

The Ambivalent Aesthetic of Eric Roach

LAURENCE A. BREINER

ERIC ROACH of Tobago shared the common Anglophone distaste for explicit ideology, but his forthright objection to the *Savacou* anthology of new poetry in 1970 produced the most public statement of his thinking about the nexus of craft, expressiveness, and political engagement in Caribbean poetry. The ensuing debate has remained important to the development of indigenous literary criticism, and that is one reason to consider Roach's catalytic contribution to the discussion. But what I want to draw attention to here is the fact that his position vis-à-vis this anthology was not his only position on the nature of poetry. A divergence between theory and practice is hardly unusual; the case of Roach is interesting because the divergence is located elsewhere. In his criticism, he championed a view of the poem as a well-wrought artifact, built to endure, and with very few exceptions his own poems in fact exemplify such an aesthetic. What comes as a great surprise is the conception of poetry projected *within* these poems, where the account of what a poet does, and indeed of what he is, seems quite at odds with both Roach's position as a critic and his practice as a poet. After sketching his pivotal position in the debate over the anthology, then, this paper will consider Roach's paradoxical ideas about the nature of the poet and the poem, first as those were crystallized under the pressure of the *Savacou* debate, and then as they are implicit in the body of his published poetry.

I

The *Savacou* anthology entitled *New Writing 1970* came out early in 1971. Established figures were well represented — there

was prose of George Lamming and John Hearne, poetry of Mervyn Morris and Dennis Scott, John Figueroa, Derek Walcott, Martin Carter — but the collection was dominated by young Jamaicans (Audvil King, Bongo Jerry, Brian Meeks), and emphasized political and experimental work with roots in oral poetry, reggae, and dub. It will help to recall the context of these events: against a background of campus unrest in Jamaica and the February Revolution in Trinidad, this was the era of Walcott's astrigent essay "What the Twilight Says," published with his first collection of plays, of Marina Maxwell's "Towards a Revolution in the Arts" (with its antithetically positive evaluation of carnival), of Pat Ismond's polarizing article "Walcott vs Brathwaite," and of the lively conference in Kingston sponsored by the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS).¹ *New Writing 1970* appeared just after both the *Caribbean Voices* anthology and the special West Indian number of *The Literary Half-Yearly* (Mysore); in fact the very first words one encounters in the *Savacou* anthology are taken from the introduction to this issue, in which Arthur Drayton speaks of a "revolutionary questioning of West Indian values" reflected in the region's literature (5).

If the writing in *Savacou* 3/4 was predominantly Jamaican, the critical reaction was Trinidadian. Roach was the first to respond, and he began with genuine surprise that a selection dominated by recent Jamaican writing would not automatically be representative of the region as a whole; and surprise at how much diversity the concept of West Indian literature was going to have to accommodate. The nature of Roach's initial reaction — "It is very obvious that something is happening over in Jamaica that we in Trinidad have not a clue about" ("Type" 6) — cast a shadow on his own long-standing belief in the cultural and political unity of the West Indies as it also dimmed the "dream of wholeness" celebrated in Edward Brathwaite's foreword to the anthology.² Beyond that first response, Roach went on to initiate debate about the anthology by raising three overlapping objections; briefly, it was too "black," too political, too inept.

