

Images of Sugar in English and Spanish Caribbean Poetry

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CONSIDERED DIRECTLY, and not as a backdrop or a part of the scenery against which Caribbean life unfolds, three categories of images of sugar cane prevail in Caribbean literature. In the first category, the focus is on sugar as a commodity, on its production and its economic status, and may involve the historical dimensions of these factors. This focus is usually conveyed by the essay genre and is marked by a tendency to minimize the human aspect in its zeal for considering the commodity. The book that to my knowledge best exemplifies this approach is Michael Craton's and James Walvin's *A Jamaican Plantation: The History of Worthy Park 1670-1970*. The book is written with such a passionate interest in the well-being of the estate that the estate's origins and development on the basis of slave labour are treated with a pragmatism that reflects a callous indifference to the way of life of those whose labour produced sugar.

A Jamaican Plantation was written in 1970 by two British historians who were commissioned for the job by the plantation's owners. The book displays the survival of a spirit that can be seen in poetry written in the depths of the colonial period by James Grainger, a member of Dr. Samuel Johnson's literary circle. Grainger's long poem entitled *The Sugar Cane* is a work that provides tough-minded advice about suitable soils, cuttings, times for planting and harvesting, weather, and the management of slaves. The poem is readable as a manual for sugar-cane cultivation. Published originally in 1766 in London, it was well circulated in the sugar-producing British West Indies and was reprinted in Jamaica in 1802.

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Alongside these pragmatic contributions to imperialist exploitation—contributions which reveal a direct link between the economic base and the literary superstructure—there is a second category of sugar cane imagery that may be classified as idealist. The tendency in this category is for writers to isolate the sugar cane from its socio-economic context. The function of this category as superstructure is to build and protect morale by disguising the real motives and conditions of economic production. The notorious early exponent of this approach is, like Grainger, a British settler in Barbados, Nathaniel Weekes. In his poem entitled *Barbados*, of 1754, the lofty, playfully hyperbolic language is a part of the covert design to minimize in the poem the unpleasant aspects of the reality being treated. He writes:

The virtues of the *Cane* must now be sung;
 The noblest Plant of all the western Isles!
 What greater Subject can employ my Muse?
 Not India's aromatic Groves, nor all
 The Treasures of her Hundred Mines, can boast
 A more important Trade, or yield to Man
 A nobler Use. Here, Muse! your Pow'r exert,
 The subject now your utmost Pow'r demands.
 To trace the *Cane* thro' all its various Toils,
 Till full Perfection crowns its Use compleat,
 Be now your Task to celebrate at large.

(Burnett 102)

The idealist attitude shown by Weekes was continued into the late colonial period in patriotic verses such as that describing Jamaica as "an island where the sugar-cane is waving in the breeze," or, at a more developed level, in A. N. Forde's poem "Canes by the Roadside," in which personification assists in the creation of autonomy and isolation.

Time was
 you tossed in a delirium
 of whispers near the roadside:
 now your last whisper
 is a treasury of lost sound.
 Months ago
 you were a handful
 of green ribbons teasing the wind:
 now dead strips tell
 where the colour and the sparkle go.

In the cycle

of things you will submit
to the tyranny of shining teeth
and the remorseless murmur of the mill
and all your once-green pride will not console a bit.

Heaped up
in your pyre ready for
the yearly sacrifices to power
you lie robbed of the majesty
of your plotted earth
bared of the eagerness of your dream.

(Figueroa 80-81)

The third broad category is one in which literary expression reflects popular experience. It is a category of great complexity since the experience is historical and may be perceived as dialectical, marked by a continuous struggle between lived reality and better possibilities. Even though, within the Caribbean, national experiences may differ widely in sugar-producing countries, the pervasive oxymoron "bitter cane" may still be used to characterize substantial periods of the people's experience with the commodity. The oxymoron captures several levels of ambivalence, with the negative pole of these ambivalences bearing the greater weight. In the period of the 1960s and early 1970s, for instance, the English-speaking Caribbean intellectuals who were associated with the journal *New World Quarterly* tended to express in their essays a decidedly negative sentiment toward sugar. The sentiment was likely the result of an unbearable accumulation of hostile historical experiences that seemed all the more intolerable because even the recent achievement of political independence offered no hope of expiating the curse of sugar, the original sin of popular Caribbean experience. Sugar cane in the region was the prompter of slavery and of the diaspora, the *raison d'être* of colonialism, the inspiration for cupidity and for the capitalist exploitation of labour, and the inciter of rage against those who would not submit meekly to this exploitation. Sugar cane also irritates by the intensive labour it demands and by its occupation of the best lands. These images in the minds of the *New World Quarterly* group predominate over the images of

