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### "Labyrinth of past/present/future" in some of Kamau Brathwaite's recent Poems

In most of his poems, particularly in the poems collected in *X/Self*,<sup>1</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite disturbs and disrupts the line of time in a way that has become familiar to twentieth-century readers since Joyce's use of what T.S. Eliot labelled the "mythic method" in *Ulysses* and Eliot's own transformation of it in *The Waste Land*, to mention only two of the best-known landmarks. Deliberately disregarding chronological succession, literature of this kind superimposes various layers of history and myth through allusions, borrowings or word plays. In it, as Thomas Dilworth puts it, "all layers are visible through all other layers," and "the present may be defined by implied comparison with the past, but it may also define the past."<sup>2</sup> The inventive vigour of Brathwaite's language gives new force to the device and draws filigree maps of future possibilities.

In his work, as in that of Wilson Harris,<sup>3</sup> time is a labyrinth in which there is no fixed centre; time is a mesh of overlapping lanes, avenues and blind alleys that have to be explored without any preconceived idea

<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press, 1987. *X/Self* is the third part of Brathwaite's second trilogy, the first and second parts, *Mother Poem* and *Sun Poem*, calling up feminine and masculine filiation before the development of an ambivalent (rather than neuter) unknown.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Dilworth, *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*, University of Toronto Press, 1988, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> I am thinking particularly of the novel entitled *Carnival*, Faber and Faber, 1985. The first words in my title are quoted from page 32.

and connected in new, visionary ways if the world (and the word) is to make sense.

Harris and Brathwaite both come from a part of the world where, as a result of the process of colonisation and exploitation initiated by Europeans, races have been mixed and the vast majority of the population uprooted, cut off from their ancestral traditions. People have not just to recover, they must create some sense of identity. Both writers are aware of the necessity of forging a new sense of belonging, and of evolving new modes for living together.

Clues to the lay of Brathwaite's historical land are to be found in his essays, which are fleshed in the rich hues of his rhythms and sounds. But the best initiation, to me, is a close reading of his poems, an unbiased approach to the way his plays on words and sounds, the way he dissociates and conjugates, takes apart and shapes anew, mutilates and refashions language until it yields a new "sensesound" unity with which he can counter centuries of alienation.

I propose to look at five poems: "The visibility trigger," "The fapal state machine," "Edge of the desert," "Mont Blanc," and "Aachen." They all belong to the second section of *X/Self*, his clearest statement to-date about the position of man, and of Caribbean man in particular, towards, in front of, within, or outside history. In addition, they all reveal something about the major historical catastrophe called colonisation, its logic and its aftermath.

This is especially clear in "The visibility trigger," a poem about the first intrusion of the white man into the life of an African village.<sup>4</sup> The poem begins like an interrupted narrative: "And so they came over the reefs." The white men came by sea, came "up the creeks and rivers." But

<sup>4</sup> A remarkable commentary on the poem is to be found in Maria-Francesca Mollica's introduction to *The Visibility Trigger / Le détonateur de visibilité*, traduit par M.F. Mollica et C. Pagnouille, Cahiers de Louvain 59, Leuvense Schrijversaktie, 1986.

we, and the poet, are wise with hindsight. The speaker is ignorant. The lilt suggests something gentle and kind, confirmed in the next line: "i offered you a kola nut," although the hands he sees as he does so are butchers' hands: "your finger huge and smooth and red." The homely reference to a market in Accra in the description of their dress ("makola blue") indicates that the speaker does not see them for what they are: warriors on the war-path. African warriors, if at war with a tribe, would not accept the kola nuts, hence the irony in the line "and you took it your dress makola blue," an irony that is carried to a pitch of contradiction in the following, isolated line:

and you broke it into gunfire.

Breaking the offered nuts is a ritual of mutual acceptance; here tradition and sacrament are denied. Lines 23-25 present a nightmarish repetition of the denial of faith, the betrayal of trust presented first in lines 8-9 and summed up in line 25:

bowl calabash oil carafe of fire silence.