Again it will help to remember that the roots of Roach's criti-

cism were complex. He spoke as a rural conservative from Tobago, as a supporter of Federation struck by the Jamaicanness of the anthology, as a respector of craft incensed at the publication of immature and unpolished work, finally as a poet of folk life who found the turn to Black Power rhetoric insufficiently indigenous, and who objected to protest poetry with the authority of one who had written many frankly political poems. For example, Roach reacted most fiercely to the suggestion that Black Consciousness constituted the thrust of West Indian writing: "To thresh about wildly like [Audvil] King and [Bongo] Jerry in the murky waters of race, oppression and dispossession is to bury one's head in the stinking dunghills of slavery" ("Type" 8). But this reaction should not be misunderstood. Roach spoke as one of several fervent West Indian nationalists, long aware of the African heritage, who objected to the Black Power movement (and particularly to its rhetoric) on the firmly nationalistic grounds that it was a piece of the old mimicry, a slavish importation from North America of ideas which had actually originated, in more sophisticated form, in the Caribbean of Césaire, Fanon, and C. L. R. James. In fact, Roach has frequently been praised as one of the most successful among those who began to take up the theme of Africa in the 1940s — not only by Wayne Brown (11), but by Lamming (38-40) and Brathwaite ("Galahad" 53; *Contemporary Poets*). For that matter, he has taken his share of criticism for being too black, too rhetorical, too "breathless" (Owens 124).³ Certainly the immediate political context is a governing factor in his response here. In overwhelmingly black Jamaica the rhetoric of Black Power contributed constructively to achieving national self-consciousness and self-respect. Roach's Tobago was black and Protestant, ethnically much closer to Jamaica (or Barbados) than to cosmopolitan Trinidad. But in the Trinidad of the February Revolution, where the recent experience of Guyana was a fresher memory, such rhetoric could appear irresponsibly inflammatory.

When Roach raised the question of the viable balance between literary and political objectives for a poet in his work, or for a particular poem, he inaugurated a general discussion of the political responsibilities (if any) of a poet in a new society, and so of

the function of the writer, which had been the declared theme at the ACLALS Conference. But Roach expressed his conception of the role of the poet in language that seems designed to preclude any discussion of politics: "Art is outside the fanatics [*sic*] scope because it engages the whole man, the totality of his life and his experience. It draws from his past, which is his tribal history and his nurture. . . . Working the native clay, stone, marble or wood with the native cunning of his love, the craftsman's mind, the grace and strength of his hands, create artifacts that are the very spirit of the tribe" ("Type" 6). As this choice of language makes clear, his objection was not finally political; it was an objection to artistic carelessness and compromise.

In replying to Roach, critics most frequently raised the related issues of experimentation and orality. Roger McTair, for example, noted that "Roach's main problem as a critic is an inability to recognize the validity of a committed poetry, and an experimental poetry" (12).⁴ Roach in fact had a strong sense of the poet's responsibility to reflect and address his own people in his own time, and many of his poems take up immediate political problems, but he was infuriated by the assumption that urgency and finish were essentially incompatible. He believed in the importance of experiment, certainly; but just as certainly he objected to the *publication* of careless work. Implicit in that attitude is an acknowledgement of print as a canonizing medium (Roach was quite willing, for example, for the BBC's Caribbean Voices programme to broadcast several poems which he never found satisfactory enough to publish). Thus questions about the status of experimental work are linked to the question whether peculiarly literary language has an inherent value. On that issue, Pantin spoke for many of the region's younger poets when he declared that "the poetry of the Caribbean must be the poetry of the spoken word, the so-called vernacular," and concluded that "in fact what Roach is really looking for when he speaks of good verse or bad verse is a creole Eliot" (3).⁵

Wayne Brown later strongly defended Roach on this point: "In his last years he waged a brief but bitter (if eventually futile) battle against the breakdown of literary standards in the islands, as evinced by a rash of publications of mostly worthless verse —

publications which were nonetheless championed by certain academics as heralding a breakthrough of the oral tradition into scribal literature, and as sociologically relevant" (Walcott, *Poetry* 129). Roach himself had pursued the matter of craft more evenhandedly, coincidentally in the course of a review of Brown's poetry: "The 'tribe boys' claim to be creating 'the New Caribbean verse,' constructing a ringing rhetoric from the native patois for the new people emerging from the darkness of slavery and colonialism. . . . They chant their rhetoric to drum beats, rapping to the brothers and sisters about tribal dispossession and the beauty of blackness. . . . The Afro-Saxon stance is that poetry is no protest weapon. . . . It is just poetry, art or craft. . . . Their central concern is for the savants to say of them . . . that they are among the finest poets in the English language" ("Conflict" 4).