sugar as a sweetener, a source of gainful employment, and a creator of national wealth.

Despite the eloquence and earnestness of these writers and the value of their essays as a reflection of the temper of their times I am not confident that these essays continue to be widely read. They lack some important resources for inviting re-reading: the denseness, the musicality, the subtleties and polyvalency of language that poetry and literary prose enjoy. This is perhaps why Maurice Lemoine, in making the oxymoron explicit in his title *Bitter Sugar: Slaves Today in the Caribbean*, goes on to chronicle in fictional form the recrudescence of slavery in present day sugarcane cultivation in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Trinidadian prose fiction writer Samuel Selvon faces the contradiction directly in his short story "Cane is Bitter" (Howes 125-37). The contradiction is captured in the genre of literary autobiography by Tobago's E.M. Roach, where he states: "My whole history is my immediate family, and dimly seen behind the parents, the generations of heavy slave folk trampled into the clay where the sweet cane prospered in our bitter sweat" (Salkey 248).

It is above all in poetry that the oxymoron is used to synthesize the complex and mainly negative attitudes to sugar cane. The Jamaican poet Una Marson suggested the contradiction in "Canefield Blues" from her book *The Moth and the Star*. William S. Arthur of Barbados in his poem "Shadows of the Canes" portrays suffering and a search for meaning:

. . . my gnarled
Twisted limbs, calloused and worn, my hands
That delved within the mulch and mire for strands
Of broken history. (28)

Arthur's compatriot, the outstanding English-Caribbean poet Edward Brathwaite, treats this contrast in "Labourer," a poem phonically enriched by alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme. The poem contains a concentration of images—made all the more dense by frequent enjambments—that constitute a vivid portrait of a sugar worker. It is a close-up, searching portrait of a man who, without other perceived options, has already suffered thirty years of field-to-factory cycles of sugar production. Hence the final stanza:

The shame, the shame, the shame-
 lessness of it all, the name-
 less days in the burnt cane-
 fields without love; cracks of its
 loud trash, spinn-
 ing ashes, wrack of salt odour that will
 not free his throat, cutlass fall-
 ing, falling sweat, grit
 between fingers, chigga
 hatching its sweet nest of pain in his toe;
 and now this and now this:
 an old man pricked
 to sleep by the weather, his labour,
 losing his hands . . . (Salkey 239-40)

Arthur J. Seymour of Guyana in the poem "Sugar" saw seeds of the sugar cane making their way across the seas "to sweeten islands with brutality" (6). The Trinidadian poet Faustin Charles put together several of the foregoing subjects and is explicit about the contradiction in his poem "Sugar Cane":

Cane is sweet sweat slain;
 cane is labour, unrecognised, lost
 and unrecovered;
 sugar is the sweet swollen pain of the years;
 sugar is slavery's immovable strain.

 Cane is a slaver;
 cane is bitter,
 very bitter,
 in the sweet blood of life. (Salkey 185-86)

These writers of the English-speaking Caribbean are at a disadvantage when their different treatments of sugar cane are placed alongside those of the great poet of the Caribbean of our century, a sage who has at his disposal, because of his national circumstances, a range of experience that was not enjoyed by the young *New World Quarterly* essayists and other poets and novelists from countries that had recently been granted their independence by their long-time colonial master, Britain. In short, no one explores this third and most important category of images of sugar cane with greater range and depth than the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén.

