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Making West Indian Literature

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Critics can be important to a literature. But the literature must be produced before it can be sifted for analysis. It may be that, even in the academy, we should pay more attention to nurturing production and trying to understand its processes. The poet, as you know, used to be called a ‘maker’— as in *Chaucer the Maker* (by John Speirs). This lecture¹ — on ‘Making West Indian Literature’ — deals in part with where I’m coming from and what I do as a West Indian poet.

But there are also other things to be said.

West Indian Literature, as a body of work, is a fairly recent phenomenon. It is possible to make connections back to the eighteenth century, as Paula Burnett does in her scholarly introduction to *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*; but the main body of work acknowledged to be excellent has been done in the last fifty years. In *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, Kenneth Ramchand takes as his beginning 1903 and the first volume in Tom Redcam’s ill-fated All-Jamaica Library. Ramchand’s year-by-year bibliography lists only 45 books between 1903 and 1951, more of a trickle than a flood. The flow is fairly substantial from 1952. On the basis of critical attention and frequent inclusion on university course lists the ‘major authors’ include V.S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Jean Rhys, Samuel Selvon, Earl Lovelace, Erna Brodber, Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Martin Carter and Lorna Goodison. But there are a great many other writers of considerable merit, some with a wider readership than the leaders on the academic list.

The department of which I am a member used to be called the Department of English, and is now the Department of Literatures in English. The difference is important, and there is a story to be told.

Our University College opened its doors in 1948, to a group of medical students, and the English Department began teaching in 1950. The University College of the West Indies (which I attended from 1954 to 1957) taught towards degrees of London University. The offerings in English were essentially the same as might have been made available in the United Kingdom or at other University Colleges under the tutelage of London. The basic assumption then was that the student choosing to read English Language and Literature had chosen to study, as Edward Baugh put it in 1970, ‘the history of the literature of England, with the inclusion, in recent years, of a few fringe benefits’ (56). (But the so-called ‘literature of England’ could silently accommodate substantial contributions from the Irish, the Scottish, the Welsh and even an American or two.) In keeping with British example, the first major extension of the curriculum was a course in American Literature, introduced in 1963. The first full course in West Indian Literature was introduced in 1969, taught by Kenneth Ramchand. I had the

¹ Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Creative Writing & West Indian Literature, delivered at the Philip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts, March 13, 1997. [Originally published in *Making West Indian Literature*, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005: 1-17.]

pleasure of attending many lectures on that course, which was outstanding. Ramchand did a scrupulous reading of each text chosen, in the context of a critical problem or complex of problems to which he related his reading. (The lectures later formed the basis of a book, his *Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature*).

After the course in West Indian Literature a course in African Literature was introduced, then one in Afro-American Literature, then one called the Oral Tradition and Literature. Some of our other courses now include Introduction to Orature, African Diaspora Women's Literature, Folktale and Proverb, and West Indian Autobiography. And there are courses in Comparative Caribbean Literature (taught in conjunction with colleagues in French and Spanish). With more and more new courses proposed, we have had to decide which courses will be required and which are optional. From its inception, a course in West Indian Literature has been a requirement for students majoring in English. Since 1990, when the University changed from a three-term to a two-semester system, our Department has required that each student majoring in English must study some poetry, some prose fiction and some drama; and must (without counting the same course twice) do at least one course in literary theory, a Shakespeare course, a course in twentieth century fiction and one in West Indian Literature.

Partly because of other courses offered, West Indian Literature now inhabits a context somewhat different from that in which it first was introduced. For a student may now — as a direct result of other courses available — be relating studies in West Indian Literature not just to English Literature or mainstream American Literature but to writing by African and African-American women, or to folk tale structures or conventions of performance or theories of autobiography.