Just before, the visionary dreamer has *heard* the catastrophic consequences of the white man's invasion. The "stalactites ringing in [his] cave of vision" express, Rohlehr explains, "profound and abnormal unsettlement; cosmic error; disturbance within the mental cosmos."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, "Brathwaite with a Dash of Brown Crit, The Writer and the Written Life," UWI, unpublished MS, St Augustine, Trinidad, 1988, p. 24. Commenting on the lines

i could hear salt leaking out of the black hole of kaneshie  
i could hear grass growing around the edges of the green lake,

Rohlehr also writes there: "The draining out of the salt lake is the drying out of a valuable commodity, salt being in those days of early encounter a highly prized substance. The silting up of the lake is a similarly negative omen."

The central lines contrast the opposed cultures of Africa and Europe that Brathwaite defines in his essay "Metaphors of Underdevelopment"<sup>6</sup> as "subsistence culture" and "missile culture." In the subsistence culture of "exploited black space ... they are," he writes, "concerned ... with stability / equilibrium rather than with progressive disequilibrium."<sup>7</sup> The European culture is, by contrast, "very aggressive" and "needs to consume its surroundings"; "its symbols are the castle, spear, arrow, gothic cathedral spire; skyscraper, and now the missile itself."<sup>8</sup> In the poem, the white men "brought sticks rods roads bullets straight objects" by contrast with the peaceful circles of the African world: "our circles talismans round hut round village cooking pots." The world and time are perceived as circles, as cycles:

the world was round and we the spices in it  
time wheeled around our memories like stars

yam cassava groundnut sweetpea bush  
and then it was yam again.

A man's life is as circular as the season's cycle:

birth child hunter warrior  
and the breath

that is no more

which is birth which is child which is hunter which is warrior  
which is breath

that is no more.

<sup>6</sup> "Metaphors of Underdevelopment: A Poem for Hernan Cortez," in *Africa/Europe, Essays and Poems* selected and introduced by Eugène Van Isterbeek, Leuvense Schrijversakademie, 1984, pp. 35-57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

The repetition expanded in successive relative clauses gives more weight to the sense of continuity beyond, through, and thanks to, death. But in "birth" the white man sees only the wounded womb ("birth was not breath / but gaping wound"), the white hunter is not concerned with survival but with making money ("hunter was not animal / but market sale"). Killing in wars has become the slaughtering of children, and when first read in isolation (as it is printed) the line "warrior was child" calls up those "abnormal," yet all too frequent pictures of boy soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

The poet's indignation then soars in what Michael Dash calls one of those "arresting moments when imagery acquires a powerful suggestiveness"<sup>10</sup>:

and i beheld the cotton tree  
guardian of graves rise upward from its monument of grass crying

aloud in its vertical hull calling  
for crashes of branches vibrations of leaves.

The riving of the ancestral tree is visually rendered in the splitting of verb and adverb ("crying / aloud"). As Rohlehr notes, the imagery of the passage "is a perfect example of how Brathwaite fuses two or more ideas or states of consciousness," here "the old coherence of the primal mind, and the new dispensation that will decimate the tribe and shatter its psychic cosmos"; "Brathwaite transforms the ceiba, home of the ancestors, into the hull of the slave ship bearing its burden of shattered souls."<sup>11</sup> But the hull is *vertical*: the tree is not struck down and laid low, it "rises upwards," and the crashing branches will bring havoc among the destroyers.

<sup>9</sup> On this, see also Rohlehr, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> J. Michael Dash, "The Visibility Trigger and *Jah Music*," *Journal of West Indian Literature* 2 (1987), 89. This, incidentally, is the only positive comment made in a generally dismissive review.

<sup>11</sup> Rohlehr, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

This leads on to the ambiguity in the title of the piece. The words "visibility trigger" are related to those used in the final image (followed, in the translated version, by the traditional Akan dirge: *damirifa due*):

and our great odoum  
triggered at last by the ancestors into your visibility  
crashed  
into history.

