

IN MEMORIAM- EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE (11/5/1930 – 4/2/2020)

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For on this ground

...

*the Word becomes
again a god and walks among
us;*

*look, here are his rags,
here is his crutch and his
satchel*

*of dreams; here is his hoe and
his rude implements*

on this ground

on this broken ground.

*(Kamau Brathwaite, 'Vévé',
Islands)*

It is curiously fitting that I write this memorial piece on Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite on the day I retire from an academic career that began with poetry. I am reminded of T.S. Eliot's last published poem, 'Little Gidding', in which he writes: 'What we call the beginning is often the end / and to make an end is to make a beginning.' I have taught the poetry of T.S Eliot for as long as I have taught the poetry of Kamau Brathwaite – for me they are entwined. But the first poet with whom I

felt affinity was Judith Wright, a poet whose love of the natural world, specific to Australia, was my love. My father gave me a volume of her poetry (*Five Senses*) in the year of its publication (1963) when I turned seven, and throughout my childhood and adolescence I would write poetry modelled on hers –

Now my five senses
gather into a meaning
all acts, all presences;
and as the lily gathers
the elements together,
in me this dark and shining,
that stillness and that moving,
these shapes that spring from nothing,
become a rhythm that dances,
a pure design.
(Judith Wright, 'Five Senses')

I stopped writing poetry in my late teens, and although I wrote my honours thesis on Judith Wright, it was in the second year of that undergraduate degree in English at the University of Queensland that I discovered Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Brathwaite was an eminent historian and social commentator, but for me he was and is primarily a poet, albeit poet as historian of 'the tribe' – of Africa, of Africa in the Caribbean, Africa in the New World, Africa in the World:

E-
gypt
in Af-
rica
Mesopo-
tamia
Mero-
ë

the
Nile
silica
glass
and brittle
Sa-
hara, Tim-
buctu, Gao
the hills of
Ahafo, winds
of the Ni-
ger, Kumasi
and Kiver
down the
coiled Congo
and down
that black river
that tides us to hell

...
Never seen
a man
travel more
seen more
lands
than this poor
path-
less harbour-
less spade.

(Kamau Brathwaite, 'The Journeys', *Rights of Passage*)

Kamau Brathwaite was the poet of my young adulthood – the poet through which I discovered the excitement of language play. This was play for life – play in which the power of words to move, to transform, was more than

personal and emotional - it was social and political. Not that Wright's poetry wasn't/isn't political, but I didn't register the political in her work then, perhaps because it was too close, too much me, too much my world: White Anglo-Celtic Australian, middle-class, female – privileged. Brathwaite spoke to me of another world – a world as far from mine as I could imagine: Black Afro-Caribbean, working class/underprivileged, male – impoverished and yet the source of (to me) surprising wealth. Kamau Brathwaite would be the 'Word/World making man' of my MA thesis, of whom I wrote in the abstract:

For Brathwaite loss of 'Word' implies both the loss of god and the loss of language (the silent or unheard African drum is image of this loss). When the New World African lost possession of his Word he became a 'mimic man'. His image of god was replaced with the Christian/European image of 'God' and the accompanying de-humanizing values of Mammon, and his African language was usurped by the English language – the language of the conqueror. When the language of a people is separated from their specific cultural origins the relationship between word and meaning becomes disjointed. Images of the Word no longer enhance meaning – they only evoke confusion and disorientation.