Our concept of West Indian Literature has expanded. In 1969 there was still a tendency to assume that literature meant novels, short stories, poems, and might also include 'good' plays of a certain verbal density. Though we admired and enjoyed them greatly, in 1969 we were not yet ready to promote outstanding non-fiction books from supplementary reading to prescribed texts on literature courses. Some were first prescribed for Special Author undergraduate courses, where the enterprise was to examine the range of a given author's work. Then books such as George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), C.L.R. James's *Beyond A Boundary* (1963) and V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* (1964) were prescribed on an MA Course. The recently established course in West Indian Autobiography has included works such as those, and of course more recent material, such as Jean Rhys's *Smile Please* (1975) and Sistren's *Lionheart Gal* (1986).

Lionheart Gal is in Jamaican Creole, predominantly. In the 1990s we take it for granted that some of the work we prescribe will have been written in Creole.

I do not myself say ‘nation language’ because it seems to me that by the end of Kamau Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice* the term is taken to mean, not what we used to call ‘dialect’ but, the whole range of West Indian language, including standard English with a regional accent (13). The language continuum of West Indian Literature ranges between our West Indian standard English and our Caribbean Creoles. (According to Loreto Todd, in a book entitled *Modern Englishes*, ‘A pidgin is a communication system that develops among people who do not share a common language’ [3], and ‘A creole is a pidgin which has become the mother tongue of a group of people’ [4]). What I am calling Creole is what we used to call dialect, or patois. A creole is a language; a dialect is a form of a language; a patois is a low-status dialect. Jamaican Creole is derived mainly from English and some West African languages. We can agree with Louise Bennett when she writes:

My Auntie Roachy seh dat it bwile her temper an really bex her fi true anytime she hear anybody a style we Jamaican dialec as ‘corruption of the English language.’ For if dat be de case, den dem shoulda call English Language corruption of Norman French an Latin an all dem tarra language what dem seh dat English is derived from.

Oonoo hear de wud? ‘Derived.’ English is a derivation but Jamaican Dialec is corruption! What a unfairity!

Auntie Roachy seh dat if Jamaican Dialec is corruption of de English Language, den it is also a corruption of de African Twi Language to, a oh! (1)

Linguists now often show that some of the forms once deemed ‘corrupt’ or ‘bad’ or ‘broken’ English may be better or more fully understood in relation to one or other of the West African languages which travelled with our African ancestors. Mervyn Alleyne, in *Roots of Jamaican Culture*, gives as an example the Jamaican Creole word *ben* (and its variants such as *min*, *en*, and *wen*). He points out that the ‘outer form points in the direction of the English word “been”’ but that the way *ben* functions in Jamaican Creole is ‘not altogether like English “been”’ and that ‘it fits into a verb phrase structure that is very similar to the verb structure of some West African languages’ (1).

In 1969 the University was beginning to recognise formally that literature of merit might be available in Creole as in Standard English. *Jamaica Labrish* by Louise Bennett, with Notes and Introduction by Rex Nettleford, had appeared in 1966. In *The Islands in Between* (1968), the pioneer collection of essays on West Indian Literature, Louis James (who had taught in the English Department here) makes mention of calypso and discusses Louise Bennett. On the basis of my 1963 essay ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’ I was invited in 1969-70 to lecture

on Louise Bennett to English Department students. At various times since then the list of prescribed texts has included at least a book or two which is largely or entirely in Creole, such as Louise Bennett's *Jamaica Labrish*, *New Day* by V.S. Reid, and *The Lonely Londoners* by Samuel Selvon. By the 1990s the movement was far advanced. Gordon Rohlehr had published influential articles on calypso — including 'Sparrow and the Language of Calypso', first presented in April 1967, at a meeting of the Caribbean Artists Movement in London, and 'Sparrow as Poet', in *David Frost Introduces Trinidad and Tobago* (73-83). In the 1990s, one of the texts prescribed for West Indian Poetry courses has been *Voiceprint*, first published in 1989, 'An anthology of oral and related poetry from the Caribbean' which includes some calypsoes, some 'dub poetry' and Bob Marley lyrics, as well as poems by Martin Carter, Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Lorna Goodison et al. Another anthology prescribed has been *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, also first published in 1989, which includes among its fourteen poets Louise Bennett, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Michael Smith, three who write in Creole and are often associated with performance. Also recommended on our reading lists is *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (1986) which gives plenty of space to poets who write in Creole, mostly in the section called 'The Oral Tradition'.

