

**POETRY AND PLACE:  
SEEING / READING LANDSCAPE AND SETTING IN SELECTED CARIBBEAN POETS**

Mark McWatt

I should say from the outset that this paper is not a systematic scholarly exercise, looking at the landscape and the settings of selected Caribbean poems and, with the help of various critical perspectives, arguing towards an important conclusion about the nature of the Caribbean creative imagination or something like that.<sup>1</sup> That is probably the sort of thing I would have attempted up to ten years ago, fussing to assure my colleagues or fellow conference delegates about the seriousness of my purpose and of the work in the paper. These days I find that I tend to focus more on aspects of literature that haunt my own imagination – and also on a more personal reaction to what I read. My preoccupation with the relationship between landscape, language and imagination began many years ago and sprung from attempts both to write about the Guyana landscape and to ‘read’ that landscape in the work of Guyanese authors, primarily the fiction of Wilson Harris.

Many years ago my family and I spent a brief holiday in St. Lucia and on one of the days we took a taxi tour around the island. Some time in the afternoon, when we were driving back to Castries along the east coast road, the driver mentioned that the little town we were just entering was called D’Ennery. Immediately I remembered Derek Walcott’s poem “Return to D’Ennery: Rain” and I made the driver stop so that I could look around. There we were, my bemused wife and young children, the puzzled van driver who kept saying that it was just a village with nothing important to see – and I, feeling a strange disappointment that what I considered the ‘grandeur’ of Walcott’s poem was somehow not available to me as I stood in the road looking around. I thought that perhaps it should have been raining (it was a bright afternoon): in the poem it was raining and Walcott seemed to feed on the gloom and to achieve a very powerful sense of place and a kind of emotional grandeur around the idea of home which easily infected the reader. But we were soon driving away from Dennery: in any case I didn’t remember enough of the poem to know what to look for. I remembered the “village stricken with a single street,” the references to the sea and the reef and the white net of rain moving off down the beach.<sup>2</sup> It surprised me that a place that was the subject of a poem that I (and others) greatly admired, was not more recognizable, and I wondered about the relationship between poetry and place, about the role the phenomenon of landscape plays in locating or ‘grounding’ a poem, and perhaps subtly displacing one’s understanding of both the poem and the place.

When I got back to Walcott’s poem soon after this experience, it struck me that the poem was not really about place, about Dennery, but rather about Walcott himself. It is a complex reflection on past and present selves – I hadn’t paid enough attention to the fact that it was a RETURN to Dennery, an occasion which afforded the poet an encounter with a

---

<sup>1</sup>This paper was delivered as the Second Annual Edward Baugh Distinguished Lecture, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, September 2008.

<sup>2</sup>I use line numbers in quoting from shorter poems such as “Dennery” but, in the case of a long epic poem like Omeros, I use page numbers. Apart from Omeros, all the poems cited are found in his Collected Poems.

younger version of self and memories of attitudes and values he no longer shared:

Five years ago even poverty seemed sweet,  
 So azure and indifferent was this air,  
 So murmurous of oblivion was the sea  
 That human action seemed a waste. . . . (5-8)

Dennery, revisited after five years becomes the site of the poet's struggle to accommodate the 'ordinary' common truths of place and people with the artistic, altering vision that claims him and makes him, at the end of the poem, the "most / accursed of God's self-pitying creatures" (63). But the poem is also concerned with the question of how to claim landscape as home: "O God" he asks, "where is our home?" (36), and later speaks of the heart's "bitter devotion to home" (43). Dennery is physical place or space on which the poet projects this inner struggle for belonging and identity on the one hand and artistic integrity on the other. This D'Ennery is the creature of Walcott's poem and impossible to find in the real place.

By the time he comes to write *Omeros*, however, that eastern coastline around D'Ennery has become part of the un-self-conscious home of the poet's imagination, and its presence in the epic poem is much closer to the real physical place:

One side of the coast plunges its precipices  
 into the Atlantic. Turns require wide locks,  
 since the shoulder is sharp and the curve just misses

a long drop over the wind-bent trees and the rocks  
 between the trees. There is a wide view of D'Ennery  
 with its stone church and wide ochre cliffs at whose base

The African breakers end. . . . (224)

This is of course the setting of the scene for Hector's death in his taxi the "comet" when it plunges over the cliff at high speed, and part of the difference in the attitude towards place here is accounted for by the requirements of the epic, as opposed to the earlier lyric genre. The cliffs near D'Ennery are the setting for an important climactic event in the poem and so remain much closer to our traditional 'reading' of geographical place than in "Return to D'Ennery: Rain".

