striking nationalism. However, their epic purpose remains incomplete, because none of these works feature a nationalistic form. Major comes closest, but even his authentically indigenous voice is more a question of language and style and not definitive form. Major, like Kamau Brathwaite (with his "nation language") and, a generation later, Kwame Dawes (with his "reggae aesthetics"), employs a continuum between Standard English and the vernacular. As authentic as these elements are, they all demonstrate language and style, not definitive form. Had Major, as well as Hayden and Tolson, structured his epic on a blues or jazz form (as Langston Hughes did in his Blues poems; as Amiri Baraka and Jane Cortez do in their Jazz and Blues poems) these works might have reached an epic fulfillment.

Walcott's *Omeros* achieves an epic completion in subject matter only. His purpose and subjects bravely shine. The lives of the native characters, their heroism, and the historical sweep are convincingly rendered. Walcott's peasant fishermen show the strength of the human will to survive against hostile forces. In the "post-colonial" experience, these forces are portrayed as hegemonic. Ancestral culture and customs have been destroyed or undermined by imperialism, and the fight for survival is both economical and psychological. It's a quest to discover and retrieve self esteem. The book moves relentlessly towards this end. Walcott often conveys his indigenous subject matter through unconventional literary strategies such as the use of unheroic characters, by employing a more self-reflective rather than an objective style, through point-of-view shifts from third person to first person, and in his use of occasional non-linearity of plot through tangential flashback scenes.

Linguistically, the bulk of *Omeros*, save for the direct speech of the native characters, is written in Standard English. On occasion, Walcott achieves a marvelous authenticity of Creole style within the narrative.

...now [Achille] must concentrate on carrying the conchs
safely. On certain days it had an inspector
from the Tourist Board watching the boats, ... (40)

And

.....
.... Out of the depths of his ritual
baptism something was rising, some white memory

of a midshipman coming up close to the hull,
a white turning body, and this water go fill
with them, (129)

The shifts from Standard English to the Creole, "it had an inspector," and

“and this water go fill” are seamless and appropriate contractions of phrase that, in both cases, serve to quicken the line and intensify the dramatic moment. A consistently patterned use of this blend of Standard and Creole English throughout the narrative might have given *Omeros* the nationalistic structure which the epic demands. Used so sporadically, the language usage remains only an aspect of voice and style.

What is *Omeros*'s form? It employs, with occasional lapses and with occasional use of couplets and tetrameters, Dantesque terza rima stanzas, and Homeric hexametrical lines whose iambics, for the most part, are sustained. These are imported forms. And this is *Omeros*'s structural failure. Like Hart Crane and Melvin B. Tolson, Walcott insists (out of homage? gratitude? loyalty?) on imitating a borrowed Western form. For a “post-colonial” epic effort Walcott's structural imitation cannot therefore be seen as a complete model for a Caribbean epic, only the beginning of the journey towards a national Caribbean epic. He does not make the structural borrowing his own in any patriotic sense. Walcott's formal imitation glaringly stands out, undermining the epic's nationalistic requirement and, in the end, casting a shadow of inauthenticity on the work as a whole.

Wherever the need for sovereignty and self-definition exists, the epic remains a valid poetic vehicle for the articulation of such notions. Because of its inveterate nationalistic goals, the epic cannot only feature a national philosophy in terms of its subject matter but in its formal structure as well. The last move towards a national Caribbean epic must therefore address this question of indigenous form.

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