With the institution of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), there has been a similar development in the secondary school system. We are a long way from 1961 when the Publications Branch of the Ministry of Education in Jamaica could write, in assessing a selection proposed: 'the use of vernacular creates a problem, as it is not the policy of the Branch to produce books containing dialect'.² The CXC Literature B syllabus, which first appeared in 1979, acknowledges the range of our language continuum, including Creole.

It is all too easy to talk about the change in attitudes as though one was never part of the colonial situation and its ways of seeing. Most of us born before 1950 have been trained to genuflect before the European Great Tradition or standards established or promoted in the metropole. This can sometimes determine not only what we value but the terms in which we talk about what we value. I am reminded of a passage in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*: 'The peasants took Crazy Bow as a fine fiddler for the hill country, but laughed at the idea of greatness in him. Greatness could not exist in the backwoods. Nor anywhere in the colony. To them and to all the islanders greatness was a foreign thing' (8). Cultural confidence develops only slowly.

² Letter from Clifton R. Smith for Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, Jamaica, to Anne Walmsley, May 30, 1961. Quoted by Anne Walmsley in 'From "Nature" to "Roots": School Anthologies and a Caribbean Canon', *Wasifiri* 11 (Spring 1990): 5.

Why do we read, why do we write, West Indian Literature? Hopefully, because it gives us pleasure. But also, no doubt, because it helps us examine and reaffirm — perhaps reconstitute — ourselves. In an early Walcott poem, called ‘Roots’, there is the line: ‘When they conquer you, you have to read their books’ (*In a Green Night* 60). It is good to be reading some of our own. I like how Merle Hodge makes the point: ‘In [our] situation,’ she writes, ‘creative writing becomes, for me, a guerrilla activity. We are occupied by foreign fiction. Fiction which affirms and validates our world is therefore an important weapon of resistance. The most apolitical of writers becomes part of the struggle’ (Cudjoe 206). They have helped to move us forward from a time, recalled by Philip Sherlock, when ‘there was no West Indian poet with whom [he] might walk as [he] did with the poets of England’ (Figuroa vii). They have helped us move beyond that time when — as V.S. Naipaul put it — ‘To us ... all literatures were foreign’ and ‘we knew we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us’ (‘Jasmine’ 24). Indeed, when there were real connections to be made between our non-literary experience and the foreign books we read, we sometimes failed to make them. V.S. Naipaul tells a vivid story about that separation. Some time in 1961, or thereabouts, he had been talking with an old lady in British Guiana.

Suddenly the tropical daylight was gone, and from the garden came the scent of a flower. I knew the flower from my childhood; yet I had never found out its name. I asked now.

‘We call it jasmine.’

Jasmine! So I had known it all those years! To me it had been a word in a book, a word to play with, something removed from the dull vegetation I knew.

The old lady cut a sprig for me. I stuck it in the top buttonhole of my open shirt. I smelled it as I walked back to the hotel. Jasmine, jasmine. But the word and the flower had been separate in my mind for too long. They did not come together. (30-31)

Most West Indians born before 1950 can tell a variant of that story. My sister recalls the shock of delight when, far away from Wordsworth’s England— in Philadelphia, USA in the 1970s — she first saw ‘dancing daffodils’. Even while we devoured what we were taught, we often sensed that really it belonged to someone else. I think I understand the Walcott persona in *Another Life* that says:

I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy,
 filched as the slum child stole,
 as the young slave appropriated

those heirlooms temptingly left
with the Victorian homilies of *Noli tangere*.
This is my body. Drink.
This is my wine. (*Collected Poems* 219)

