

# *Projective Verse as a Mode of Socio-Linguistic Protest*

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Form is never more than an extension of content.

— CHARLES OLSON

IN AN ESSAY entitled “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson, the post-modern American poet, describes projective verse as “composition by field” (148), as “open” poetry, which accommodates a form of imaginative ploughing that is in opposition to the inherited traditional lines, stanzas, and metres. As such, projective verse becomes a linguistic protest against poetic convention, against established modes of poetic form and expression; and, if one accepts Olson’s observation that form “is never more than an extension of content,” then projective verse becomes also a tool for social protest. When Olson articulates the need for new recognitions in composing such open verse — the primary one being that the poet “can go by no other track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself” (148) — he is really underlining the need for the poem to write itself. The poet, therefore, must be open to spontaneity of improvisation as the poem’s life (both in form and meaning) dictates. This means that the poem must be capable of *total* expression. It must be able to live *on* the page as well as *off* the page. It must be kinetic, capable of plurality, multiple perceptions, and non-linear thought.

Frank O’Hara, Robert Duncan, Olson, and other Black Mountain poets of the 1960s used projective verse in this way. While these poets were protesting against Vietnam and compulsory drafting into the United States Army, black American poets, such as Amiri Baraka, were protesting also against civil rights violations

in the United States. Concurrently, in the Caribbean, black nationalists were calling for independence from colonial control. This international spirit of protest was based on the writers' vision of the future of their respective countries. They were, in effect, anticipating a day of change. Projective verse with its openness, its total expression, its off-the-page immediacy even when read from the page, its resistance to monolithic barricades (suppressive social and political systems and suppressive modes of poetic form and expression) served the writers well in their quest for change. And it is in this context that I specifically examine the use of projective verse in the work of Caribbean poets Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Anthony Kellman, and of the black American poet Amiri Baraka.

As a particular perception strikes the poet writing in open field, and as new and sometimes different or similar perceptions follow, the form must, in turn, adapt and improvise in order to have successful intercourse with those perceptions. This improvisation, this ebb and flow of modes of thinking and seeing, this spontaneous arrangement and rearrangement of both form and meaning, is particularly important and indeed relevant to poets under discussion here, who are products of a plural heritage, of societies which, to some extent, are today still defined by colonial ways of seeing, by colonial patterns of values that yet must be purged, purified, and redefined. Because of this historical definitiveness, people of this background can, in a single breath, slip in and out of several linguistic, musical, historical, and cultural modes with the greatest facility, almost at will. This *modus operandi* in the context of poetry relates to what Olson calls "the *kinetics* of the thing," a "high energy-construct" and a "high energy-discharge" (148). Of course, this is the positive imaginative end to such a quality of legacy. The negative end is waste, confusion, fragmentation, and feud sprouting from a spirit of neo-colonialism (or post-colonial colonialism) which some Black American and Third World writers are seeking to address and redress. They are concerned with helping the reader to see the positive images of their respective worlds, worlds that are plural, creolized, and culturally rich. Life is seen, therefore, not as linear portrait but as cycle of fragments — shored — and as gateway to wholeness, scale of being, creole

magic; and this process of creativity is continuing still in these post-colonial times although, of the first-generation Caribbean writers, only Brathwaite and the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris (whose novels are his poems) come closest to approximating this reality in literature. (Projective verse, it must be emphasized, is a call for linguistic and social liberation.) These writers then are very concerned in portraying the respective contemporary realities of their societies and, in order for us to understand fully and appreciate the extent of their concerns, it is necessary to take a brief look at the historical conditions which shaped their poetic and aesthetic stances.