The keys to Guillén's almost unerring perceptiveness are his willingness to identify his perspective with that of the progressive common people in Cuba and in the West Indies at large and his commitment to the idea of development resulting from their potential to bring about change in their society. Always with an eye for the major issues, he takes into account his country's economic base, the role sugar plays in it, and the whole history of the people's relation to sugar production. Thus his very first mention of the problem of sugar comes in a poem written in 1929 entitled "Little Ode to a Black Cuban Boxer." The poem embraces several issues. The young boxer training in New York to test his skills against a U.S. opponent is instructed by the poetic voice not to lose sight of his identity in the great metropolis; and, rather than succumbing to the superficial pleasures that can be derived from the vogue of admiration based on exoticism that a few prominent blacks were enjoying at the time, he should speak in true blackness, a Cuban blackness. It is clear from the poem that this condition includes an awareness of imperialism, of the fact that

that is the same Broadway,
that stretches out its snout with an enormous
humid tongue,
to gluttonously lick up all the blood of our canefield.¹

This vivid image of imperialist exploitation has its parallel in other poetic forms in Guillén's poetry. He is skilled, for example, at expressing deep lyrical feelings in the dramatic mode. Thus his poem "Cane," also of 1929, shows the powerful effect of dramatic setting presented by the use of simple prepositions.

The black man
next to the canefield

The Yankee
over the canefield

The earth
under the canefield

Blood that goes out from us!

The lyrical feelings rest on his awareness of the persistence of oppression and exploitation:

I a slave yesterday of white overseers with their coleric whips,
 Today a slave of red sugar-greedy Yankees

who make of Cuba "A hard map of sugar and neglect." The lyrical feelings also spring from the contemplation of generations of ancestral suffering:

I the grandson, the great grandson
 the great great grandson of a slave.

But these feelings, coinciding with those that inspired the essays written for *New World Quarterly* in the 1960s, trigger a response that goes beyond desperation, beyond the impulse to condemn and abandon sugar. The poem "West Indies, Ltd." (1934) in which Guillén looks at the situation in Cuba and in the neighbouring islands contains strong images of rebellion against sugar cane itself and against those who exercise oppressive control over sugar-cane workers. Guillén's complete identification with the alienated worker is well conveyed by the merging of the poetic voice with that of a speaker who spontaneously surges forth as the voice of the people in the poem.

The long canes tremble
 in fear facing the machette.
 The sun burns and the air is heavy.
 The overseer's shouts
 explode dry and hard like whip lashes.
 From among the dark
 mass of the wretched who work,
 a voice breaks into song,
 a voice erupts into song,
 a voice resounds full of rage,
 a voice is raised,
 a voice ancient and of today,
 modern and barbarous:

—Cut heads like canes,
 chas, chas, chas!
 Burn canes and heads,
 let the smoke rise to the clouds.

Even the poem "Cane," which at first reading indicates a static unchanging condition, on closer examination suggests the inevitability of change and improvement. The image "The Yankee / over the canefield" suggests the American's superiority to and

control over the canefield, the worker, and the land. For the land, in giving sustenance to the canefield, is at the base of the exploitative structure, completing the generalized picture of victimization of Cuban capital and labour. However, when the prepositions in this short poem are considered from the point of view of the temporal relation they establish between the canefield, on the one hand, and the black man, the Yankee, and the land, on the other, the picture changes. The most durable relation is that of the land to the canefield. It is the base on which the canefield rests, and this relation will last as long as there is a canefield. This continuity is sustained by a metonymical relation between the land and Cuba. Because of his closeness to the canefield and his destiny to be under the earth when he dies, "the black man" enjoys temporality that, though threatened as far as his life expectancy is concerned by the exploitative conditions in which he works, is still naturally lasting. On the other hand, "the Yankee" who at first reading is superiorly commanding, now comes to reveal a crucial flaw. Precisely by being "over the canefield," he is viewable as having no true contact with the land, no foot on the ground. This makes his position precarious and temporally unstable. In time he may come plunging to the ground or find it prudent to fly away, leaving the canefield, the land, and those who work on it, so that the wastage of lifeblood can be stopped. The urgency and intense feeling expressed in the last stanza reflect the earnest desire for that time to be hastened.