And since the books with which we became familiar were always about some place other than where we lived, and often recorded social idioms which were not ours — or not exactly ours — they often seemed to imply that how we spoke and what we did were not entirely correct. Listen to the narrator in *Crick Crack, Monkey* (by Merle Hodge):

Books transported you always into the familiar solidity of chimneys and apple trees, the enviable normality of real Girls and Boys who went sleighing and built snowmen, ate potatoes, not rice, went about in their socks and shoes from morning until night and called things by their proper names, never saying ‘washicong’ for plimsoll or ‘crapaud’ when they meant a frog. Books transported you always into Reality and Rightness, which were to be found Abroad. (61)

Such could be the consequence of a West Indian colonial education. It often created distress and confusion. But individual experiences differ significantly. A central strand in Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, which records the process by which G becomes alienated from his village community, also celebrates his intellectual development and the kindness of a colonial schoolmaster, evidently modelled on Frank Collymore. Derek Walcott, identifying some advantages in colonial education which he says ‘must have ranked with the finest in the world’, once declared: ‘I feel absolutely no shame in having endured the colonial experience.... It was cruel, but it created our literature’ (‘Meanings’ 312).

Even Kamau Brathwaite, who later helped us all acknowledge Caribbean continuities out of Africa, was for a time confused by colonial tutelage. In an autobiographical essay he writes:

I had spent most of my boyhood on the beach and in the sea with ‘beach-boys’ or in the country, at my grandfather’s, with country boys and girls. I was therefore not in a position to make any serious intellectual investment in West Indian middle-class values. But since I was not then consciously aware of any other West Indian alternative (though in fact I had been living that alternative), I found and felt myself ‘rootless’ on arrival in England and, like so many other West Indians of the time, more than

ready to accept and absorb the culture of the mother country. I was, in other words, a potential Afro-Saxon. ('Timehri' 32)

Brathwaite wants us to know that his 'education and background, though nominally "middle class," is, on examination, not of this nature at all' ('Timehri' 32).

Mine was indubitably middle-class, and very colonial. I got punished for playing in the gully near our house. My family ritually listened to the King's Christmas message. Yet there were many countervailing influences in my experience. At Half Way Tree Elementary School (which I left in 1947) we had an Empire Day ceremony not unlike the one described in *In the Castle of My Skin*. But I remember mainly the repeatedly successful subversion of all that solemn loyalty. We used to add bits to the patriotic songs: *the banner of the red white and blue* (*Miss Nancy shoe*). My godmother, Edith Dalton-James, an outstanding teacher, was fervently anti-colonial (unlike her husband, the Headmaster). She became President of the Teachers' Union, was devoted to Norman Manley and ran unsuccessfully as a PNP candidate. She used to teach anti-colonial lessons, sometimes on the spur of the moment. I recall her once publicly remonstrating with my mother, her good friend, for failing to tell her class what a rascal Cecil Rhodes had been.

At home we often read aloud the Louise Bennett poems appearing in newspapers in the 1940s. My mother, the schoolteacher, was less than enthusiastic. Though I recall her directing very successfully 'Bruk Kitchen Aforesaid', a farce in Jamaican Creole — I think it had been adapted from an Irish piece — she was always coaxing us to speak *properly*, and our adulation of Louise Bennett didn't seem to fit in with that programme. But the rest of the family — father, sister, two elder brothers and an aunt who lived with us — revelled in Louise Bennett's pointed humour. Though we did not talk about her craft, we knew that she was skilled. Part of why I'm sure we knew, is that my father often invited us to join in mocking the ineptness of a Jamaican gentleman whose solemn standard English poems were also often published in the papers. My dad would read a bit of the poem aloud, inviting us to supply the predictable rhyme. We very often got it right. We never thought of playing that game with Louise Bennett poems.