After Europe's mass extermination of the native Amerindian populations in the Caribbean region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Africans were imported to replenish the labour force. By the seventeenth century, the British were on the scene and a sugar-based plantation economy was established. Meanwhile, in the United States of America, the Pilgrim emigrants from Europe were building their New World. In the process, the native North American Indians were almost wiped out and the Europeans, to sustain their economic uplift, established slavery here as well. The black in America and the black in the Caribbean have this common bond, this common history of being dominated. This domination affected every facet of the slave's life: his religion, language, perceptions, and attitudes — in short, his whole cultural and spiritual life. Especially in smaller islands such as St. Vincent and Barbados (which are largely flat and made the slaves' attempts to escape very difficult, unlike, say, Jamaica and Haiti, where vast forests and mountainous terrain exist), the impact of colonialism, the culturally destructive impact of colonialism was felt most bes- tially. With the coming of Emancipation in 1834 in the West Indies and in 1863 in the United States began the emancipated slaves' incredible task of rediscovering their identity. And this has been the task of every one of the contemporary blacks' forebears. The culturally unique impact which blacks have had on the face of twentieth-century civilization is indeed a direct result of their forebears' courageous struggle to retain their identity and indige- nous ikon in the face of sexual abuse, lynching, demoralization, and other psychological grotesqueries inflicted by the dominant

'race.' And it is this vision of reclamation of lost worlds, buried languages, and buried El Dorados (psychic cities of gold, unique visionary correspondences) that becomes the imaginative preoccupation, imaginative wishbone of Caribbean/Third World and black American writers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the writers protest against forms of literary autocracy handed down by a dominant culture. These writers carry their protestations a little farther and also lash out against new tyrannies, the post-colonial injustices enacted by the black ruling élite who perpetuate the spirit of colonialism through their exploitation, greed, selfishness, fraud, and denigration of their own images — the burdensome backwater of self-hatred. Brathwaite articulates the exact nature of the protest in *History of The Voice*:

What our educational system did was to recognise and maintain  
the language of the official, the language of the Anglican preacher.  
(8)

What Brathwaite is saying is that inherited dominating language and cultural constructs still define the society and he implies the need to resist this cultural imperialism which casts up ikons and images that are irrelevant to the indigenous heartbeat of the community and which draws the members of that community away from its primordial ritual and original scaffolding. The question of how does one create or reclaim a rhythm and an expression that adequately reflects the natural experience of the populace has been raised and to a significant degree answered by these poets. Brathwaite's "Wings of a Dove," for example, radically departs from conventional English pentameter and captures the images of the world, the Third World, within which and for which it was written:

## 3

So beat dem drums  
dem, spread  
dem wings dem,  
watch dem fly  
dem, soar dem  
high dem,

clear in the glory of the Lord.

watch dem ship dem  
come to town dem

full o' silk dem  
full o' food dem

an' dem plane dem  
come to groun' dem

full o' flash dem  
full o' cash dem

silk dem food dem  
shoe dem wine dem

that dem drink dem  
an' consume dem

praisin' the glory of the Lord.

(44)

Here, Brathwaite employs a Rastafarian drum rhythm to carry a poem written in creole language, which is a plural language form and the national language of the English-speaking Caribbean. The musical movement of the poem captures the movement of the emigrants. This creole language echoes the ethnic and historical diversity of the region; and this plurality is seen in the way this national creole language creates multiple meanings in the poem. For instance, "watch dem ship dem / come to town dem" can be interpreted as "watch the people being shipped like cargo" or "watch the ship of the 'mother' countries." In the latter sense, the "dem" after "ship" is a possessive pronoun repetition, a characteristic Jamaican sentence construct. Yet another possible meaning is that the speaker is an imperial figure who seeks to "watch them and ship them," that is, to divide and conquer, to ship away the human resources from the region, to ship away their future.

It is evidently the language of the poem (Olson's high-energy construct and discharge) — the arrangement of words, the choice of syllables, the breath of lines of the poem — that gives it its particular force. Olson is right when he said that it "is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty, by these particles of *sound* as clearly as by the sense of the words which they compose" (149).