It is undeniable that Roach persistently identified popular culture with rural folk culture. He never came to terms with urban popular culture, with mass culture; it inspired in him a mixture of grief and disgust, expressed most openly in "A Poem for This Day." With that important qualification, Roach's work demonstrates profound respect for popular art and especially for fragile oral culture. Yet he could not help hearing the oxymoron in the phrase "oral literature," and would have insisted on distinguishing the art of the spoken from the art of the written word. Thus what is most significant in the passage just quoted is the poet's emphatic distinction between a rhetoric and a craft; and between a transient performance and a work that becomes part of the tradition, of the language itself. It seems clear from these statements that while Roach respects verbal performance, he finally ranks higher the craftsman who can immortalize verbal performance in a work of art.

II

In extraordinary contrast to Roach's critical statements, however, his poems depict poetry as a matter of free expression rather than of artful composition. His earliest and most persistent images are of the poet as an "Aeolian harp" (Von Erhardt-Siebold), who produces poetry as a kind of natural effusion, almost a bodily

function, when he meets the wind and makes his way through the world. The High Romantic imagery of the Aeolian lyre or wind harp is at its most literal in "Homestead," where the cedars become "seven towers of song when the trades rage," and stand as symbols of the poet and of the "voluntary verse" he produces. In "Frigate Bird Passing" and elsewhere the solitary bird is a less explicit representation of this Aeolian ideal: "feeling the wind in his belly . . . he flies and dreams. . . he shrills his epics to the risen sun."

Poetry here is something virtually irresistible that springs, gushes, bursts forth; a proclamation, the crowing of a cock. In "Tree" it is literally an ejaculation: "I stand up siring my song / Conscious of the pride and poise of fullness." Because of its subject, "A Dirge for a Dead Poet" brings together several of these images: the poet is one who "crowed his cockerel light, pouring bright poems through the heavy air, . . . he was a prophet's rod blossomed, a humming totem pole . . . a bounding stag."

It is noteworthy that in these examples the poet's output is described generically ("poetry," "song") or in the plural ("poems," "epics"). Not only is there no allowance in this conception for reflection, revision, or any exercise of craft, there is also no room for an individual poem, as a discrete finished object. What the poet produces seems to have neither form nor content. Obviously there is no cult of the artifact here, and (a separate issue) no discernible cult of craft.

There is, however, some sense of audience. Though the emphasis is decidedly on the nobility of the *idea* of such effusion, there is some secondary interest in the effect it has on an observer, on the world — the *impression* it makes and leaves. Thus the poet is described as a bird that sings while it flies, awakening all who hear him as his song pours "through last slow closing shutters of the soul" ("Beyond"). Elsewhere he is the high-flying, solitary hawk whose cry is nevertheless heard and attended to (Roach seems to have in mind a kind of Homeric augury). As in the following lines from "Tree," the recurrent images throughout are of abundance, exuberance, and superfluity, of passive availability rather than active service: "O world, take honey from my worth, . . . tap my ample heritage of strength, . . . draw

on my reservoir of hope." The poet need merely be himself, and so long as he does it "gracefully" (the word occurs often, twice in "Death Does Not"), he will leave not poems or even words but an impression on some eye, in some mind:

soar
 Like the lean hawk; . . .
 How you hang gracefully
 Under the dazzling sky
 Some gazer's eye will mirror. . . .

Stand at the precipice
 At the end of the race;
 Pose and leave pictures there,
 The last, the best, the rare;

And like fearless diver
 Leap into the air;
 Plunge graceful as a swan
 Into oblivion.

This is a *fin de siècle* tragic view of life, a celebration of the heroic individual. This springing forth of inborn and irresistible style, which Roach frequently calls "grace," has its closest relatives in the Bergsonian *élan vital* and the *sprezzatura* that Yeats so much admired. If "Death Does Not" sounds like Yeats on art, it sounds like Unamuno on life: we should live so as to deserve immortality, whether it exists or not, so that at worst we prove worthy of more than the universe can give us.

Such "grace" remains a primary value throughout Roach's career. It is still being invoked in one of his last published poems, "At Guaracara Park," especially in the opening stanza:

the bronze god running;
 beauty hurtling through the web of air,
 motion fusing time and space
 exploding our applauses. . . .