At home we often entertained ourselves by reading aloud. By no means Bennett poems only. There were Dickens novels in the house, and you would think we would have read aloud from them, but I don't recall that we did. But we read work by some other very English writers — humorous verse by Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Hilaire Belloc, and witty monologues by Saki ('She was a good cook as cooks go, and as cooks go she went'). A very special favourite was P.G. Wodehouse. Given the range of these family entertainments, it has never

occurred to me to do what so many of my students are inclined to do: to position standard English as somehow antithetical to orality.

When I was growing up, there wasn't very much Creole in print. Claude McKay's *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (1912) I didn't hear about in school. Nor did I know of Walter Jekyll's *Jamaica Song and Story* (1907) until the Dover Publications reprint in 1966. But from 1944 (when I was only seven) we had at home a Louise Bennett book called *Anancy Stories and Poems in Dialect* (Gleaner Co., 1944). And, partly because of holidays spent with relatives in the country — at Ritchies; in Malvern; at Inverness — and partly because of friendly tutorials from people we employed — in those days called not 'helpers' but 'maids' and 'garden boys' — we internalised folk songs, riddles, proverbs, Anancy stories, duppy stories and Big Boy stories. A living oral tradition was part of my middle-class environment. One of the folk songs we were forever singing at home began 'Mi seh to gimme back mi shillin wid de lion pon it'. My sister, the eldest of us, told me recently that she first learnt that song from hearing it sung by men at work on the road nearby. Other favourite folk songs in our house included 'Big big sambo gal an im cyaan do a ting' and 'Mattie Rag' ('Mumma, mumma, dem ketch puppa, / dem ketch im down a mango walk; / an if ah never run dem woulda ketch me to, / fi go sing sweet song an play guitar'). My friends and I would tell and re-tell Anancy stories such as 'Anancy an Tiger' in which Anancy tricks Tiger into accepting a saddle and bridle like a riding horse, 'Anancy and the Plantains' in which Anancy, pretending he will have to do without, ends up receiving half a plantain from every other member of his family. The better storytellers would do good versions of 'Ananishi's tie-tongue speesh'. Everybody knew the ghost story about the man who was crossing a graveyard when he encountered a man with long long teeth and ran, and when he thought he was safe he went up to a man and told him he had had to run away from a man with long long teet, and the man said, 'Teet like dese?'

'Aunt Gem' — my father's sister, Gertrude Morris — was an important influence on us all. She was a very genteel person, punctiliously courteous, who taught in secondary schools and later at a teacher training college. Though she spoke standard English habitually, even when relaxing, she loved to share with us her joy in vivid Creole, especially in proverbs and Jamaican folk songs. She was often supported by my father, the genially subversive humorist; but, curiously, I don't recall my father — who sang tenor in the Parish Church choir and played the piano well — ever playing or accompanying the folk songs on the piano.

Of course there is a big difference between enjoying little bits of folk culture while living in an urban middle-class home, and sharing more completely in folk experience. About many details of Jamaican folk culture I am always having to read and to ask. Sometimes I ask Velma Pollard, who nearly always knows. Sometimes I ask my wife, who — inter alia — seems to be familiar with

every item in the Sankey hymnal. She lived for years in the rural parish of Westmoreland, in what I sometimes call, when she is not too cross, ‘darkest Darliston’.

I’ve never been happy with the notion of ‘middle-class’ values versus what Brathwaite (in 1970) called ‘the alternative’. I greatly admire, and like to quote, the beginning of *Contradictory Omens*, where (in 1974) he is offering a subtler formulation. He writes of a cultural process of creolisation in which various elements intermingle, to become ‘the tentative cultural norm of the society. Yet this norm, because of the complex historical factors involved in making it ... is not whole or hard (crown: jewel: diamond), but cracked, fragmented, ambivalent, not certain of itself, subject to shifting lights and pressures’ (6).