Brathwaite's poem appears to move along on its own energy, improvising as it goes on, moving in and out of creole and Standard English forms, with perceptions following perceptions, creating creole magic. He brings us back to a ground note with the refrains "clear in the glory of the Lord" and "praisin' the glory of the Lord."

Brathwaite's most recent book, *X/SELF*, exemplifies this layering and merging of form and meaning by using European, African, Amerindian, and Maroon landscapes (all rooted in Caribbean history) to demonstrate how this creole national language does approximate the environmental realities of the region in a more meaningful way than former inherited language forms did. In "Dies Irie," we hear the parodying of an Anglican hymn. The sound structure of the poem is an Anglican hymn but with a distinct Caribbean style; and the poet uses this form as a vehicle for protest against international systems of ethnic suppression:

if vaqueros then shall bomb  
 bard babu baboon master racist  
 what reply will malans make me

what defences will they fascist  
 verwoerd vvoster pik van botha  
 which sowetos will they rape

mighty and majestic god  
 head herder of the lost herero  
 zulu sioux seminole

(38)

Here, Brathwaite deliberately and playfully ridicules the hymnal form, deliberately "fakes" that form, for we can hear a distinct African beat, a cracking drum-beat achieved by the syllabic organization of the words and by the particular breath or break of the lines. Apart from the aesthetic appeal of the parodic juxtaposition, Brathwaite's work here complements Olson's pattern of projection in which "all parts of speech, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use . . ." (153).

One of Kellman's poems, "Watercourse" (which mixes Standard English and creolized Barbadian English and is partly performed to the accompaniment of the acoustic guitar approximating

“tuk band”<sup>1</sup> rhythms), opens with this call-and-response drum variation:

And so the grim news greet you  
           Bishop dead  
 And yes the harsh winds grizzle you  
           Barrow dead  
 And O the good news ease you  
           Burnham gone  
 And yes the drum-beat hymn you  
           Baby Doc lock out,  
 and up to now he cyan believe he lose . . .<sup>2</sup>

The juxtaposition of languages here co-exists with a juxtaposition of consciousness (sadness and elation), creating a tension necessary for what, after all, is a rather solemn poem about the varying qualities of leadership and values in the Caribbean of the 1980s. The percussive use of the shorter lines keeps the gravity of the poem alive, while the looser creole-language line — “and up to now he cyan believe he lose” — relieves that tension. As the varying moods move in and out of each other in the poem, the sound patterns change to complement those moods. One can hear the livelier calypso dactyls in this part of the poem which celebrates the island:

Island  
 is a womb of a cave  
       Island  
 is a wave inside me

By the seashore I will come back again  
 and the pain of the strain of the rain in my heart  
 will be no more.

This sort of rhythm radically departs from the inherited iambic pentameter which characterized much of early black poetry. The iambic pentameter with its accented second syllable is a quieter, more subdued metrical expression than the dactyl which places the accent on the first of its three syllables creating a rushing linguistic flood. Dactyls evoke the image of skipping stones, with the first stone-skid always the strongest. The “pain of the strain of the rain” is “a womb of a cave” in the poet’s soul, evoking sadness and elation, juxtaposing beauty, and creating creole magic. My

comment on the limitation of the iambic pentameter is not intended as an aspersion but merely as an observation that the type of language used, the form of expression of a people, should relate and reflect their natural experience.

Another example of the juxtaposition of Standard English and creole expression appears in Derek Walcott's "Spoiler's Return," a poem about the return to earth of a dead calypsonian who is commenting on the social scene in contemporary Trinidad:

Is Carnival, straight Carnival that's all,  
 the beat is base, the melody bohbohl,  
 all Port of Spain is a twelve-thirty show,  
 some playing Kojak, some Fidel Castro,  
 some Rastamen, but, with or without locks,  
 to Spoiler is the same old khaki socks,  
 all Frederick Street stinking like a close drain,  
 Hell is a city much like Port of Spain.