This runner bears a clear family resemblance to the athletic figure in "Death Does Not," and his physical grace is characteristically associated with making an almost inadvertent impression on an audience.

There are times when Roach envisions a fully social role for the poet as an Adamic giver of names, as one who describes the

potential symbols in nature and in his human community, and by putting them into words makes them recognizable to others, so that they can successfully function as symbols. In poems like "The Flowering Rock" Roach plays this role himself, singling out a feature of the landscape as symbolic of the character of its inhabitants. By so doing he speaks them to themselves, in words whose very artfulness constitutes a cachet of truth.

This version of the poet's role appears occasionally even in the late poems. The unanswered questions that conclude "Verse in August" at least leave room for a positive reading of Roach's view of himself as such a poet:

what's all my witness for?
 why do I wear the poor folk and the years?
 eh brother what's the score?
 is the game won or lost?

But on the whole the last poems are pessimistic: in "Piarco," the peasants' devotion to the son of the village who "shall name them to the world" is presented as futile, and in "A Poem for This Day," when we are invited to "regard these market towns and mouldering / villages . . . *not even names to us*" [emphasis mine], the implicit failure of the poet's naming function is included in the general collapse of society.

This conception of the social role of the poet is of salient importance in Roach's *criticism*, as we saw earlier, but in the poems it repeatedly appears only to give way to the more effusive, less responsible, view. There is a strong tendency, if not strictly a preference, to see the poet as himself more a symbol than an agent of symbolizing: as totem for the tribe, rather than shaman; not the prophet, but the prophet's blossoming rod. Thus in "Tree" (1952) the poet turns out in the end to *be* the tree he first *observed*: "I am my rooted symbol tree." As Roach imagines him here and in other poems (e.g., "The Flowering Rock" or "Frigate Bird Passing"), it seems difficult for the poet to recognize a symbol without identifying himself with it. In "At Guaracara Park" Roach follows this habit of his ideal poet: he recognizes the runner as a symbolic figure in stanza one, and by stanza four he has identified himself with his symbol (this is apparent in the shifting use of the word "our," which first links the

poet with the audience as distinct from the runner, and later encompasses all three).

Roach associates the figure of the poet not only with the runner, but with fighters, drummers, and dancers as *enactors* of the tribe to itself (e.g., "The Fighters," "The World of Islands"). Such figures occupy a place conceptually *between* shaman and totem, between agent and symbol. In each case, a highly personal style, the expression, and even the assertion, of individuality, is the ground on which their value to the community is established.

What is extremely rare in the published poems is any sense of the individual poem as an artifact, a product of skilled labour. One such instance occurs in "Homestead." When Roach urges that the work of the peasantry deserves to be celebrated and memorialized by artists, he speaks of "cunning tapestries" to be produced by poets and artists "upon the ages of their acres, the endless labor of their years." In this passage "upon" carries several meanings: most simply, the artists' work will be *about* the peasants', but there is a further implication that the artists' success must rest upon a culture whose foundation this unsung labour has laid. There is finally even a hyperbolic suggestion that the artists' tapestries *physically* coincide with the fields, that the land itself be transformed, through art, into what we recognize as landscape. Thus Roach exhorts poets and artists to work "at the centre" of the peasants' world, and his imperatives radically assimilate the work of poet and peasant: "*cultivate* the first green graces, . . . *sow and graft* the primal good . . ." [emphasis mine]. When the poet through his craft makes the land articulate, enables it to speak forth the man, he re-enacts and so mirrors the peasants' own labour, which first articulated the fields by shaping them as "monuments in stone."

But in Roach's poems there is nearly always a backward slide from such consciousness of craft to the earlier, simpler position. Thus "The Fighters" exhorts painter, sculptor, poet to "persist to sheer perfection in the work. . . ." But though a perfection of craft seems intended, the term is immediately defined in a different way as the statement continues: ". . . like those who pit their perfect and tough sinew against arrogance and hate." Perfection is something organic, a fullness of growth, the charac-

teristic of fighters and of "dark ecstatic dancers" — heroic surrogates for the tribe as a whole. The accompanying image echoes this: perfection for the artist means that in him "the seed takes leaf and the leaf greens and flowers like fire."