Though I have developed an interest in poets who perform their work, I also enjoy and admire authors of very different tendency: Rhys as well as Louise Bennett, V.S. Naipaul and Mikey Smith. When I wrote ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’ — in 1963 — I didn’t know it would become important. I was expressing admiration of a poet who had given me pleasure and who, it seemed to me, had been undervalued by many literary people. No doubt partly for its pioneering place in the chronology, that essay is often cited and has been constantly reprinted. I wish more interest were shown in my later, better, essays on Louise Bennett’s poetry and my annotated edition of her *Selected Poems*.³

Serendipities led me to ‘dub poetry’ — a disputed term. Late in 1975, when I was on secondment to this centre, I had a telephone call from Leonie Forbes. She asked me to look at some poems she had received from a man in prison, Orlando Wong. I saw talent in the poems, and I told her so. She urged me to visit Orlando. I survived his initial inspection, and became one of his regular visitors at the St Catherine District Prison and, later, at Fort Augusta where the regime seemed less strict. He was already writing reggae rhythms in his poems, and outlining an explanatory aesthetic. He examined poetry by Langston Hughes and younger black American poets. I introduced him to reggae-related work by Linton Kwesi Johnson, whom I had met in England in 1972-73.

Under a liberalising regime — Carl Rattray was Minister of Justice — Orlando was allowed to take part in poetry readings outside of prison. Sangster’s published *Echo*, a book of his poems. Orlando, released on parole, was admitted to the Jamaica School of Drama, where Dennis Scott was principal. At the School of Drama he met with other poets, including Noel Walcott and Mikey Smith, and in 1979 they began to promote the notion of ‘dub poetry’. Orlando, who had changed his name to Oku Onuora, defined it for me. The dub poem, he said, ‘is

³ ‘Louise Bennett in Print’ in *Caribbean Quarterly* 28, nos. 1 & 2 (March-June 1982): 44-56.
 ‘Louise Bennett’ in Daryl C. Dance ed., *Fifty Caribbean Writers* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 35-45. Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems* (Kingston: Sangster’s, 1982).

not merely putting a piece of poem pon a reggae rhythm — hence when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem.’ Later he took the position that the music rhythms need not be reggae. He has also addressed the issue of political content: ‘Dub poetry... mean to dub out the isms and schisms and to dub consciousness into the people-dem head.’ In the recent book by Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*, there is a wealth of material on what ‘dub poets’ think they are doing, but not many critical judgements that convince. Unfortunately, however, the critics I find more rewarding most often are — like me — discussing poems which offer riches before and after, not only during or because of, performance: poems such as ‘Me Cyaan Believe It’ by Mikey Smith (*It A Come* 13-15), Linton Johnson’s ‘Reggae fi Dada’ (34-36), ‘Dis Poem’ by Mutaburaka, or Jean Binta Breeze’s ‘Riddym Ravings’ (58-61). The greater critical challenge is to explain the transformation of a text which seems inadequate until performed. We need a criticism which gives greater weight to the impact of performance.

Through Oku Onuora I got to know Mikey Smith who asked me to help him prepare a book. Unlike Oku, Mikey had little idea of how his work might be presented on the page. His considerable skills were essentially oral. As he told me once: ‘sometimes a rhythm come to me first. You know, is a rhythm, an me seh, “Dah rhythm-ya feel nice, you know, feel nice.” And then me try remember the rhythm... and then I build under that, build up under that. Build under that and catch me breaks and the bridges. Just like how a musician a work out’ (Interview 41). Listening to Mikey perform (with or without a backing of music), one could hardly fail to notice his firm sense of structure and of rhythmic patterning. But when he showed me some of his poems in manuscript I found them difficult to read. The spelling was erratic, sometimes puzzling. The line breaks seemed arbitrary, out of sync with the very firm structures of his oral delivery. To translate into another medium— print — poems he had tested in performance, we agreed on a working procedure: ‘Mikey would read poems into a tape recorder; then I, listening to the tape while examining the manuscript, would suggest a representation on the page that seemed to me consistent with Mikey’s reading. Then he would make decisions’ (*It A Come* 10). Because he died before the project was completed, it is I who made most decisions about spelling, punctuation, line-breaks and stanzas. But I did not cut the poems, or write in any bits of my own. Presented, for the convenience of readers, were ‘Mikey’s words in Mikey’s order’ (*It A Come* 11). Of this particular instance of making West Indian Literature, Kenneth Ramchand has remarked: ‘What we have here is the new orality affected by the new technology — the media, the visuals, the sound; the new orality calling for a new kind of scribe!’ (‘A Personal View...’ 28). I am glad to have been a scribe.