(432)

Although Walcott uses a rather closed form in his rhymed heroic couplets, this hardly matters because of the pentametrical innovations. The very first words in the extract, "Is Carnival," is creole language; the third-person pronoun "It" of Standard English is omitted; and this syllabic structure establishes a rhythm that deals a heavy blow to the rigidity which the conventional couplet form presents. The poem's rhythm is that of the calypso and this becomes an extension of the poem's content. In this case, the dactyls are broken by one-, sometimes two-, even four-syllable words to give a progression of both sound and thought. This kind of improvisation, where thought follows thought and form adapts to this kinetic process, is at the heart of projective verse. For ex-colonial peoples this verse is saying that one must replace Shakespearean and Chaucerian pentameter with a metre that reflects the social consciousness of the people for whom the literature is written, a metre using the voice of the people: calypso, ruk-a-tuk, raggae, and jazz.

Caribbean sound structures in verse find their percussive counterpart in the works of such American poets as Amiri Baraka. Baraka uses jazz for much the same reasons that Brathwaite, Walcott, and Kellman use rhythm patterns indigenous to the Carib-



bean. The language of jazz is audible in Baraka's poem "I Love Music," in which the sound virtually leaps off the page as a vehicle for expressing the social realities from which that music springs:

can be  
 can be  
 can be, trane, can be, trane, because of trane, because  
 world world world  
 can be  
 sean o casey in ireland  
 can be. lu hsun in china  
 can be,  
     brecht wailing  
                     gorky riffing  
                     langston hughes steaming  
                                     can be  
                                     trane  
                             bird's main man  
                             can be  
  
     big maybelle can be  
 workout workout workout  
                     expression  
                     orgunde  
                     afroblue can be  
 all of it meaning, essence revelation, everything together  
                                     wailing in unison  
  
     a terrible  
 wholeness.

(47-48)

This poem opens very close to the margin, creating a tenseness, then in the middle it expands outwards, swelling like jazz sounds; then, slowly, it brings us back to the margin. A similar frame is seen in Brathwaite's "Wings of a Dove" and in Kellman's "Watercourse." This letting-loose, this improvisation of word and sound, has its genesis in paradox and juxtaposition. The diverse cultural essences and creole magic impinge on the spirit of the poem causing form and content to, as Olson says, "juxtapose in beauty" (149); and it is also part and parcel of that cultural and historical paradox whose song is wholeness out of fragmentation. Historical and cultural fragmentation is the point from where all black people must begin. Through the imagination, these fragments can be reassembled to reaffirm one's sense of place in the world. Blues

and jazz music are at once pain and joy, despair and hope, gateways to wholeness — a terrible wholeness.

Rebelling against conventional linguistics, Baraka's "I Love Music" uses no capital letters for proper nouns. This conscious subversion promotes a vision of freedom from stultifying categories of expression. Just as Baraka notes, in the essay "Greenwich Village and the African-American Music," that the "music was trying to get away from the restrictions of tradition without reason" (186), so too his poetry was attempting, through subversion of conventional forms, to return to African rhythms, to reclaim the primacy of improvisation and the primordial construct.

Baraka captures this primal African energy construct in "Class struggle in Music":

What is  
 the emotion  
 not the colonised mercedes in  
     briefcases  
     ties  
     words arranged  
     by picture window rote

our emotion, not  
 its  
 not the witch training  
 not the denials of self and family  
 not the isolated dead corpse negro  
 accepting the hating cup  
 of Cortez' asshole-hat wearers

But the us emotion  
     the love  
         emotion  
     the love  
     heat,  
     snowball,  
     heat,

    move-  
     ment  
     life  
     yeah, vitality  
     beat beat beat  
 boom buppa doompa doom

boom buppa doompa doom  
 boom buppa doompa doom  
 boom buppa doompa doom  
 yeh,  
 that and  
 boom buppa doompa doom  
 boom buppa doompa doom  
 boom buppa doompa doom  
 that is the emotion

(97-98)

Repetition of phrase, word, and idea but in slightly different forms each time — a process at the heart of African music — characterizes this extract. Baraka refers to emotion as “the emotion,” “our emotion,” and “us emotion” at different points in the poem. This creates multiple sound effects — a complex singularity. He mixes and varies his syllabic constructs as well. He talks about the “love emotion,” the “love heat,” and the “snowball, / heat.” These rhythmical variations set the poem free as surely as blues, jazz, and calypso set people’s spirits free during Carnival.