Another earlier Walcott poem about place which interested me was the poem "The Swamp" from the volume *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965). What I am calling 'place' here is not a specific geographical location, but rather a special type of physical landscape, the nature and characteristics of which are familiar to most readers. As someone who has carried around memories of swamps since childhood, I was excited by the poem and its language, but at the same time struck by a kind of absence. I suppose I was looking in the poem for what the environmental critics now refer to as "the principle of dual accountability to scientific as well as aesthetic truth"<sup>3</sup>. The individual images of aspects of the swamp are very vivid and powerful. Here are a few examples:

Behind its viscous breath the very word 'growth'

---

<sup>3</sup>This quote is from the online version (no pagination) of his review found here: <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~smarx/Nature/Buell.html>.

Grows fungi, rot;  
White mottling its root. (3-5)

Fearful, original sinuousities! Each mangrove sapling  
Serpentlike, its roots obscene  
As a six-fingered hand. . . . (13-15)

The speckled vulva of the tiger-orchid;  
Outlandish phallos  
haunting the traveller of its one road. (19-21)

These are virtuoso poetic performances, but their very selection, plus the value-laden words in the imagery ("rot," "obscene," "outlandish") turn our attention away from the physical phenomenon of the swamp and towards the poet and *his* attitude towards the swamp. There is a real sense in which the language, far from enabling an experience of the swamp, transforms it instead into a human uneasiness or fear. Hence – and perhaps inevitably – the language is faithful to the poet's vision but not to the objective reality of the swamp. I want to return later to the notion of environmental or eco-criticism in connection with another Caribbean poet, but right now I want to move on to look at poetry and place / space in the work of Edward Baugh.

There is a poem called "Getting There" in Eddie Baugh's first collection, *A Tale From the Rainforest*. Here we have a poem the first half of which is very firmly tied to the real: a winding, difficult up-hill journey by car to visit a mysterious woman; the trip is tedious noisy and not without danger. But when we arrive, in the middle of the poem, at the question of the woman's identity, all the tedious reality disappears:

Well, to tell  
the truth, I not so sure  
myself. My friend who study  
Literature say she is the tenth  
Muse. Him say her name  
is Silence. . . . (19-24)

The noise and the danger are taken over by silence and calm as the poem moves swiftly from outer to inner space, from the detailed, material and particular to the imprecise, the mysterious and the vast, to an inner space. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, speaks of an "inner immensity . . . which flees the objects of nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*" (184). It is also an inner space as the persona of the poem abruptly abandons the outer journey for the dream of an inner peace and the repose of the spirit. Physical place or destination is here transcended in favour of a superior, inner space that was probably the object of the journey from the beginning.

In "The Warner-Woman," a poem from the same collection, there is a spatial opposition between narrow, dim interior space and the larger and more threatening exterior world that the warner woman refers to. When the poem opens the persona is:

underneath my mother's bed.  
I delight in dust and dimness.  
Connoisseur of comics and the coolness of floorboards. . . . (3-4)

This is a world that is intimate, cosy and protected, and it is shattered by the warner woman:

But the blue sky broke. The warner-woman.  
 Bell-mouthed and biblical  
 she trumpeted out of the hills,  
 prophet of doom, prophet of God,  
 breeze-blow and earthquake,  
 tidal wave and flood. . . . (6-11)

The warner-woman's prophesy of doom penetrates and threatens the comfort and security of the boy with the vast and threatening exterior world and the disorder of natural upheavals. On one level the contrasting spaces refer to the differences between the protected world of childhood innocence and the wide and frightening adult world, with which the child is familiar by the end of the poem: "Haven't heard the warner-woman / these thirty-odd years." A similar use of place or space to show the differences between childhood innocence and adult experience is found in the poem "Responsibility," where the child awakens in the early morning and is dimly aware of his parents beginning their day's duties elsewhere in the house while he retreats into the narrow and cosy space under the covers, knowing that the "distant morning" of his adult responsibility is still far away in the future.

