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The Language of Earl Lovelace

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By his creative use of the language environment in which he writes, Lovelace has made an unparalleled contribution to the development of the West Indian literary voice. The dimension of “voice” goes beyond language. It is language use as shaped by ways of seeing (narrative as well as philosophical perspectives) and by linguistic competence. In the West Indian language situation, “linguistic competence” includes the ability to manipulate more than one code as well as different registers of these codes (Youssef). This versatility with regard to language use is of central importance to Lovelace’s narrative practice, which, in turn, is informed by his political consciousness.

In the Anglophone Caribbean the official language is Standard English (SE), while the native language of most West Indians is Creole. The vocabulary of Creole is English, with inputs from other languages—especially in Trinidad and Tobago. What effectively distinguish the two codes from each other are features of their sound systems and, more significantly, their respective grammars.

Today Creole and Standard English do not exist in hermetic compartments. There is a middle ground of Creole that is increasingly influenced by English, known as the mesolect; the Creole that preserves the most traditional forms is known as the basilect, and Standard English is referred to as the acrolect.

Depending on their level of education, or their class background, West Indians have different levels of competence in Standard English, and there is much interaction and intertwining of speech forms from different areas of the language spectrum. Conscious code switching between Creole and SE is a normal part of language behaviour. These and other features of the language environment constitute an important resource for the writer of fiction, notably for the purposes of characterization and narrative perspective.

West Indian writers of fiction have always used Creole in their works, although in earlier periods the fiction reflected the low status of the language and its speakers, and the elitist consciousness of those who created fiction. In Trinidadian literary history, the Creole voice, though marginalized, was present in written fiction for more than a hundred years before Sam Selvon, who tends to be seen, erroneously, as the person responsible for introducing Creole into our literature. The achievement of Selvon with regard to language is that he used Creole for **narration**. Up until Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners* (1956), the use of Creole was restricted to dialogue, and the West Indian narrative voice was Standard English largely untouched by the first language of the West Indian population.

To date, Selvon and Lovelace are the only two writers who have published novels in which the entire narration is in Creole: Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* and *The Housing Lark*, and Lovelace’s *Wine of Astonishment*. It is an option that some writers have used for shorter fiction—short stories, or passages within novels, for example V. S. Naipaul’s “Baker’s Story” in *A Flag on the Island*, and “Tell Me Who to Kill” in *In a Free State*. Most novelists have

maintained the tradition of SE for the narration and Creole for the dialogue of Creole-speaking characters.

Lovelace has developed a flexible narrative voice that is mainly SE, but which is regularly infiltrated by Creole, a practice that is motivated by two things. On the one hand, the omniscient narrator has possession of Standard English, but he is also a Creole speaker; he is part of the environment in which the fiction is set. In every one of Lovelace's novels, the narrative voice is that of a participant-observer, whether or not the narrator is explicitly identified as a character in the action. Lovelace has expressed his discomfort with the SE narrative voice that is too removed from the language of characters. In an interview with H. Nigel Thomas, published in 1991, he poses the rhetorical question: "Is the narrator somebody from England or is he from the same society as the characters?" (Thomas 19).

The other factor that accounts for the increasing variability of Lovelace's narrative voice is what seems to be a growing conviction that the writer does not own the story, and that those whose story is being told must participate in the telling of their story. In his novels, therefore, narration is not a monologue. Rather, it admits the voices of characters in the story, a trend that develops over time to the point where individual characters take ownership of the narrative voice in the dramatic manner of *Salt*, his latest novel to date.

Apart from the increasing input of his characters in the narration, each of the novels introduces a new element of experimentation with language. Lovelace's work, therefore, presents an amazing versatility of form. The first novel, *While Gods Are Falling* (1965), appears to adopt the straightforward approach of SE narration and Creole only in dialogue. Yet already Lovelace's narrative voice displays a greater variability than the SE narrative voice of the literary tradition. In this novel he uses a third-person voice for the narration, but the action is presented from the point of view of a character—the protagonist Walter Castle—and is told with great subjectivity, reflecting this character's state of mind, over the period of his development, by palpable shifts of style. These stylistic shifts also include passages of covert Creole influence, language that is ostensibly SE but which can be "heard" as Creole by the Creole speaker.

In the construction of dialogue, Lovelace demonstrates a sensitive ear, the ability to pinpoint features of speech that serve to sharply individualize his characters. This skill is already evident in *Gods*, but mainly in the portrayal of some minor characters whose speech is so finely observed that they are rendered more striking as personalities than the main actors. The speech of the protagonist is also very believable, except in some of his conversations with his wife, Stephanie, when his language shifts towards hers; and her language is problematic. The young Lovelace seems to have given Stephanie the dialogue of wifely characters in the movies and popular metropolitan literature of the era. Stephanie's language is somewhat unreal because she is more of a role than a person, almost always referred to as "the wife," "the woman," or "she."

There are also some scenes in which Walter and other characters hold philosophical discussions, projecting themes of importance to the novel, where they all speak one undifferentiated variety of SE. At this stage the writer is not yet able to create idiolects of his second language, whereas the speech of characters that speak varieties of Creole furthest removed from the acrolect is skillfully captured. For the dialogue of some of his minor characters, including the loggers in the rural area of Nuggle, Lovelace represents some basilectal features from which he significantly departs in his subsequent work.

In his next novel, *The Schoolmaster* (1968), Lovelace successfully explores a difficult option: stylized dialogue juxtaposed with the realistic representation of speech. This novel is set in Kumaca, a remote mountain village almost sealed off from the rest of the world. Its prototype is the actual village of Cumaca, one of those communities in Trinidad where Spanish and/or French-lexicon Creole remained the language of everyday communication well into the twentieth century. The novel has an allegorical, even mythical dimension to it, and this is projected largely by the writer's use of language.