This wish that formal perfection could somehow still be as kinetic as fire or a dance is worked out most thoroughly (though not very clearly) in "Poem (Pray that the Poem Out of Nowhere Come)."⁶ At first poetry is described in Roach's usual way: it is something that bursts "out of nowhere" as unexpectedly as a flower from a bare bough, or water from a rock, and having made its appearance it will then "go with grace," and "sing." But the baffling last stanza struggles with a more complex idea:

Not the gross cunning of the Doric stone,
 Those flanks and breasts amazing gods and men:
 (That form was cut for a coarse artisan
 Who was half-blind from soot in the black forge.)
 But the dancer in dreams, Cyprian in tides
 Fresh from the seafoam or gleaming at Paphos, goddess,
 Goddess, born and reborn, eternally woman,
 Eternally loved. . . .
 And think on Shakespeare's monumented beauty;
 On Parnell's passionate wreck; on poor John Keats;
 And think on Yeats — the poem's gone to stone.

This passage seems to propose an opposition between the Doric statue of the goddess, laboriously cut from stone, and the goddess herself, who dances in dreams with that elation of the blossom or the spring which the poet values so highly. This opposition is complicated by a further distinction between two goddesses: the true Aphrodite of the imagination, and a coarser one, unruly wife of the blacksmith Hephaestus, who (in Roach's brief myth) shamelessly modelled for storytellers and Doric sculptors. But only one of these goddesses actually plays any further role in the poem: inasmuch as divinity corresponds to eternity, the goddess of seafoam and dreams is paradoxically timeless, and in that sense fixed, "gone to stone." Since it is shaped by her own exuberant being in space and time, this image puts to shame the Doric one, clumsy by comparison. What Roach's ideal poem aspires to is the paradoxical kind of fixity, like the shape of playing fountain, rather than the calculated, carved fixity of the sculpture.⁷

Here Roach is attempting to address an inherent friction between the implications of two key concepts, "grace" and "impression." This friction is aggravated by the two diverse senses of the word "impression": one fluent and elusive, as in "impressionism," the other rigid and inorganic, as in the "impression" of a mould on bronze. This polarity comes to the surface only in "Poem (Pray that the Poem Out of Nowhere Come)" where it is figured in the distinction between the two Aphrodites, and it is never explicitly resolved in Roach's poetry. His resort to the metaphor of dance suggests that he is looking for a reconciliation in something analogous to the performative *discipline* that mediates between the expressive freedom of the dancer and the impact of the dance itself as a composition (this would accord with his proposed placement of the poet somewhere between shaman and totem). But the implication that the Doric statue is inferior, which this formulation necessitates, is uncongenial to most readers, and indeed at odds with Roach's own instincts: in "Caribbean Coronation Verse" of the same year Shakespeare is unequivocally *praised* for his "cut and chiselled" verse (though that in its turn may seem a highly unusual characterization of Shakespearian texture).

In "The Picture" Roach again compares poetry with a more concrete art-form, but though he asks for Rembrandt's art to paint the woman who is his subject, what he wants to depict seems equally problematic for both media, for the framed painting as for the page-bound poem: the subject is "A moment laughing in the running moment. . . . The freedom she must live, the gaiety she is." Again, as in "Poem (Pray that the Poem Out of Nowhere Come)" and "The Fighters," he envisions exuberance somehow perfecting its own form: "A gesture like a phrase, a chord, a curve." The gesture somehow *has* classic form itself, as does the dance of Aphrodite in "Poem (Pray that the Poem Out of Nowhere Come)." At the same time he seems to recognize two challenges for poetry: how to capture such gestural form in words, and how to imitate it, as a model of the compositional process — of how a poet's own "grace" successfully leaves an impression.