In The Poetics of Space, Bachelard has a chapter on 'corners,' the corners of rooms and other intimate interior spaces, which denote protection or refuge from an outside world, but which also permit the kind of daydreaming that expands the corner and enriches the imaginative life of the occupant. I think this is clearly the case as well in these poems of Eddie Baugh. Bachelard writes at length about the house as a space of intimacy and protection and one that illustrates the opposition we have been discussing between inner and outer worlds. Of course, Eddie Baugh has a poem called "The House" in the collection It Was The Singing: it is a poem that neatly illustrates many of the spatial paradigms that Bachelard refers to: Bachelard suggests that the house changes from the "geometrical space" (47) of an "inert box" (47) – which characterizes the house before you move in and become accustomed to it – to the "inhabited space" (47) of the house that has become home. The persona of Baugh's poem states that because they did not own the house nor expect to stay long in it, they did not "shift / to shape the place to [their] convenience" (?) but rather "it was we who made accommodation, / adjusting ourselves to its rigidities" (?). In return, as it were, the house becomes an interior space that is protective of the family, a refuge from the harshness of the external space (the hurricane, the harsh noonday heat, the "deadly geometry of the sparrow-hawk" [?]). This process of house and family growing to accommodate each other takes place over time (the time it takes the baby who moved in with them to grow up and get married): it becomes "a good place to come home to" (?) and for the children to grow up in. Of this process, Bachelard says, a geometrical object of this kind ought to resist the metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy. (48) There is a "dynamic rivalry" (47), Bachelard, claims, "between house and universe" (47), but through "some indefinable current of sympathy" (39) the house becomes part of our dream of home – the place or 'space' of home. The persona in Baugh's poem affirms all this at the end of the poem when, looking forward to the daughter's marriage the following day, he says that "something, perhaps, will be fulfilled."

Moving outward from the house to the larger space of the town, I want to look at two poems about, presumably, Port Antonio, the town where Baugh grew up. "The Town Which Had Known Better Days" is a poem about the way the town comes to a sudden but temporary life of excitement when Errol Flynn's yacht anchored in the bay and the star and his entourage brighten the town for a while with their extravagant lifestyle. What is interesting is the way time or event is seen in the poem through the lens of adult memory and imagination, although the experience took place when the persona was a school-boy. Apart from language and details that suggest the values and judgment of a mature and distant perspective – such as "our picturesque, ramshackle, port" (14) – it is clear that the understanding of contemporary events has increased, changed and matured since the time when they actually took place:

we learned to our befuddlement  
that Eve (spelt differently, we were relieved  
to find) could be a man's name, when one  
of the slow, precociously pubescent girls  
who giggled at the back of the class, waved  
her autograph book in our faces, showing off  
what a French boy – her boyfriend, so she said –  
a sort of junior cook on the yacht  
(I learnt *sous-chef* much later) what that  
French boy, Yves, had written. . . . (18-27)

The parenthetic remark ("I learnt *sous-chef* much later") makes the point explicit. The main point here is that the experience of place – indeed all experience that can be read in poetry – is 'contained,' if that is the right word, in memory, the poet's memory. The poet selects experiences and details from memory and presents them in the poem. This makes the poem in a sense entirely different from the place its title evokes. The centre of the poem is the consciousness, memory and imagination of the poet and not the place itself. Thus, the reader is not distracted by reality.

There is another poem about the same place in the earlier volume *A Tale from the Rainforest*. This shorter poem is entitled "A Rain-Washed Town by the Sea":

The scrunch of the kitchen knife through the long stalks  
Of ginger lilies I cut for my mother  
This leaf-moist morning. The sharp scent  
Pierces me  
Way above the trumpet  
tree, noisy with the gossip of birds,  
improbably far, the silver stylus  
Of a jet chalks the arrow of my  
Ambition across immaculate blue.  
Even as I gaze it dissolves in puff balls  
of vapour.  
From my school desk, carved  
with the names of the lost, the heros, I shall dream  
on the cobalt sea.  
By midday it will rain,  
Extravagantly, the gutters will gurgle with delight.

