

## Book Reviews

Breiner, Laurence. *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. pp. xxi, 261. £40.00, £13.95 pb.

*An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, by Laurence Breiner, is intended primarily for a readership having its initial contact with poetry in English written in the Caribbean. Individual chapters — six altogether — delve into such matters as the relationship between the poetry and its audience, the broader West Indian context in which the poetry has evolved, the separate literary histories of the Caribbean islands, and the connections between the growth of West Indian poetry and an array of cultural and literary developments in Europe, Africa and America. Outlining the literary history of a highly formative period (the 1920s to the 1980s), the book incorporates an exploration of specific poems that allows insight into the nature of the social and cultural issues writers were moved to address. While the book provides a splendid foundation in West Indian literary history, its higher purpose is to “provide categories for thinking about this poetry, and to investigate the poems as *poems*, rather than as documents of social/political development” (ix). Of central concern are the texts themselves and what they reveal about the writers’ intent in “using the particular resources of poetry” (xi).

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 are vital preliminaries to the main thrust of the study. In Chapter 1, Breiner discusses the cultural and political functions of the poet in West Indian society, invoking analyses and responses to this issue as it is viewed through Caribbean rather than European or American lenses. He notes that the site of the content, of the language, and of the composition of the poetry is the West Indies itself and that the subject matter, the consumers, and often the producers have been the common people of the Caribbean. West Indian poetry, the reader is informed, has gone beyond canonical poetry to include such oral and musical forms as calypso, reggae, and folk and church music. In addition, it has been influenced by such cultures as the East Indian and the African. In terms of status in the society, its

valorization by such writers as Morris and Braithwaite has helped it not only to secure legitimacy, but also to achieve acceptance as "serious" literature speaking to the society at large. The poetry, in other words, has not been restricted to what is approved by metropolitan publishers; rather, it has centred on diverse aspects of Caribbean society as seen from a multiplicity of positions within that society.

In Chapter 2, Breiner examines the broader social context in which the poetry of the English-speaking Caribbean emerged. Critical here is the awakening of non-Anglophone poets from Haiti, Cuba and Martinique, whose work was nourished by a fascination with the African Self and with black consciousness. The growth of such preoccupations is attributable in large measure to a rejection by France – and by Europe generally – of "many of its own cultural assumptions" in a society reshaped by a major world war (29). This impetus in France to abandon many French cultural assumptions inspired the Haitian poets to do the same, a penchant reflected in Thoby-Marcelin's "Sainement" (1926)<sup>1</sup> and Léon Laleau's "Trahison" (1931)<sup>2</sup>. As a result of such influences, Haitian poets eschewed European models of poetry, initiating a movement away from the received forms and content. In Cuba, too, new trends emerged. Unlike the poets of Haiti, those of Cuba were mainly whites but were engrossed in the subject of "blacks as an element of Cuban identity" (36), an interest that evolved into "Afrocubanism" or the Negrista movement. The two early movements — Indigenism (Haiti) and Negrista/Afrocubanism (Cuba) — were followed by the international Negritude movement. The construct of Negritude was rejected by such poets as C.L.R. James, Price Mars and O.R. Dathorne, the last regarding it as a "product of French West Indian colonials . . . in alien lands that had bred no indigenous culture, raised no gods, fathered no new consciousness" (51). One response to Negritude was Creolization, an ideology which stresses the cross-pollination, the melting-pot, the "out of many, one people" concept. As Breiner notes, the literary equivalent of creolization might be Marvellous Realism/Magic Realism, which "transcends territorial boundaries, narrow nationalism, and racism" while still penetrating into "the nuances of regional experience" (55).

Chapter 3 presents a survey of the individual histories of poetry in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Barbados, St. Lucia, and the smaller islands. Breiner observes that after 1950, Caribbean literary critics began referring to a "West Indian" literature rather than to distinct territorial literatures, largely because no one "country" had a large enough body of writing to claim a literature of its own. This notion of a West Indian literature was further fostered — and consequently consolidated — by the work of the University of the West Indies, which was also intent on distinguishing West Indian from English literature.

It is in Chapter 4, however, that Breiner begins to scrutinize distinctive elements of the development of West Indian poetry written in English. Breiner's interest here lies primarily in poets "working within a European tradition and then gradually indigenizing the resources of English poetry" (140). He identifies the ways in which West Indian poetry diverged from its English counterpart, noting in particular the growth away from received European forms, subject matter and language, and he is conscious of the poets' temerity in appropriating European culture to produce such original and successful works as *Omeros* (Derek Walcott) and "Eternity to Season" (Wilson Harris). In Chapter 5, Breiner addresses another "approach" adopted by some West Indian writers, one in which the poets strive to depict and to give voice to the West Indian people while breaking free of European conventions and perspectives and drawing vitality in part from an "embrace" of Africa (196). He concludes that, after decades of exploration of form and language, the results are certainly varied and uneven but that the poets have nevertheless succeeded in reaching an international audience. Chapter 6 elaborates on the quest by West Indian poetry to find a site for itself which is distinctly West Indian and which highlights a West Indian history and experience, a purpose neatly encapsulated in Claude McKay's words: "I am as conscious of my new-world birthright as of my African origin, being aware of the one and its significance in my development as much as I feel the other emotionally" (196). Breiner concludes that by the end of the twentieth century the poets are no longer smothered by European, American or African influences, no longer bound by a duty to be representative of or mouth-pieces for their societies. They have been liberated to write as they wish, set unequivocally free to explore "the psyche and experience of the private citizen" (230).