The white conquerors, who answered the welcoming offer of kola nuts with the fiery talk of their guns, did more than kill and wound people, they raped and maimed a living tradition: they left "stripped violated wood crying aloud its murder." That the odoum tree should be "triggered ... into your visibility" seems to be a seal on the destruction enforced by the invaders. Yet when Brathwaite writes that it "crashed / into history", does he mean that African tradition was shattered by being forced into the arena of written history or that it was launched into European history with its full load of destructive/creative power? The context of the poem as well as the most evident consequences of colonisation point to the first reading. But the ancestors are the agents of the triggering. The eruption of Africa on the European/American scene can also be seen as a time bomb. A price has had to be paid and is still being paid for seeing what should have been kept secret, for desecrating what was part of a hidden and hallowed tradition, for turning life-giving, life-preserving circles into targets for missiles, for breaking the cycle of death and life and thus turning death and suffering into ends that can only breed despair.

To crash into history, to be triggered into the white man's field of vision, is not synonymous with final destruction, but with a wound that can never be healed and that infects the invaders.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Compare with Rohlehr's suggestion that the triggering by the ancestors is a "rationalisation" of a "catastrophe too large to be comprehended." *Ibid.*, p. 28.

In the African village as presented by Brathwaite time is experienced and lived as a cyclical process. Time is a harmonious circularity attuned to the cycles of nature. But the white man arrogantly denies the circularity of time; the white man imposes the abstract notion of history as progress unfolding towards some infinitely receding absolute. Although the white man's history is landmarked with successive "revolutions" he rarely seems aware of what the word implies. In distorting his relation to time and corrupting his relationships with other human beings, he is unwittingly caught in the compulsive repetition of violence, in the vicious circle of oppression and rebellion. Paradoxically the more man insists on his freedom from cyclical repetition the more thoroughly he is trapped in the circle of violence.

"The fatal state machine" is precisely on the fatal treadmill of violence, on the enclosing mechanisms of repressive power, complete with its obedient actors and attendants: Army, Church, and School, all sanctioned and sanctified by God Almighty Lord of Hosts.

This comparatively long poem is full of puns and historical charades through which people and events are restored to their deeper reality. The first two paragraphs, for instance, bring together the Punic wars, medieval battles and tournaments and the North African Front in the Second World War. Permanence within the context of war is established, and later compared to the logic of a centralized economy. As the HQs of the armies have to be protected at all times by the "Poor Bloody Infantry," so too the delicate centres of economic decision-making must be "marched" against all threats of carnival transgressions.

The line "Charlemagne had other problems" introduces a comparison between the genuine Roman Empire of the first centuries A.D. and Charlemagne's "Holy Roman Empire," a pseudo-, neo-empire that was never anything but an unstable patchwork of various tribes and customs:

aix-la-chapelle was not on the tiber and his timbered halls were

not

made of stone he  
could become caesar  
but the pope demanded his god/head.

Though crowned emperor Charlemagne could never be deified and his timber buildings were closer to the woods in which "barbarians" lurked. The barbarians' subversive influence is, Brathwaite suggests, incompatible with a proper functioning of the "state machine": it "cannot function on mist on mystery on magic"; it cannot tolerate charity or the reversal of values proper to carnival. Jesus of Nazareth and all working people are introduced among the barbarians by the logic of sounds and the connotations of words: "and carpenters and fishermen and dialect and walking on the / water."

The second section further develops what is necessary to the state machine. But the "precepts" are "crooked within," and the isolated repetition of the reflexive pronoun ("itself itself," ll. 49 and 52) suggests some scratched record. As would happen with theological enquiries, the next lines skid into long convoluted confusing questions ending with a dogmatic non-answer: "from whence since there is god and only god and always was and is / and ever shall be," followed by the Rastafarian "seen?" and lines echoing revivalist fervour from a church or chapel.

The third section presents the rot inherent in the state machine, and the fourth the rebellions and bloodshed that are direct consequences of the mechanisms of oppression. Colonisation and imposition of the colonizers' culture is expressed in the line "young caliban howling for his tongue," which conveys the suffering of cultural deprivation and recalls Caliban's words in *The Tempest*: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (I.ii.363-5)

The brutality of the plantation system is sharply brought out in a line such as "when canefields are laid out black green sick yellow greed dry." The nursery atmosphere suggested in "sugar sweet" is denied in the violence evoked next. Raping women and cutting the throats of the men on the ships, is fair vengeance for a long endured slavery. But it offers no solution. The final lines of the poem are immediately related in Brathwaite's mind to the previous enumeration of rebels or potential rebels that have been reduced to the silence of the grave since he specifies in one of his notes that "the rebels [were] presaged in Dante's *Inferno* and already glimpsed in Michelangelo's paintings under the doom (dome) of the Sistine Chapel:" in dante's villa of valhalla" (which draws in Wagner and Norse mythology) and "in this chess checkered chapel of our hell" (the floor of the Sistine Chapel is checkered like a chessboard). But obviously the last four lines have a wider meaning. They sum up the poem (and most of the sequence) by evoking the darkness encompassing a world ruled by violence: our world, our hell.