These memories define me. I keep them  
 against that morning when my eyes  
 no longer turn to greet the sun. (1-19)

Interestingly, the town is not mentioned at all nor evoked in any obvious way. The reader gathers that the town names or defines the place / space in which the experiences described in the poem take place. The sensuous nature of the experiences – with strong appeal to sight, hearing, smell – conjure a reality that, for the poet, is intimately identified with the place, the “rain-washed town.” It is interesting that, although the poem is obviously referring to memories – and the words “these memories” (17) occur near the end – it is written entirely in the present tense; the verbs not in the present tense are in the future tense: “I *shall* dream on the cobalt sea” (13); “by midday it *will* rain” (15). This technique makes the memories present and makes them more vivid and powerful. For the poet, these experiences are immediate and available: the rain, the sound of the knife cutting the stalks, the smell, and although the many details are carefully selected by the poet, their arrangement and their effect (on poet and reader) seem involuntary, inevitable.

Another interesting aspect of this brief poem is its use of space: the way the focus shifts from objects very close – the knife, the lily stalks, the trumpet tree – to the contrails of the jet which is “improbably far” (7) and really has nothing to do with the place, the “rain-washed town,” except that the poet has chosen to include it, indicating clearly that what constitutes the reality of the town is created entirely by the poet as aspects of memory. For me, this illustrates what Bachelard refers to as “the dialectics of inside and outside” (211) – not only in the sense that the poet’s creative imagination (inside) and the real phenomena (outside) synthesize the poem, but also the use of the present tense conjures into palpable (outer) poetic existence experiences that now exist only in the poet’s inner memory of childhood long ago. The technique recurs in the following stanza when the persona is seated at his school desk, but dreams of (or rather, “on”) the cobalt sea so that blue sky and cobalt sea – in contrast with the more intimate surroundings and activities in the poem – infuse the quality of vastness, or what Bachelard calls “immensity” into the poem. According to Bachelard, one

might say that immensity is a philosophical category of daydream. Daydream undoubtedly feeds on all kinds of sights, but through a sort of natural inclination, it contemplates grandeur. And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside of the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity. (183)

Baugh does mention the daydream that takes place at the school desk which can indeed be considered a ‘contemplation of grandeur.’ This kind of daydream, according to Bachelard, “always starts in the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away is far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*” (184).

This poem becomes more than a poem of place, it is a poem about space, immense space, in which the poetic imagination contemplates infinity. Finite experiences are projecting into infinite space and time and are therefore thereby hallowed – they become the defining memories referred to at the end of the poem, which exist to defy and counteract the ravages of time:

These memories define me. I keep them  
 against that morning when my eyes

no longer turn to greet the sun. (17-19)

When we turn to Kamau Brathwaite, we find that place often expands beyond the corners, houses and towns that we have been looking at, and becomes instead an ocean of 'space' that transcends physical limitations and dimensions as well as individual life experience and memory. In the preface to Mother Poem, Brathwaite says: "This poem is about porous limestone: my mother, Barbados" and the reader soon discovers that place here refers not only to the Barbados of the poet's experience, but also to the Barbados of history, and Brathwaite frequently sees the island through the filter of history – of plantation society and slavery – and this has the effect of expanding the reality of place and projecting it into the dim historical – even geological – past. This in turn necessitates another, more manageable metaphor, hence the figure of the mother. We find that woman, historical time and physical place are drawn into an embrace that creates a strangely powerful resonance throughout the poem. Perhaps this can be seen as another instance of simultaneous inner and outer reality as the poet's own memory is modified or supplanted by history – and the individual consciousness of the woman is identified with the whole island and its past. In brief passages of the poem, it is possible to encounter the multiple realities of the subject – as woman, as ancestral memory, as geography, as vegetation, as language itself:

So she sings of streams  
that are a-glutter with boulders

Of rocks that have not forgotten  
their ancestry of iron

She quarrels like the dry seeds of the lotus rattle

She rattles like dry tamarind pods  
like shak shaks

She shakes  
And her tongue climbs a hill of dry consonants

She is alpha  
She is omega  
She is happy. . . . ("Hex," 1-12)

Because the earth itself (rock, shrub and river-course) is part of the poetic voice that speaks, it is tempting, perhaps, to read Mother Poem in so-called eco-critical terms, that is from the kind of earth-centred approach advocated by eco-critics such as Lawrence Buell, whose book The Environmental Imagination (1995) has become a seminal text in this new critical movement. Buell takes his cue from Thoreau's Walden and the work of other American naturalist writers, and traces the ancestry of this kind of writing back to Virgil's Georgics, pastorals like Spencer's The Shepherd's Callender and heroic narratives like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In terms of contemporary literature, the environmental critic focuses upon metaphors of kinship between man and the natural world which, according to Buell, "whether true or not, when accepted as language can strengthen the environmental ethic" (218).