In the essay “Expressive Language,” Baraka articulates the need for a new speech to undermine hierarchies of Western meaning; and he searches for this voice in African rhythms. Baraka feels that the twisting of meanings by dominant language forms has been a cause of great confusion and ignorance, both on the part of the dominated and the dominator, the latter having convinced himself that his distortions are justified and are, in effect, solid reasoning and no distortion at all. The Slave Trade was blessed by the religious and political leaders in Europe because, to them, the African was a heathen whose enslavement was therefore a natural punishment by God for his sinful nature. Projective verse as used by Baraka and other Third World writers attempts to tear down the hierarchical language structures which have consolidated that illusory view of Western superiority by oversteering and inflating Western importance.

Like his Caribbean counterparts, Baraka also recognizes the need for creolization in poetic expression. He realizes that the black man is, after all, a product of mixed origins — African and European. Baraka notes, therefore, that socialization “which is rooted in culture depends for its impetus for the most part on the

multiplicity of influences," on "other cultures," and on the "reaction and interaction of one culture on the other [to] produce a social context that will extend or influence any culture in many strange directions" (373). This means that projective verse as a mode of articulating this ethnical reality is of paramount importance since, in order for a society and hence for a poem which mirrors that society to go in "many strange directions," the society or poem must contain a form of *raison d'être* which harmonizes with that many-sidedness and which is creolized and open. Conventional, static forms are at best artificial for a people of plural background when they seek to reflect that plural world. Baraka realizes this when, in the essay "Hunting is not for Those Heads on the Wall," he points out that formal "artifacts made to cohere to pre-conceived forms are almost devoid of . . . verb value" (379).

This process of artistic creation can be seen as an extension of the way a society functions at the social, political, cultural, and economic levels; and, if this process is cast as formalized artifact and not as dynamic drilling kinesis (which defines any form of plurality), then every aspect of that society's expressiveness will remain static. This static socialization and acculturation will limit perception, blindfold vision, and give an unrealistic presentation of the plural, creolized society.

Projective verse is thus compatible with the essential nature of the black experience, an experience which is open, constantly defining and redefining itself as it discovers and rediscovers aspects of itself projecting towards a more definitive future. Just as the Civil Rights Movement evolved into the Black Liberation Movement, so too did Black American poetry evolve from early Gwendolyn Brooks sonnets into Baraka's radical projective verse. Caribbean poetry too moved from Hilton Vaughan's sonnets to Brathwaite's "nation language." Their poetry, like their jazz, reggae, and calypso music (and now Kellman's poetic experiments with the Barbados ruk-a-tuk music form), extricated itself from the unnecessary and irrelevant aspects of literary convention. As black people were breaking out of the ghettos, out of colonial rule, and more recently out of neo-colonial bondage, their music and their poetry were emancipating themselves as well. Their poetry found and still finds its medium, its field, in projective

verse, a form that most closely relates to the changing social and cultural scenes in which it is written.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Tuk bands" are Barbadian groups that play ruk-a-tuk music, normally comprising a bass drummer, a kettle drummer, and a penny whistler.
- <sup>2</sup> "Bishop" is the late Maurice Bishop, Prime Minister of Grenada; "Barrow" the late Errol Barrow, first Prime Minister of Barbados; "Burnham" the late Forbes Burnham, President of Guyana; and "Baby Doc" the ousted President-for-Life in Haiti, Jean-Claude Duvalier.

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