"Edge of the desert" and "Mont Blanc" are less ambitious in length but no less inclusive in their historical scope and exemplary in their respective ways of Brathwaite's approach to history. Both focus on the drought, on the spreading of violence and starvation, which is another form of violence, on the "underdevelopment," the active impoverishment of the conquered territories by the colonizers.

Broadly speaking, "Edge of the desert" is about the colonisation of North Africa from the time of the Phoenicians onwards, and the subsequent impoverishment of land and people. The poem weaves into a continuous web of images the development of Carthaginian colonies, Cleopatra's star-crossed love affair and her suicide to escape slavery, the fall of Rome, the Arabs' slave-driving, the French colonisation, and the famine in Ethiopia. The theme that seals the unity of this apparently heterogeneous collage is the imposition of an external order, and the hopeless attempts to shake it off.

The main setting is the Sahara ("sa / hell" in "Mont Blanc"), with incursions northward to the Mediterranean coast, eastward to Egypt and Ethiopia, south to Kano in Northern Nigeria and, through the words "ports of Spain," to the Caribbean. Africa, called in line 9 "the darkened continent," was labelled "dark continent" by the white men who explored it because it was removed from the light of Christ and full of alarming customs and creatures. Many projected onto its strangeness the darkness of their own hearts, which was one way of actively darkening it. More cogently in an African perspective, the continent has been darkened by colonisation.

The "pomegranate" reference to the Maghreb in the first lines of the poem ("In the deep south / away from the ner / vous pomme / granite coast") deserves a word of comment. In spite of the words "granite" and "nervous" the place is felt to be fertile because of the sensuous roundness of "pomme"<sup>13</sup> and of the apple turning into a pomegranate,<sup>14</sup> a fruit highly charged with symbolic connotations. Its many seeds make it into an obvious symbol of fertility; but it is also, like the apple, connected with the Fall, with man's mortality, and so with the world of the dead: Persephone swallowed a pomegranate seed. In the Middle Ages its obvious representation of diversity within unity also served as a symbol for the Church. The pomegranate is a complex fruit, like the fruit of colonialism.

The "liquid voiceless / pepperpoint of fires" observed from the air may describe the shimmering caused by intense heat. It also suggests skirmishes: the "deep south" is not "pacified" yet. However, the lines which follow sound peaceful enough and define the "pepperpoint of fires" as "oases of the coconut." But these places of refreshing shadow and water

<sup>13</sup> Note that the two words in line 3 ("vous pomme") are French words, and, as it happens, French is the language that was imposed on the local calibans.

<sup>14</sup> Pomegranates are cultivated in Southern Spain (see the name of the town "Granada") and in Northern Africa: the pomegranate tree is called *Punica granatum*). My information on the pomegranate is largely derived from Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant's *Dictionnaire des symboles*, Paris, Laffont, 1982.

and rest are darkened by the latent association between coconut and skull: "that cut green skull and helmet in my hand." "Lamenting water" in the next line may describe the whining noise of the ropes as water is pulled from the wells; but the word "lamenting" calls up specific associations of lament for the dead or the departed, which leads on to the "fall of carthage" in line 14. The "tumbrils around the gardens of the port of Spain" in the next line suggest cartfuls of opponents about to be beheaded rather than fertilizing manure.

Line 20, "the kettle singing sieve to time too sand to save the world," hissing with sibilants, is complex and difficult to construe. The whistling kettle is like a timer, an instrument to measure time: "sieve to time too," like the sand clocks, therefore "sand to save the world." The sense that there is not much time or hope to save it is reinforced by the secondary reading that the world is buried in too much sand to be saved, also literally, because of increasing desertification.