I am not sure what Brathwaite would say about all this, but of course it is not really an entirely new way of reading nature in poetic texts, though some of the aims and emphases might be different, including that of (to quote Buell) "teasing us toward awareness of ourselves as environmental beings" (251). There are sections of Mother Poem that lend themselves to this kind of reading:

Is this why there are no rivers running in my island  
 why you see dry water courses if you follow the shape of the  
 Bramble  
 The curve of the slow growing green, the sunken gums of the parish  
 why you remember only its history of pebbles?

For how can water flow from rock  
 When the dust blinds the dream of the shot eye  
 How can cool silver break from coral limestone  
 when no wind of rain breaks in upon our prophecies? ("Tear or pear shape," 1-9)

This kind of sense of place, Buell argues (quoting the cultural geographer Yi Fu Tuan) "holds psyche and society together by supplying a deeply satisfying sense of home base or home range" (262). Buell also quotes the assertion that "without a complex knowledge of one's place and without the faithfulness to one's place upon which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place would be used carelessly and eventually destroyed" (262). There is certainly reference to this sort of abuse and desecration in Brathwaite's poem just quoted; a later section reads:

Dead river courses: dry causes  
 The leaves of the land eaten by tourists

My mother's vision blocked by bricks and cement blacks. . . . ("Tear or pear shape," 18-20)

It is the children of the mother who have become 'unfaithful' to Barbados and have condoned its careless slide towards destruction – and why? Brathwaite suggests it is because they have become alienated and attracted to other places:

And her children

Wearing dark glasses  
 Hearing aids  
 leaning on wine

On the dark sibyls of asia minor  
 on the flat bergs of western ontario

Build houses bigger than she has need for. . . . (24-30)

The environmental critic argues that this kind of writing forces the reader to look on place in a new and different way and calculate both its effect on him/her and also the reader's contribution to its current state of being. In this way, Buell claims, the reader can "recalibrate familiar landscapes . . . to keep alive a sense of the undiscovered country of the nearby" (262).

It seems to me, nevertheless, that Kamau Brathwaite's Mother Poem, while yielding readily to this kind of environmental analysis, is much more complex in its treatment of place and



in its impact on the mind of the reader. The historical echos in the landscape (windmills, the plantation system, the old railway that lives again in the poem "Angel Engine"), link the mother and the reader to ancestry and slavery and suggest the miracle of survival and endurance: flesh, limestone, vegetation, memory and imagination are all fused into the phenomenon of place and are part of the space that is Barbados – but a Barbados whose plenitude and riches are encountered only in Kamau's poem which modifies and enriches one's encounter and experience of place and provides a language for accepting its haunting presence. As Brathwaite suggests at the end, the poem takes away the reader's Barbados and at the same time restores it enriched by memory and imagination:

So that losing her now  
you will slowly restore her silent gutters of word-fall

Slipping over her footsteps like grass  
Slipping out of her wrinkles like rain

Re-echo of the stream and bubble  
Re-echo of the cliff and the scar face mountain

Past the ruinate mill and the plantation stable  
past the bell and the church wall, the chapel

Half-trampled with cordia leaves: the graveyards of slaves

Past the scramble of grape where the train line once ran  
past the boulders and stumps of the silkcotton trees

Linking linking the ridges: the matchbox wood houses  
Past the glimmering downward gulley and pebble and fountain

The ancient watercourses

Trickling slowly into the coral  
Traveling inwards under the limestone

Widening outwards into the sunlight  
towards the breaking of her flesh with foam. . . . ("Driftwood," 140-155)

The reader tastes the full variety and richness of place as he declines with the life-giving water through the landscape, along the ancient water courses towards the surrounding sea.