Brathwaite attempts to re-instate African based Word in the Caribbean through the rediscovery and recognition of African gods that in fact still survive (in evolved form) in the underground culture of the Caribbean 'folk', and in the promotion of 'nation-language' – an Africanized English that he believes to be the creative and unadulterated image of his people. His poetry 'After Africa' (in particular *The Arrivants* and *Mother Poem*) is image of the 'creative rebellion' he espouses – a rebellion of Word. 'By creating the concept of change, the concept of

rebellion, the concept of freedom', Brathwaite claims, 'you can in fact encourage its encompassment.'
(Anne Collett, *Edward Kamau Brathwaite: The Wordmaking Man: An Exploration of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's Philosophy of Word*, MA, University of Queensland, 1987)

Although Brathwaite's poetry speaks the anguish of a broken world and broken people, his poetry also offers a promise of healing and wholeness, achievable through the power of w/Word: here was the potential to 'make it new', although not quite in the way Ezra Pound and the modernists might have envisaged. Brathwaite was a modernist, influenced by the poetry of T.S. Eliot; but unlike Eliot and Pound, his modernist search for poetic and spiritual value in 'other' cultures was not an appropriation of otherness – it was a desperate recovery of self. In 1970, Brathwaite published a reflection upon a personal journey that, poetically transformed, would become the tribal, historical and mythical journey of *The Arrivants* (1973) – the trilogy (made of the separately published volumes *Rights of Passage* [1967], *Masks* [1968] and *Islands* [1969]) upon which his career as Poet was founded. After completing a BA at the University of Cambridge in the early 1950s, Brathwaite speaks of himself as 'a West Indian, rootless man of the world', recalling numerous applications for work in places as varied as London, Cambridge, Ceylon, New Delhi, Cairo, Kano, Hartoum, Sierra Leone, Carcasonne, Jersusalem. From among those many possibilities, Brathwaite writes of 'ending up' in a village in Ghana, of which he observes:

It was my beginning. Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly; obscurely, slowly but surely, during the eight years that I lived there, I was coming to an awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in

society. Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, I came to a sense of identification of myself with these people, my living diviners. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland. When I turned to leave, I was no longer a lonely individual talent; there was something wider, more subtle, more tentative: the self without ego, without I, without arrogance. (Kamau Brathwaite, 'Timehri', *Savacou* 2 [1970])

But in order to arrive at this place of recovered belonging, recovered self in community, Brathwaite had to enter that dark wood of Dante Alighieri's imagination: 'In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell what a wild, and rough, and stubborn wood this was, which in my thought renews the fear!' ('Inferno', Canto 1, *The Divine Comedy*)

The refrain, or rather, the magical incantation of 'slowly, slowly, ever so slowly' that Brathwaite intones in his autobiographical reflection is drawn from the poetry collection, *Masks*, and more significantly, the last poem of the volume, 'The Awakening':

and as the cock
now cries in the early dawn

so slowly slowly
ever so slowly

I will rise
and stand on my feet

slowly slowly
ever so slowly

This is a return to new life through the dark night of the African soul. Here, as recorded in *Masks*, the Poet travels back in person and in communal spirit to the roots of his African heritage. He travels through the trauma of slavery and the painful recognition that Africa is light, but it is also darkness; that the Afro-Caribbean man and woman must both acknowledge their African heritage and also accept that they are strangers to Africa and Africa is stranger to them:

I travelled to a distant town
I could not find my mother
I could not find my father
I could not hear the drum
(Brathwaite, 'The New Ships', *Masks*)

Through libation, the ritual making of the drum, the calling up of the old gods, and the sometimes imagined, sometimes performed, re-enactment of masked journey through an ancestral and more recent past, the poet is remade as Poet-Drummer. He is the poet-historian of 'the tribe', a role that Brathwaite conceives as a means of maintaining connection with past lives and creating meaningful viable futures for a dispersed people. This was the material of my MA.