III

Roach responded to these challenges; until the end, he remained sure of his raw vocation as a poet because of the kind of impression experience continued to make on him, the "bright splash on the mind" ("Verse in August"). But two problems developed. First, and most simply, he came to doubt his own skill at the same time that he was shaken by what seemed an absence of craft in the coming generation of poets (Rohlehr, "Blues" 2). More profoundly, he questioned the impression he made as a poet, not particularly out of self-doubt, but because he was led to question whether any poet made an impression, whether poetry was in fact one of the heroic offices of the tribe ("what's all my witness for?"). The question whether the poet is to be numbered among the heroic, enacting figures of Roach's pantheon, the politicians, drummers, dancers, fighters, is argued back and forth through the late poems. "City Centre '70" and "At Guaracara Park" identify the poet with other "marathon" runners who earn (or once earned) "applauses"; in "Elegy for N. Manley" and "Ballad for Tubal Butler" the subject is the failure of heroes, and poets are not among them, or even in the poems, at all. Roach's old idealism is ironized, the early image of the singing bird sardonically recast: "history's ceaseless flood / has left him on a muddy shoal, / . . . sometimes howling, a mad dog, at the current in its course" ("Ballad for Tubal Butler").

In "Hard Drought" the tale of a hero ruined and bypassed by history is repeated, but its conclusion is made resonant by grim allusion to the early, idealistic image in which the heroic figure leaves an impression not of any accomplishment but of something like *style* ("grace"). Some brink is always part of the geography — he stands on a precipice in "Death Does Not"; "steep beneath him sleeps the green sea death" in "Frigate Bird Passing" — but in those early poems his gesture in the face of death is noble. In "Hard Drought" it is not:

Station by station throughout history
the ground is bloody; the hero's face
stamped on the woman's napkin's masked in blood.

A whole career falls between the naïveté of "pose and leave

pictures there” and this bitter passage. These same lines may at least provisionally conclude the argument about the status of the poet. The explicitly political context established in “Hard Drought” discourages any claim of the poet to the role of hero, but while the poem sharply distinguishes the two figures, it ends by identifying a place for the poet within the tale of the hero. Earlier in the poem he is associated only with dreams and prophecies, nothing tangible; but in the end he is Veronica, the chance witness who takes the impression (note the choice of “stamped”) of the fall — a nobody, wholly identified with that action (*vera icon* = “true image”), whose life story begins and ends in this: simply being there, and a moment after wondering what to do with the bloody rag.

Yet in fact believers venerate the veil, not Veronica. The problem of that rag, the artifact, the tangible and enduring impression, is what lingers unresolved in Roach’s work. To clarify by exaggerating: his early aesthetic is of *action*, of Zen brushwork, the brisk single gesture that creates the work. The thing to be treasured is the dependable performer, the poet as a functionary of the tribe, and the thing that gives pleasure is the event, the process of creativity observed, more than the resulting artifact, which becomes a kind of evidence of activity rather than its goal. Even in the late poems when testifying witness is a central concept (particularly “City Centre ’70” and “Verse in August”), the emphasis is squarely on the *role* of the witness, the *act* of testifying, not on the verbal form of the testimony or the likelihood of its endurance as an artifact. As the etymology of her name indicates, Veronica *is* the icon she carries; here again the poet-figure is at once a symbol and an agent of symbolizing; identified with the impression she takes, Veronica *is* what she *witnesses*.

As a critic, Roach remained more preoccupied with the responsibilities of the poet than with the constituents of a poem, and on the evidence of the poems his aesthetic *seems* quite surprisingly *not* one of craft, even though with a few exceptions the character of the work itself is highly crafted. Like the Yeats of “Lapis Lazuli,” Roach respects the artifact as an *embodiment* of craft and skill, but is comfortable with its fragility, so long as it is not *intended* to be temporary. What is important is that a

poem should be built to last whether it actually does or not. Indications are that he was more comfortable (should we say happy?) than we assume with the aesthetic of the carnival mask, laboured over, centre of imaginative attention for months, then displayed, celebrated when the time is ripe, and at once discarded. Perhaps finally we should say that what interests Roach is adornment, the artist decked out in plumage of his own making, rather than the product itself alone.