I want to turn my attention now to a place – or 'space' – that is very familiar to me: that of my native Guyana. One of the problems here is that Guyana has two very different physical landscapes: the flat, agricultural coastal plain, where ninety percent of the people live; and the interior landscape of forest, rivers and mountains. Literary treatments of Guyana's interior landscape are best encountered in the prose fiction of Wilson Harris, and indeed there is very little poetry set in the hinterland forests and mountains. For my purposes in this paper, therefore, I will confine myself to the spaces and landscapes of the city and coastland as found in the poetry of Martin Carter.

In the poets looked at so far, we saw that the places and spaces in which the poems are set, while reflecting the poets' own sense of place and belonging, were nevertheless modified, displaced, or inscribed by their imaginative concerns and agendas, such as the idea of home, the desire to possess the landscape, the notion of how history has altered the perception of place and ideas concerning the 'spaces' of memory and desire. In all these cases, we sense that the landscape or setting is somehow subordinate to the poet's imaginative agenda and design. With the landscapes of Guyana, the opposite seems to happen: the landscape influences and acts upon the poet and creates a quality of strangeness or mystery within the writing that several critics have mentioned.

Perhaps the most important feature of the coastland of Guyana, where almost all of Carter's poems are set, is that it is below sea-level, an average, we are told, of eight feet below sea-level. This means that the land itself has to be protected by sea-defences: the famous Guyana sea-wall. This, and the sea that is always threatening invasion, are prominent features of the coastal landscape and in the Guyanese imagination. Hemmed in by the sea on one side and the forested interior on the other, most Guyanese live in the relatively narrow space between the two. They occupy this liminal space and it can perhaps be argued that they express a liminal imagination: an imagination which dwells on the threshold between reality and dream. The seawall itself features prominently in the work of Martin Carter, Guyana's foremost poet. His poem "Sunday Night" explores the notion of boundaries and liminal spaces:

This night is me  
I walk the wall of life:  
Sand is out there and little crabs that hide,  
Sky is up there and yellow piece of moon  
City's down yonder like a shabby church. ("Sunday Night," 1-5)

Notice that the poet is keenly aware of the geometries of his space as he walks on the sea-wall between the sea and the city, but he is also on a kind of vertical mid-point as well between the "piece of yellow moon," which is "up there," and the city, which is "down yonder." It is the privileged position of the artist, perhaps, which makes him more aware of what is going on. The poem continues:

The night is me  
I walk the wall of life:  
The congregation only hears the priest  
But more I hear – the clicking of the rat  
Gnawing that holy altar comes to me. (6-10)

The confinement within physical spaces – behind physical boundaries – becomes for Carter an imprisonment within mental attitudes, as though landscape has invaded the mind. The poet, contemplating this condition, says that it "draws his heart" and "husks it to a shell." But, typically with Carter, there comes a point where the boundaries are breached (just as the sea frequently overtops and breaches the sea-wall) and revolutionary forces are unleashed. The dry husk of the poet's heart is perfect kindling for the revolutionary fire; the poem concludes:

This night is me  
I walk the wall of life:  
This wall is stone and iron heels of anger  
kick sparks into my husk and shell of darkness  
till flesh ignite and burn in black and red. (21-25)

Again, in the poem "Black Friday, 1962," a poem about a day of riot when a large section of Georgetown's commercial district was burned down, Carter resorts to the sea-wall image. After daring to wonder whether the day's events signalled the beginning of a revolution, he remembers a lesson from the sea-wall:

Behind a wall of stone beside this city,  
mud is blue-grey when ocean waves are gone,  
in the midday sun!  
And I have seen some creatures rise from holes  
and claw a triumph like a citizen  
and reign until the tide! (27-32)

Is the reign of the people to be as ephemeral as that of the mud-crabs on the foreshore between tides? The vision of revolutionary glory can easily turn into a vision of despair, as he continues:

Atop the iron roof-tops of this city  
I see the vultures practising to wait.  
And everytime and anytime,  
in sleep or sudden wake, nightmare, dream,  
always for me the same vision of cemeteries, slow  
funerals  
broken tombs, and death designing all. (33-39)