After completing my MA in 1988 I moved on to other things – a growing family and a PhD in the UK – and only kept up with Brathwaite's new publications sporadically and at some distance. There was much else to occupy me. But I introduced students to Brathwaite at the Universities of London, Aarhus (Denmark) and Wollongong, primarily through *The Arrivants*, *Mother Poem* (1977) and *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry* (1984). The print texts were brought to life as only performance can do, by a cassette recording of a talk Kamau gave at the University of Canterbury on *Mother Poem*, an LP of

Brathwaite reading *Masks*, and a live recording of Kamau reciting 'Negus' (from *Islands*). The latter is part of a wobbly, snowy, sputtering video recording of a televised BBC Open University program that included conversation with Mikey Smith, C.L.R. James and the very young Linton Kwesi Johnson, an also very young Fred D'Aguiar and a not so young, crusty but charming Derek Walcott. This combined repertoire (whose sound quality suffered even further from repeated transcription into the latest technology) has been my mainstay for 25 years – this and the endless ventriloquising of Brathwaite whose poems I would perform year after year, almost to the point of parody ...

One of the reasons I didn't keep up with Brathwaite's ever more experimental poetry was its increasing dependency on visual notation/transcription. For someone who admired his verbal nuance and wit, for someone whose interest lay in the linguistic power of word, his 'Sycorax *video* style' seemed to negate what poetry 'is', or at the very least, to deny its depth. But when a copy of the volume, *Born to Slow Horses* (winner of the 2006 Griffin Poetry Prize) arrived in my mailbox in hope of review, my interest was piqued – in particular I became interested in the idea of trace, and the poet's use of repetition. Was this just a rehash of old material from a poet whose muse had up and left some time ago? or was this something else? I decided on the something else, in part out of loyalty to the poet who prompted my love of Caribbean poetry, but perhaps more importantly, the poet who I believe changed English language poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century as fundamentally and significantly as T.S. Eliot did in the first half. But where Eliot and Pound played at black face (writing to each other in characters drawn from the Uncle Remus stories), much as Picasso played with African mask, Brathwaite performed Africa in the Caribbean through the language traditions of a dispersed and reinvented

Africa that had revealed him to himself - praise song, worksong, blues, calypso, jazz... In that autobiographical piece of 1970 he recalls, 'I came home [from Ghana] to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean.' (Brathwaite, 'Timehri') In *Islands*, Brathwaite had identified and mourned the loss of that cultural recognition, a disconnection between Africa and the Caribbean, writing in the poem 'Jah' of a land that 'has lost the memory of the most secret places.' Here he claimed that

We see the moon but cannot remember its meaning.
A dark skin is a chain but it cannot recall the name
of its tribe.

Here Brathwaite's politics and poetics is focussed upon the recognition, revaluation and celebration of Africa in the Caribbean – 'tribe' is a reference to African heritage, African belonging. The journey undertaken into that 'dark wood' enabled Brathwaite not only to name himself (Kamau) but to name his calling. 'The Awakening' begins:

Asase Yaa, Earth,
if I am going away now,

you must help me.
Divine Drummer,

'*Kyerema*,
if time sends me

walking that dark
path again, you

must help me.

If I sleep,

you must knock me
awake ...

and as the cock
now cries in the early dawn

so slowly slowly
ever so slowly

I will rise
and stand on my feet
(Brathwaite, 'The Awakening', *Masks*)

Here the poet speaks both for himself and for his people. Here he accepts the mantle of acolyte of the Divine Drummer with the power to recall the name of the Tribe, to call out those who have forgotten, and to find the means by which to remember and reinstate that name.

So how then are we to understand these lines transcribed into a volume of poetry published some 35 years later in a very different context and time? – specifically, America post 9/11. To forget tribal name is to isolate the self from the ties that bind us to others, to culture, history, language, nature and divinity. In that isolation we become small, hurt, angry, violent, desperate. We are rendered powerless and ineffectual. It might seem that Brathwaite's 'Jah' advocates a return to the divisiveness and isolationist politics of tribalism and religious separatism. But by inserting a trace of this poem in a new collection of poetry that sympathises with the privation, loss and suffering of isolated individuals in a global world affected by Hiroshima, Chernobyl and 9/11 (all referenced in the volume of poetry), the poet shifts the original focus of the poem from the specific