*An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* is a highly creditable addition to such illuminating works in the area as Lloyd Brown's *West Indian Poetry* (1984), J. Edward Chamberlain's *Come Back to Me My Language* (1993), and Bruce King's *West Indian Literature* (1995). It certainly achieves its major goal of providing an introduction that meets the needs of newcomers to West Indian literature. As a literary history, it is comprehensive in its sweep, sketching not only the maturation of the English-language poetry of the Caribbean but also the broader regional and international background against which that growth occurred. It is an informative work that reveals the complexity of the forces that have influenced both the preoccupations of the poetry and its evolution over time. Furthermore, the author's writing is lucid; his work is not burdened by a dense overlay of jargon that obscures the elegance of his argument and conceals the truths he offers.

The book will be especially helpful to students in senior high school classes or in their early university courses in English or West Indian

literature. Besides outlining a fine background for the study of Caribbean literature, it presents admirable models for the analysis of individual poems. As well, the apparatus included — for example, notes, a guide to further reading, and an index — will be invaluable to beginners in the field. For readers in general, however, Breiner's strategy of close analysis of specific poems to illustrate or fortify his arguments is highly rewarding. His discussions of the works of such poets as Claude McKay and Lorna Goodison, are both perceptive and revealing. One wishes, indeed, that even more of this had been attempted. Also of potential interest to the general reader is Breiner's criterion for selecting the poems to be examined: he chooses works more for their utility in the development of his arguments than for their status in Caribbean literature. In the process, he gives a modicum of exposure to writers, among them Léon Laleau and Price Mars, who are not ordinarily privileged by either anthologies or the critics. At the same time, he manages to convey something of the thematic richness and diversity of Caribbean literature.

Inevitably, some readers may be less than enthusiastic about aspects of Breiner's writing. The author's occasional inclination to repeat propositions or to employ certain terms interchangeably, for example, may prove disconcerting to the reader. Yet, such practices may be defended on the ground that they serve to reinforce particular arguments or to clarify significant notions. Less easily dismissed is the problem of determining the relative strength of the impact of the various forces identified as significant influences on Caribbean literature. Still, this book is meant to serve as an introductory survey, and it discharges this function superbly.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jurant un éternel dédain aux raffinements européens,  
 Je veux désormais vous chanter:  
 révolutions, fusillades, tueries  
 Bruit de coco-macque sur des épaules noires,  
 Mugissements du lambi, lubricité mystique de vaudou

...

Me dépouiller de tous oripeaux classiques  
 et me dresser nu, très sauvage  
 et très descendant d'esclaves.

[Swearing eternal scorn for European refinements, / from now on I want to sing you: / revolutions, executions, killings, / Noise of coco-macaque on black shoulders, / Groans of the conch shell, mystic voluptuousness of vodun . . . / I would strip myself of all classical trappings / and stand naked, very much the savage, / and very much the descendant of slaves.]

Naomi Garrett. *Renaissance of Haitian Poetry*, 94. Translation by Laurence Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ce coeur obsédant, qui ne correspond  
 Pas avec mon langage et mes costumes,  
 Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,  
 Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes  
 D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance  
 Et ce désespoir, à nul autre égal  
 D'appriivoiser, avec des mots de France,  
 Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?

[This haunted heart that doesn't fit / My language or the clothes I wear / Chafes within the grip of / Borrowed feelings, European ways. / Do you feel my pain, / This anguish like none other / From taming with the words of France / This heart that came to me from Senegal?]

Naomi Garrett. *Renaissance of Haitian Poetry*, 142. Translation by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, *The Negritude Poets*. New York: Viking, 1975, 15.

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Wai Chee Dimock. *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, and Philosophy*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Pp. 278. \$48.00, \$17.95 pb.

Wai Chee Dimock, by way of interdisciplinary intervention, contests the sovereignty of "commensurability," not only as a philosophical concept, but also as a highly durable and even efficacious "cultural disposition" in the post-Reformation world. Commensurability, she reminds us, is a "style of rationality" which strives for perfect justice. At the same time, this striving for "the just measure of things" — for what is fit, equal, and proportionate — has proven so efficacious that it is seen, conversely, as constitutive of rationality *per se*: what is true of justice is true of all thinking, all universalizing. In practical deliberation, commensurability promises the resolution of all conflicts because all competing interests and values can be measured and scaled according to the standard of a single agreed-upon end (happiness, pleasure, utility, civic duty). To Dimock, this style of rationality is as questionable as it is attractive. Her complaint is that "a language whose charge it is . . . to resolve its conflicts into a commensurate order is a language that abstracts as much as it translates and omits as much as it abstracts." Her concern, then, is to rescue "the stubborn densities of human experience unsubsumed and unresolved by any order of the commensurate" (5).

As many readers will recognize, this ethical concern for the "residues of justice" does not originate with Dimock, and she carefully acknowledges her debt to a multipartisan tradition extending from Aristotle to the Frankfurt School, communitarianism, and feminism. Her claim to originality lies in the method by which she sets out to "unsettle" the notion of commensurability. Dimock calls for "a critical practice responsive to . . . the cognitive residues of a text" (141). Resisting a poststructuralist temptation, she does not dispense with justice *per se*, but calls for a "non-integral" and "less exhaustive" version of it (5). Thus, in the same spirit, one can do justice to this very ambi-