Most of the characters speak a language specially invented by Lovelace to capture the otherness of Kumacan speech. This fictional language is a blend of slightly stilted SE, Spanish and French structures translated literally into English, a sprinkling of Spanish and French words, and some input of Trinidadian Creole that serves to ground the story in time and place. A significant group of young characters all speak an archaic-sounding, poetic variety of SE that sets them apart and underscores a symbolic role reserved for them. They represent Kumaca in its pristine state. These characters are marked by their youth, their beauty, their innocence and their strength, and all of them are destroyed in one way or another by the end of the novel.

Other very significant characters are outsiders to Kumaca, and their speech is realistically represented. Father Vincent the British priest, and the pompous schoolmaster Mr. Warrick, both speak SE. Here Lovelace is eminently successful at imprinting the individuality of these characters upon SE speech. Then there is Benn, the mountain guide who locks horns with the priest in a philosophical duel. Benn commands both Creole and SE, and his language switches between the two codes depending on his mood and the tenor of the debate.

In *Schoolmaster* the variability of Lovelace's narrative voice becomes more pronounced. The main voice is a collective one that reflects the consciousness of the village. This voice remains largely SE, but shifts on occasion into the distinctive language of fictional Kumaca, and yields to the thought processes of individual characters. This a progression from *Gods*, in which the narrative voice draws on the consciousness of a single character.

It is in his next novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979) that Lovelace arrives at the richly flexible narrative voice that will be the basis of his future innovation. Lovelace incorporates into the narration the worldview and the individual speaking styles of the novel's characters, thus admitting Creole, without apology, into predominantly SE discourse. This infiltration is captured

in an image from the novel, a description of music at a dance: “and they was taking classic tunes, tunes like lieberstraum and intermezzo and barcarole, and threading them through with calypso” (*Dragon* 130).

The narrative voice also reflects the writer’s own extensive language competence, that of an educated Trinidadian able to mix codes and to smoothly shift between SE and Creole, as well as between different registers of SE—the conversational, the academic and the lyrical. The narration often shifts into an intellectualizing mode that employs scholarly language, moving from an oral to a scribal register that is part of the diversity of Lovelace’s narrative voice. An element of his lyricism is the long sentence, laden with images, that is a trademark of his style in all of his fiction. Often these passages are, syntactically, not sentences at all, but loosely constructed stream-of-consciousness reflections bounded by full stops, a single one sometimes filling a whole page or more. There is also a certain lyricism in the recurrence of a set of lexical items that affirm and celebrate qualities such as vitality, dignity and resistance, language use that suggests the visionary reconstructing reality by the power of the word: “aliveness,” “quickness,” “tallness,” “personhood,” “dangerousness,” “warriorhood.” Dialogue in *Dragon* is exquisitely fine-tuned, as it will continue to be in all of Lovelace’s later works, reflecting an increased attentiveness to voice.

His next published novel, *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982), written before *Dragon*, presents yet another narrative strategy—the use of Creole for narration as well as dialogue. The single code tends to mask the fact that this novel maintains the practice of infiltrating the narration with the voices of different characters. Lovelace’s narrator is a woman, who has not witnessed at first hand much of the action that she recounts, including some crucial scenes that take place in settings not seen as a woman’s space—the rumshop and the gayelle, for example. However, as wife of Leader Bee of the community’s Spiritual Baptist church, she has access to a network of informants on events in the village. Eva, then, is really a medium. She relays events in language so vivid as to suggest eyewitness narration. One may therefore apply to *Wine* the theory of possession by which Funso Aiyejina interprets *Salt*:

... the first person narrator is a multi-vocal narrator who is regularly possessed by the other characters in the novel ... [like] the medium in *orisa* rituals who loses his or her voice and inherits the voice and manner of the possessing deity. (“A Complex Tapestry” 13)

Thus what we hear in *Wine* is not always Eva’s voice. Rather, she yields to the voices of the different villagers who provide parts of the story.

The villagers of *Wine* and the slum-dwellers of *Dragon* speak a rather educated variety of Creole. It is further into the mesolect than fits the social profile of these characters, for example: the preponderance in their speech of SE pronoun forms inflected for case (“his” and “him,” as opposed to “he” serving as subject, object and possessive); widespread SE plural marking; and

the use of “will” over the TC future tense marker “go.” This tendency is not peculiar to Lovelace. Many Trinidadian writers seem either to unconsciously project onto their characters the variety of Creole which they themselves speak, or, unconsciously or deliberately, to weed out from their literary representation of Creole traditional features which are still alive and well in Trinidadian speech, to make their writing more accessible to the English-speaking audience.

In *Salt*, Lovelace returns to the narrative voice that has a SE base with regular code switching. Now, however, the variability of the narrative voice goes beyond simple code switching. *Salt* employs a main narrator who, like Eva of *Wine*, is a conduit, a gatherer, and coordinator of stories. This narrator is a chameleon persona, the voice seeming to slide between first and third person, omniscience and a limited perspective.

Moreover, the voices of characters may now abruptly displace the voice of the main narrator, quite often in mid-sentence, in an ongoing scenario of “everybody putting in their mouth” (*Salt* 3). Without notice we are plunged into a different consciousness. Suddenly the story is being told from a different point of view, in a different voice, the transfer signalled only by linguistic clues—startling shifts of person, tense, register or code. *Salt* is an exciting innovation in narrative practice that takes to new heights of artistry the manipulation of the Trinidadian language repertoire.

The specific strategy of participatory narration introduced in *Salt* is a culmination of trends that have been developing in Lovelace’s work over the years, advancing the writer’s undertaking to make the subjects of fiction collective owners of the story, joint comptrollers of the word.

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