agenda of creating Afro-Caribbean community, or even a wider pan-African/Black community, to something more humanist. Brathwaite's awareness of the problem of a fragmented world that had specific application to the Caribbean in the 1970s is understood in this century as applicable more generally, in fact, globally. To recall the name of the Tribe in the twenty-first century is to recall that which makes us Human. But, importantly, recall is made through specific remembrance of the work done in the cause of a Black politics and poetics. Toward the end of 'Mountain', the last poem of *Born to Slow Horses*, Brathwaite calls upon the compassion of his audience to help him see and say, recalling the original humbleness of his mission as poet and tribal drummer. He gives thanks and praise 'for what you have allowed me / helping me to find my space w / in yr welcome,' and it is with gratitude that he acknowledges the blessing of

... these hard-
working prayers of yr hands
yr maroon & Marcus Garvey rastafari fight for human
rights & justice

in the world. that black & poor & dispossess are forces in
the universe
like pride & passionate & knowin who yr folksongs are
o song so strong even in a strange land now yr own yr
honeycomb yr hoom

To recall the name of the Tribe in the twenty-first century is to call on our humanity, our compassion, the intimacy of our connection to each other, and indeed, to the planet.

Recently I have returned to Judith Wright, but Wright in relation to Brathwaite. In a keynote given at conference last year in Bremen, Germany, I developed

relationship through their shared concern for the violence done to peoples and planet in the name of 'civilisation' and its tools - conquest, colonisation and capitalism, aka greed and selfishness. I spoke about an entanglement of what might be called 'postcolonial' environmental and social activism and the act and art of poetic word craft. Wright sets up cyclical relationship between destruction of indigenous people and land and the kind of future we are thereby creating in 'Nigger's Leap, New England':

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last. We should have
known
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.

...

Night floods us suddenly as history
that has sunk many islands in its good time.
(Judith Wright, 'Nigger's Leap, New England', *The Moving Image*, 1946)

No matter how deep or wide the ocean, time and tide inevitably uncover the skeletons: the bones of the disappeared ones – the indigenous peoples, the indentured and enslaved peoples – are flung back onto the shores into the light of day; the voices of the dead return to haunt us. We might understand those shores to be literal: graves are uncovered on the excavated ground of modern building sites; skull and thigh, finger and hip are revealed when rising sea levels undercut and wash away apparently stable land. But these skeletons are also uncovered by the archival work of historians and laid bare in the shore lines of poetry, or speak through a kind of poetic ventriloquism. Some turn a deaf ear to the whispering of ghosts and a blind eye to the altered forms

of eroded remains that *might* be something else if we just wish hard enough; but Wright and Brathwaite insist on remembrance and recognition of the ground upon which our present and our possible futures might be built. In ‘Negus’ Brathwaite famously declares:

It is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
to bulldoze god’s squatters from their tunes, from
their relics
from their tombs of drums

It is not enough
to pray to Barclays bankers on the telephone
to Jesus Christ by short wave radio
to the United States marines by rattling your hip
bones

I
must be given words to shape my name
to the syllables of trees

I
must be given words to refashion futures
like a healer’s hand

Words. Name. Trees. Future – of peoples and planet. It is not insignificant that ‘The Awakening’ of *Masks* and of the Poet, is a tribute and a call for help from Asase Yaa, Earth; and that the final poem of *Born to Slow Horses* should be in part a praise song to the beauty of that Earth:

from spider lilies' fading stars thru turquoise greens of
days of sky & ocean
water blades' translucent grass the orange of the fruit &
citrus sunset into
red & crimson indigo

So i turn back turn back to ship & journey here & water
flowing my beginning. quiet ending
the great mass of the memory mountain

rising up slowly out of the sea before sun
before sun
-rise

for even when it is dark. it is dark. it is home. it is here

Kamau, I thank you for the beauty and power of your
words and I wish you peaceful journey in that final
turning back into that slow rising out of dark out of sea
into sunrise. into home. into that great mass of memory
mountain.