In the second section of the "sinking of Chad," that is, underdevelopment, the spreading of the desert, the scarcity of food, is directly associated with the fall of Rome, which Brathwaite sees as a turning point in European history, as we shall see in "Mont blanc."

The terrible vision of the child in the thin shadow of a camel, "whose only drying water is his pools of singing eyes," is the kind of image that moved the well-fed world to extensive donations during 1985, without the donors necessarily understanding the connection between such "natural" catastrophes and a system of organized dependence.

Not far from Ethiopia, on the Nile "where the mediterranean sea comes seeking through," we come to the scene of Cleopatra's love and death, rendered in four lines that combine irreverence and sensuous luxuriance. An unlikely rebel figure "cleopat," the "unmummied peachskin coloured chick"? Yet Brathwaite and Shakespeare give her a grand part to play, when she chooses to die rather than be taken "north" by Caesar after the death of Antony (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V.ii).

The expanding industrial and military power of Europe is presented as the driving force of colonisation, as directly responsible for the underdevelopment of colonised countries: "as it rises / chad sinks." The geographical correlative used by Brathwaite for the economic power of Europe, or more generally of the Western world, is Mont Blanc. As he puts it in "Metaphors of Underdevelopment,"

Mount Blanc is, to me, the centre of Europe. It is their holy mountain: this hub of white around which European history revolves. ... [When] the mountain of history becomes "active," as it were; as Mt Blanc "rises," as it were, and becomes "illuminated," as it were; so do the areas around it *sink* and become *darker*.<sup>15</sup>

Like "Salt," "Mont Blanc" begins with the lines

Rome burns  
and our slavery begins.

This leitmotif in the sequence is easier to understand if we recall the beginning of the essay already quoted. After asking the question: "What caused the death of the Amerindians, the holocaust of slavery, the birth of Tom and Caliban?" he answers:

Now, in terms of our own culture-view, it all began with the collapse of the pillars of Hercules and the fall of the Roman Empire ...  
This imperial achievement had created an equilibrium of materia and spirit, of metropole and province, of law and chaos. ...

With the decline and fall of Rome, flux appeared ... Christianity and the holy Roman Empire attempted to restore or retain the equilibrium ... but that was now impossible ... because there were

<sup>15</sup> "Metaphors of Underdevelopment," p. 48.

now too many alternatives: too many new kinds of natives. ... And then money (MAMMON) became the centre of this shattered universe ... travel to new lands, explore, exploit control: the shift to power outwards. ... No prayer, but purse; no custom anymore but customhouse and curse. Marco Polo overland to China; the Portuguese by stepping stone to Africa; Columbus to San Salvador; looking for power, for powder, gun/powder; converting the grain to gain, unholy grain.<sup>16</sup>

The industrial and military achievements of conquering, expanding, colonizing Europe that are associated with the Mont Blanc dwarf cultural achievements:

it out proportions the parthenon

the colosseum is not to be compared with it  
nor dome nor london bridge bernini bronze nor donatello  
marble.

Mt Blanc being a huge mass of snow and ice, that is of concentrated water, is a fitting "objective correlative" for the expanding power of Europe as a source of drought for the rest of the world. If it was not for the glaciers there would, literally, be much more sea on the surface of the earth:

without it the sahara would have been water  
latvium carthage tunis would have been dolphin towns.

Such geographical considerations are meant to illustrate a historical truth: without the colonial expansion of Europe Africa's economy would still be the subsistence economy that made for a harmonious relationship with the environment, it would not have been desiccated by the

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

burning breath of the white man's greed: "harm / attan."<sup>17</sup> But the poem also suggests that aggression will eventually return like a boomerang:

sa

hara wakes out slowly.

Over half of the poem (ll. 28-32) is about the famine in the Sahel that made an impact when shown on television screens ("the film crew cameras already closing in / like buzz like buzzards"). The intrusion of dry dust to the very marrow of life is expressed by the use of short lines and the repeated splitting of "into" across different couplets. Juxtapositions of words like "dry / gully eyes," "dome / heads propped up on sticks of skeletones," or "large deep agate space age eyes" summon with terrible accuracy the emaciated bodies and faces of the starving.