Roach's very suggestive exploration of the issues reached no firm resolution of the aesthetic differences embodied in his work, but such resolution may be available only in the abstract, not in practice. Certainly an open debate on the interplay of oral and literate aesthetics in poetry seems to be endemic to the cultural situation of West Indian literature. It makes its appearance quite early; in the conflicting Edwardian and Modernist aesthetics of Trinidadian poetry of the 1930s, and more articulately in the ideological friction between the writers of the Jamaican Poetry League and those who came to be associated with *Focus*. Debate along these lines continues after Roach, as is evident in the opposing positions taken a decade later by Ramchand ("Parades, Parades") and Brathwaite (in *History of the Voice*, an expansion of his English Institute paper).

At least in this poet's own case, a tentative conclusion brings the evidence of the poems together with a statement from the *Savacou* debate. He had written "Art . . . engages the whole man, the totality of his life and his experience. . . . Working the native clay, stone, marble or wood with the native cunning of his love, the craftsman's mind, the grace and strength of his hands, create artifacts that are the very spirit of the tribe." Roach often wrote as if technique were an indistinguishable part of style; if what he thought he was encountering in *Savacou* was the spectre of a writer possessing the sensibility of a poet without the skill, his shock may have been primarily at the discovery of an area for self-doubt hitherto unrecognized. What had supported his writing — perhaps not quite until the end of his life — was a faith that good work deserves to survive, whatever its actual fate, because it is good, and because through what might be called

its technical virtue (its "grace") it is capable of preserving the memory of its subject (an "impression") as well.

Perhaps we can be conclusive only about how, at his most secure, Eric Roach thinks of *himself*, as a poet: he is a witness who takes the impression of some "grace," the spirit of the tribe, and then by his own "cunning, grace, and strength" leaves an impression. This is first of all an impression of what he has witnessed, the elusive spirit identified and articulated by passage through his hands. But it is also an impression of the poet himself, of his activity, a life spent witnessing and testifying.

NOTES

- 1 For detailed chronicles of this period, see Brathwaite, "Love Axe/1" and Rohlehr, "My Strangled City." Allis provides an illuminating chronological list of the notable critical essays appearing in these years (329-49).
- 2 "The miracle is . . . that despite the racial/colour/class bases and stereotypes on which our society is built, explorations of it, by West Indians, have on the whole, been conducted in the most humane and generous context imaginable. This is because the dream of wholeness has (so far) dominated over the fragments, the pebbles, the divided islands of the selves . . ." 6.
- 3 Williams notes that "to the end Roach remains a poet of blackness, oppression, etc.; the same aspects he so summarily dismissed in his younger colleagues" ("Part I" 4), and goes on to illustrate the resemblance between Roach's objection to King and Jerry in 1971 and Walcott's earlier critique of Roach himself in 1965 ("In Praise of Peasantry").
- 4 This critique is developed even by Roach's most sympathetic readers, Rohlehr ("My Strangled City" 110-12; "A Carrion Time") and Williams: "in the debate Roach had confused his desire for craft (a true mark of the poet) by locating that craft solely in the European tradition" ("Part II" 7). Rohlehr sensibly emphasizes the need for plural standards to respect generational and even (sub-)cultural differences within the region, in what is still the most substantial review of the anthology and of the reaction to it ("Assessment").
- 5 The passage of time has incidentally revealed an irony in Pantin's perceptive remark; if any West Indian poet deserves to be called a "creole Eliot" it is surely Brathwaite, who so astutely saw Eliot as a "folk poet," and who reminds us how Eliot's recorded *voice* helped to initiate the project of forging the "jazz" of West Indian speech into poetry ("Nation Language" 51).
- 6 "Poem (Pray that the Poem Come Out of the Dark)," a later version of this poem, introduces more of Roach's most familiar imagery: "She is the dancer in dreams, the *grace* in the tides, / The *flower of foam* that gleamed at Paphos, goddess, / Goddess, eternally woman, legend and living" (emphasis mine).
- 7 In "For A. A. Cipriani" there is a similar contrast between an energetic Trinidadian politician and the statue in which he will be memorialized.

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