I am far more often an informal critic. As they do to various colleagues at Mona who have published poetry or fiction, and no doubt some who have not, writers show me manuscripts and ask me what I think. Usually we sit and talk. In face to face communication it is fairly easy to convey respect, no matter what you're actually saying. When you have to *write* an assessment, it is difficult not to sound like God or a patronising hypocrite. If I can be encouraging, it is usually because I can identify a passage or a line, some detail in the manuscript, that really gives me pleasure. Sometimes, when I'm lucky, I can show how the thing can be improved, usually by pruning.

All my writing life, there have been people who have helped me in a similar way. Other poets, friends, my wife, my daughter, my sister — they have all at various times helped. At a crucial stage in my development, in the late 1960s, Dennis Scott, Wayne Brown, Anthony McNeill and I — in varying configurations — often met at Taylor Hall, where I was Warden, and inspected each others' poems. To call what we were doing workshops would be misleading — nothing was organised, not even times to meet. But the man in search of coffee or a drink would often fish a poem from his pocket.

Approval from Tony was meaningful, but he was hardly ever severe. Dennis tended to understand immediately what you were trying to do, so would often argue cuts and readjustments. Wayne was enormously helpful to me, because he often refused to grant that what I was trying to do might be worth doing. His attention was a compliment; but he could be brutally challenging, inclined to dismiss whatever seemed like mere intelligence. At the time he was a passionate admirer of Ted Hughes, and thought that genuine poems must be visceral. Somewhere in a file I think I have a poem which he had graded four out of ten. He was, and is, a hard marker. 'The Forest' was a poem provoked by Wayne, but I never told him so.

THE FOREST

That world I knew was all too plain:
a dry world, crisp and certain
in the sun, where practically anyone
could laugh and prattle all day long,
seeing clear for seeing nothing. But

horrid those grim creatures which, obscure,
lurk in the forest where the leaves
are damp, where sun is filtered
to a nightlight feeble against fears!

Around dark tree-trunks red eyes leer:

Come; into the forest
where the leaves are damp,
where no bird sings. Come,
flee the sunlit safety of the shore.
Deep in the forest where the air is dank
embrace the gracious maggot in the mind.
The bright boat burns on the beach. (*The Pond* 39)

Many would-be writers, at a certain stage, try not to know the maggot in the mind. But at workshops here and abroad, I have often seen students make a quantum leap when they identify the pleasures of distress. Disturbance may be a source of creativity.

There was a young poet
who thrived on his pain
(Hey ho the sun and the rain)
His woman ran off
and he found her again
(Hey ho the sun and the rain)

It pleased him to ask for
a foot in the face
(Hey ho the sun and the rain)
Whenever it hurt enough
words fell in place
(With a Hey ho the sun and the rain) (*Examination Centre* 38)

Of course a workshop is often concerned with matters of craft — how to revise, to reshape, how to make the work *clean*. This will often be a highly conscious activity. But in helping students make West Indian literature, we must also give similar attention to where the work comes from, to the originating process.

There's a story told of the poet W.H. Auden. A young man says to him *I want to write poetry*. Why, Auden enquires, do you want to write poetry? Because, says the fellow, I have important things I want to say. Mmmm, says Auden, I see. But another young man comes to the master and says, *I want to write poetry*. Why? asks Auden. Because, this fellow says, I like hanging around words, listening to what they say. Ah, thinks Auden, maybe he is going to be a poet.