This is also perhaps a good example of what Jeffrey Robinson calls the "unconscious subversiveness of the imagination" (83): Carter would dearly have liked to proclaim Black Friday as a moment of liberation when, as he says, a "city of clerks / turned a city of men" (7-8), but in full optimistic flow the subversive imagination (the sea-wall image) pulls the poet and the poem in another direction. The language of the imagination (the poet's attitude towards his observations of the world) asserts its autonomy and speaks its own message, but that language itself has been affected by the poet's physical environment. The very existence of the sea-wall indicates that the coastland is a contested space – contested by sea, forest and man himself. Hence, in many of Carter's poems, the coastal landscape seems ambiguous and amphibious. In a poem called "Endless Moment World" the poet seeks to adjust to this amphibious landscape and the poem ends with the lines:

so living where to breathe is hard  
I fly like a fish in the air  
and swim like a bird in the water  
and gill stays gill, and lung stays lung  
and my fin and my wing help each other. (21-25)

In this later poem, Carter is using the perceived difficulties and contradictions of the physical setting to suggest the difficulties and contradictions of the political situation in Guyana at the time – and he is doing so without projecting one on to the other: the accuracy and integrity of his reference to landscape is what controls the poem's meaning and effect.

I want to end by looking at two Carter poems that extend the awareness of the sea that threatens the coast. Here, the poet uses the sea and the seafaring fisherman very effectively to comment on the past and the quest for the future and the sense of self. The figure of the fisherman is not romanticized (although the language sometimes makes gestures in this direction), but rather is tainted with the horror of the past and that quality

of dream or nightmare that we have been examining. Here is the ending of a poem by Carter called "Till I Collect":

Over the shining mud the moon is blood  
 falling on ocean at the fence of lights.  
 My course I set, I give my sail the wind  
 to navigate the islands of the stars  
 till I collect my scattered skeleton  
 till I collect. (13-18)

The fear of excavating the buried horrors of the past – on land or at sea – haunts the imagination and is very much a part of the sense of dread associated with the drowned coastland. In a later poem, "Our Number," the language becomes more enigmatic, perhaps, but the figure of the fisherman's wife, counting shrimp on the foreshore, provides an unmistakable link to the familiar imaginative complex where the vast sky and sea exposes and diminishes the value and stature of the human until he/she becomes animal or bird, indistinguishable from the fisherman's catch, and is finally (as in the time of slavery) abstracted to a mere number:

The pins of the slack pin seine  
 irregular the horizon; the tide  
 Has gone them bare. A most disturbed  
 seagull proportions a catch. The fisherman's  
 wife, another seagull, leans on the sky  
 counting shrimp.

Surrendering ourselves  
 we denizen an epoch of abuse  
 trying to defy with the seagull's  
 or seawife's similar desperation  
 the tide that naked skins us.  
 Shrimp is our number. Is so  
 we stay. Is a way  
 of counting born we. (1-14)

The sense of the strange and the mysterious in these Martin Carter poems seems to spring directly from the setting itself, from that coastal landscape that is full, not only of physical dangers like flood and the destruction of farms and homes and livelihood, but also of the ghosts of history and the improbability of permanence and real rootedness in that amphibious place.

Perhaps, then, I can conclude by surmising that my fascination with place and landscape in poetry springs from my own Guyana upbringing and experience where these 'spaces' are so dominant and seem to govern so much of one's real and imaginative existence.

### Works Consulted

- Bachelard, Gaston. The Poetics of Space. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon, 1969.
- Baugh, Edward. A Tale from the Rainforest. Kingston, Jamaica: Sandberry, 1988.
- . It Was The Singing. Kingston, Jamaica: Sandberry, 2000.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. Mother Poem. Oxford: OUP, 1977.
- Buell, Lawrence. The Environmental Imagination. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Carter, Martin. Selected Poems. Georgetown: Red Thread Women's Press, 1997.
- Marx, Steven. "The Environmental Imagination by Lawrence Buell." Books at High Noon, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, February 10, 2000.
- Robinson, Jeffrey. "The Guyanese-ness of Guyanese Writing." All are Involved: the Art of Martin Carter. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2000.
- Walcott, Derek. Collected Poems, 1948-1084. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986.
- . Omeros. London: Faber, 1990.