The poem ends with an allusion to the suicidal capacity for self-destruction inherent in the industrial/military development of the West. The "rise / ing gas" can simply be caused by pollution. It also refers to the gas chambers so efficiently used to implement the Final Solution.

"Aachen" is the other side of the European coin. While Mt Blanc stands for the massive, impressive, and oppressive economic development of Europe, however self-defeating in the long run, Aachen stands for its recurring failure to achieve political unity, its inability ever to reach back to the dream stability of the Roman Empire. Europe has been restlessly driven by the dream of a lost paradise (soon associated with the dream of El Dorado): it lies at the back of all successive colonial ventures.

Aachen is Charlemagne's Rome, the capital (for a while) of the Holy Roman Empire so pithily contrasted with the former Empire in "The fapal state machine." The barbarians are those who speak another language, those who are not understood by the ruling class: the opponents, the dissidents. "The dialect of the tribes" (with its echoes of Mallarmé and

<sup>17</sup> On this, see also Christine Pagnouille, "Le retour du tonnerre," *Revue de poésie* vol. VI, No. 3 (1987), 41.

T.S. Eliot) refers to the various vernacular languages that replaced Latin and had achieved a measure of official recognition at the time of Charlemagne:

The dialect of the tribes will come beating up against the crack foundation stones of latin like the salt whip speechless lips of water eating the soft tones of venice.

The passage is alluring and powerfully, albeit somewhat deceptively, suggestive of the ambivalence present in the process of destruction. Echoes such as "beating"/"eating," "stones"/"tones," "whip"/"lips," create a rich language texture that covers up, or compensates for, the eroding effect of the sea. The "tones of venice," like the "foundation stones of latin" suggest a formal perfection that may deceive the reader into endowing them with permanence, yet both are in fact fragile, while the barbarians' languages, like sea water, are closer to, or even part of, the flux of nature.

The "dialect of the tribes" takes culture back to the simplicity of origins: "sparing us back to the purest parthenon." "Parthenon" is both the Greek temple recognized as a model of balance and proportion and the virginal condition of a still unadulterated culture. While the first part of line 9 ("to ga to gar") both suggests the emergence of language out of onomatopoeic sounds and refers to the Ghanaian language Ga, the second part ("to derek walcotts pitcher of clear metaphor") evokes man's shaping words into the pure forms of poetry, this even without the help of the quotation from Derek Walcott's poem "Islands" in Brathwaite's notes ("I seek ... to write verse ... ordinary as a tumbler of island water").

But origins cannot last: "Masons" - people who build with stones, thus perhaps also empire builders - will stop the free flowing water, will rape the virgin/parthenon of her first pristine charm, and turn culture (again) into a way of enforcing rules and thus of oppressing others.

Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci are Renaissance artists whose virgins are not necessarily the mother of Christ. The former's "wet dreams"



are associated, I suppose, with the lush wet body of his Aphrodite emerging from the sea with her long hair partly concealing her nakedness. The woman most readily associated with da Vinci is Mona Lisa, the Gioconda with the enigmatic smile. In both pictures the sense of innocence is lost in the women's sly provocative attitude suggestive of depths to be plumbed. This loss of innocence significantly occurs at a time when works of art begin to be considered in terms of their market value, and when the colonial expansion of Europe not only opens up new areas of the earth in European trade but develops the trading in slaves, and thus literally sells young girls (virgins).

Commerce and trade in human beings did not spread in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe for the first time ever. Awareness of historical repetition is conveyed in lines 19-20 by the reference to the mathematician and cartographer Marinus of Tyre and to the slave trade carried out by the Phoenicians through the Mediterranean at a time when Rome was still a country town. In the third line of this seventh tercet, Sycorax, Caliban's mother in *The Tempest* (cf. I.ii), is described as black and is introduced as a prostitute in difficult circumstances: "the black witch of a small hotel." This may recall the situation of the archetypal mother towards the end of *Mother Poem*.

After the tercet on the overruling of the "black magnificenti" by market economy, the structure of the poem breaks down. Lines now stand in isolation and are apparently no longer connected at all. In those lost lines, a twofold perspective is more obvious than in the rest of the poem. From the perspective of the dying emperor, the situation is tragic, awareness of failure and of the proximity of death are overwhelming. As in "Song Charlemagne," Brathwaite quotes, or half-quotes, from *La Chanson de Roland*: "*roland est mort*," and the place of his death is repeated three times, as in a formal dirge. The last two lines parallel the fading of consciousness with the decline of the sun on the horizon, and the "setting islands" inevitably call up those Western islands to which dying heroes are taken.