I do not mean to suggest that strongly held opinions will inhibit poetry. But poets tend to be preoccupied with *making* — to get caught up in a process of making, in a fascination with words and what they are capable of doing, an interest in shapes and patterns. If the poet isn't hanging on too tight, the work may move in directions which he did not consciously choose. Many poets are in touch with the paradoxical woman who asked, *How do I know what I mean until I see what I've written?*

I had an experience of that sort in writing 'Checking Out'. In summer 1977 my family and I spent six congenial weeks in a London University flat. When we were due to leave, we cleared the flat and swept it. *Partir, c'est mourir un peu.*⁴ The first draft was provoked by my unease. The beginning of the poem and the very end of it were more or less always there. But at first the middle was about the flat as home. Some of the most crucial words in the eventual poem — 'recycled', for example, and 'vestige' — came very late. After several days and many revisions, I found I had a poem about death.

CHECKING OUT

I slam the door, 'Dear, are you positive
there's nothing left?' Well, no:
something remains, I'm sure of that:

some vestige of our lives in this bare flat
will linger, some impulse will outlive
our going, recycled in the flow

of being. We never leave,
we always have to go. (*Shadowboxing* 51)

We learn to listen to the language, to find out what the poem wants to be. I like to remind my students of some lines from a Derek Walcott sequence called 'Guyana' (in *The Gulf*):

He followed, that was all,
his mind, one step behind,
pacing the poem, going where it was going. (39)

Though the university cannot claim to have produced many writers, the fact is that a number of creative writers — some very distinguished indeed — have passed through our community. Former UCWI/UWI students who have

⁴ To go away is to die a little.' Edmond Haraucourt, *Seul* (1891), 'Rondel de l'Adieu'. Angela Partington ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 323.

published at least one book of poetry or prose fiction or have had a play performed include Derek Walcott, Abdur-Rahman Slade Hopkinson, Jean D'Costa, Dennis Scott, Erna Brodber, Velma Pollard, Timothy Callender, Paul Keens-Douglas, Tony Kellman, Elean Thomas, Victor Questel, Noel 'Wick' Williams, Jimmy Carnegie, Edward Baugh, Pamela Mordecai, Wayne Brown, Rachel Manley, Jim Nelson, Cecil Gray, Jean Small, The Mighty Chalkdust, Brother Resistance, Beverley Brown, Orlando Patterson, Alwin Bully, Merle Collins, Kendel Hippolyte, Rawle Gibbons, Kwame Dawes, Christine Craig, Garth St Omer, Honor Ford-Smith, Robert Lee, David Heron and Basil Dawkins.

Many people who at one time or another have been members of our staff have helped in making West Indian Literature. The critics have fostered understanding and respect for creative work. The poets, playwrights, writers of prose fiction — who have often also functioned as critics — have added to the store of literature we value. Writers who have been, at one time or another, on our staff and each of whom has either published a book of poetry or prose fiction or had a play produced include: John Hearne, Kamau Brathwaite, Philip Sherlock, John Figueroa, Velma Pollard, Erna Brodber, Olive Senior, Edward Baugh, Orlando Patterson, Jean D'Costa, Rawle Gibbons, Pamela Mordecai, Michael Gilkes, Earl McKenzie, Sylvia Wynter, Merle Hodge, Mark McWatt, Earl Lovelace, Wayne Brown, Elaine Savory, Cecil Gray, Jean Small and Bruce St John. Especially in the context of the names I've mentioned — and the ones I have inadvertently failed to list — I count it a signal honour to have been allowed a title which includes Creative Writing. The honour indicates, I trust, that the University community values the creative contribution of us all, in making West Indian Literature; that the community acknowledges the writer, struggling to say it right.

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