Change is even more clearly envisaged in the climactic part of Guillén's "Elegy to Jesús Menéndez," his grand 1952 poem on the death of the leader of the Cuban Sugar Workers' Union who was murdered by a soldier at the service of foreign owners in 1948. This poem demonstrates that sugar, the centre of the Cuban economy, is at the heart of the whole revolutionary process to which Guillén's pre-1959 poetry contributes essentially. For in its rich symbolism, in its elegant yet simple language, the triumph of the revolution is foretold; and at the core of this triumph will be the return of Jesús Menéndez:

Then he will arrive,
General of the Canes, with his machette

made of a great polished flash of lightning;
 then he will arrive,
 rider on his horse of water and smoke,
 his slow smile in his slow greeting;
 then he will arrive
 to say,
 Jesús will say:
 —Behold the sugar now free of tears.
 To say:
 I have returned, do not be afraid.
 To say:
 —The journey was long and the road was difficult.
 A tree grew nurtured by blood from my wound.
 From it a bird sings out to life.
 The morning is announced with a trill.

The reality of a sugar free of tears, free of imperialist control, is presented as realized in Guillén's *I Have* (1964). The speaker of the title poem presents himself as every working man, "I peasant, worker, simple person," who says

I have, let's see,
 I have the pleasure of walking about my country,
 master of all there is in it,
 looking very closely at what before
 I didn't and couldn't have.
 Sugar crop I can say,
 . . . now mine forever and yours, ours,
 and a broad resplendence
 of sun rays, stars, flowers.

The reality of common ownership, Guillén proposes, is the essential condition for sugar without tears. For when he wrote this poem, the cultivation and harvesting of the sugar crop still required strenuous efforts; and fair markets for the product, the anxious dream of the whole Caribbean region, were not yet assured. Besides, mistakes were subsequently made and admitted to the people with regard to production policy. Nevertheless, a concomitant of Guillén's sharing of a common perspective with the people is his confidence that, when the people have taken control, problems become manageable. And indeed the first experiments at mechanization of the sugar harvest that were taking place at the time of his writing *I Have* have now flourished to the stage where the sugar harvest is substantially mechanized

in Cuba. The back-breaking aspects of the labour have now been largely eliminated. At the same time, the fact of common ownership removes barriers to the people's unstinting and sedulous efforts to have sugar fulfill its designated role in their country's economic life. This means producing—in difficult times, with lower fuel supplies, when land is needed for the greater range of food products in the drive toward self-sufficiency—the maximum amount of sugar on smaller acreages. It also means that the sugar-cane plant inspires and is subject to the high-level scientific research and development that the system of education, responding to local (national) needs, makes possible. Thus genetic engineering is applied to attaining seeds that increase the sucrose content of the plants; Cuban biotechnologists have derived from the sugar molecule the cholesterol lowering and invigorating health product, Ateromixol or PPG; and more and more valuable uses of the by-products of sugar production are being discovered, from protein rich animal feed such as *Sacharina* to paper. The country also now possesses the capacity to produce sugar mills and cane-processing plants for the harvest as well as “a well-known inclination to undertake integrationist and cooperation projects [in the Caribbean]” (Klinger Pevida 2).

In the journey from “bitter cane” to “sugar without tears,” Guillén travels for a long time in the company of those of his fellow Caribbean writers who share his humane and broad vision. He does so with a dialectical understanding of historical processes and with the confidence that his compatriots will join him in effecting the transformation of their society through a socialist revolution. The musicality of his pre-1959 poetry, like that noticed in Edward Brathwaite's poetry, is not only a manifestation of a great Caribbean gift. The contrast with the brutal reality it reveals also suggests a model and a goal of happiness. The achievement of transformation permits Guillén a wider range of experience—represented here in the consequent new images of cane and his people's satisfied relationship to it—that are not available to writers in the neighbouring countries.

Caribbean writers offer views on the role of sugar that reflect a variety of perspectives: that of the pragmatic imperialists, the idealists, and the discontented nationalists. In all this company,

the dialectical vision of Nicolás Guillén stands out because his images do not merely reflect history. They help to transform it by revealing its dialectical processes and the possibility of accelerating historical change.

NOTE

- ¹ All quotations of Guillén's poetry are from his *Obra poética* and are translated by the author.

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