But Charlemagne's last words are to be read in a different light too. Roland is dead, the horn of defeat has been blown; but he was killed by Saracens, one of whom was even "Lord of Carthage and Ethiopia." These, to Brathwaite, can hardly be faithless villains. "Roncesvalles" is a place of victory as well as of defeat. The "tilting of the scales of justice" is also a promise of redress. The centre of the world is no longer Europe (with the United States of America perfecting both the conquering spirit of the West and its sense of guilt). Are not the scattered islands of the Caribbean with their fragments of uprooted cultures the cradle of a new era? In this perspective, the "setting islands" are not the islands of the dead, but "islands in the sun."

The shift to the Caribbean as a new point of departure is announced at several points in the poem. A note relates the Portuguese slave-trading in lines 17-18 to the Virgin of Guadeloupe. Bermuda is acknowledged as a likely source for Caliban's island.<sup>18</sup> Even more to the point, line 9 presents Caribbean poetry ("derek walcotts pitcher of clear metaphor") as a virginal form of culture, parallel to what could be found in ancient Greece or in the Middle Ages.

The poem "Aachen" presents itself as a recreation of Charlemagne's last words. It is a prophesy that not only bears on the future, as prophesies are supposed to do, but also concerns the past. It spreads across ages, it jumbles Phoenician colonies and Renaissance exploration of the world, the fall of Rome and the rise of the "setting islands." It provides a splendid illustration of Brathwaite's "labyrinth of past/present/future," of his conception of history as cyclical and of his insistence on the "partiality" of our perception. "Partiality" is another word I borrow from Wilson Harris's *Carnival*. Characteristically, the word "partiality" is to be accounted for in more than one way. We are playing

<sup>18</sup> See *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode, London, Methuen (Arden edition), 1958, introduction pp. xxvi-xxviii.

parts, wearing masks, and we have to become conscious of this if we are to turn them into instruments of knowledge and freedom instead of being enslaved by them. Also, and just as importantly, we can only apprehend parts, partial and constantly shifting realities, yet we are mostly caught in the petrifying lie that things, events, and people can be labelled in absolute terms. Plays on sounds through which words are tuned into one another - "satin" that becomes "satan" in lines 11-12, "pilots" that become "pirates" in line 25 - point to the narrow margin between the positive and the negative. They stress the fundamental instability of such oppositions and help to destroy the illusion that absolute judgement is ever possible.

In "Aachen," as in the other poems considered here, and indeed in most poems by Brathwaite, playing on sounds and words contributes at least as much to the liberating re-creation of the past and to the shaping of the future as the startling juxtaposition of traditionally disconnected periods. Through this essentially ludic (though also extremely serious) attitude to language and reality, the circle of oppression can be redeemed into a cycle of liberation, the rebel can escape the fatal alternative of being killed as a martyr, or killing as an oppressor.

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(*Barcelona*)

### Variations on a Princely Theme: Kamala Markandaya's *Golden Honeycomb*

The Princely States of India in their relationship with the British Raj have received much attention from both historians and novelists of the two countries. It may then be asked whether any further reconstruction is necessary on such a theme. From time to time, however, one comes on observations which suggest that not all is said and done. For example, the international journalist James Cameron, after long years of familiarity with India, could still write in 1974:

Probably more nonsense was talked about the Princely Houses of India than about any comparable society - if indeed any comparable society ever existed. Their image was everything from the romantic to the ridiculous. Sometimes their wealth and power were fantastically exaggerated. The eccentricities and outrages of some of these rulers became a kind of running fairy-tale; the diligence of others went unrenowned. Much of the blame lay with the British who made tools of them, then pets of them, and finally scapegoats of them.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian critic Saros Cowasjee, in his introduction to Mulk Raj Anand's *The Private Life of an Indian Prince*, while also accusatory as regards the British, offers a different version:

<sup>1</sup> James Cameron, *An Indian Summer*. (1974) Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987.