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Late Modernism

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**Remaking Lateness in “Rights of Passage”**

In *On Late Style*, Edward Said defines two conditions for lateness: one is a temporal quality; the other is a peculiarity of style going against the grain. Kamau Brathwaite’s 1967 poem “Rights of Passage” shows this sense of lateness in its remaking of time and style. Essays on the relationship between postcolonial literature and modernism by Simon Gikandi and Jahan Ramazani support a further and related reading of the poem. “Rights of Passage” also shows how this Caribbean poem more generally contains this sense of lateness in its remaking of high European modernist language and structure.

First, a style can be identified as late by its temporal orientation. This is a misleading word because lateness most colloquially means “coming after” or “being delayed” and this suggests a specific relation to time as it travels around a clock. Instead, lateness simply means deviating from any assumed pattern or sequence. This anachrony is prominent in “Rights of Passage”, which recreates the settings encountered and inhabited by Afro-Caribbean people on a sweeping journey through history. Brathwaite doesn’t abandon an assumed sequence—the poems adopt a narrative voice that begins with a Prelude and ends with an Epilogue and sketches a historically contiguous journey from the moment of contact in Africa to the cotton fields of the Americas to the urban centers of North America and Europe. While the historical contexts adhere to a historical logic, Brathwaite collapses space and time to collapse a historical trajectory, similar to what Said describes as “the opening up of chronological sequence into landscape the better to be able to see, experience, grasp and work with time” (Said xii).

Brathwaite achieves this by conjoining disparate voices across continents and centuries. The poem switches between many different single speakers (e.g., Tom or the invocator in the Prelude) and a collective voice “we” that speaks for all people. The speakers are dislocated in time and space through memory so much that the linear progression of time becomes scrambled—for example, “return” occurs both from the present to the past (“The Journeys”, “The Emigrants”) and from that memory to the future (“O Dreams O Destinations”). One striking instance of this diffusion of voice occurs in “The Emigrants”, where the speaker describes the movement of 20th century urban emigrants. In the next breath, the quays and airports vanish, replaced by the inverse scene of a voyage of arrival towards the Americas. Now the speaker transforms into a watchful American Indian inhabiting Christopher Columbus in his landward approach. And most effectively, “Rights of Passage” defies history as a linear progression through its cyclic patterns of migration, return, and the recurrence of dispossession.

This cyclic pattern contributes to the second condition for lateness, which is a peculiarity of style that “involves a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against…”* (Said 7). “Rights of Passage” abounds with such contradiction. Chief among these are the consistent reversals of progress: In “Work Song and Blues”, violent exile out of Africa is succeeded by a resilience that grows stagnant under enslavement and colonization and that is followed by further hopeful migration by the descendants of slaves in the second and third sections and ends with a disillusioned return to the Caribbean. “Rights of Passage” describes migrations that do not come to rest. Unproductive productiveness is also reflected on a smaller scale in a sustained alteration of images. For example, the recurring image of fire symbolizes both regeneration and destruction. When it appears in “Prelude” it is a vitalizing force, arriving as a gift of warm fires from God. Before that, the image in which “birds blink/ on the tree /stump ravished / with fire / ruined with its / gold” recalls the golden birds and boughs of Keats’s Byzantium, which in “Sailing to Byzantium” offers an escape from physical embodiment via holy fires. But in the next line, that which gives life transforms into a destructive weapon of battle which destroys the speaker’s village. Fire reprises its betrayal across the Atlantic in the bullets that conquer the native West Indians. Pursued first as regenerative, fire turns degenerative as soon as it is grasped. The image mutates once more in “Epilogue”, where fire is described as an element that will purge the world in preparation for another newer future.

Appropriately, lateness defines many works of a literary modernism that seek to express sharp ruptures from the past, privileges cultural mixing and contradiction, and breaks from tradition. Lateness and modernism assert a shared attitude towards the old, the past, and the traditional. There can also be variations of lateness within the varied modernisms. In the occasional ways postcolonial literature not only recentered, but inverted, a modernism seen as an institution or canonized aesthetic, it can be described as “late modernism”.

Simon Gikandi’s essay “Preface: Modernism in the World” introduces some ways Brathwaite’s “Rights of Passage” can exemplify modernist lateness. Gikandi argues that the postcolonial experience was articulated primarily, perhaps even solely, in the language and structure of modernism (420). Despite its status as a threatening, alienated and elite art form, the works of high modernists were influential models for postcolonial writers. For example, modernism became the model for a flourishing postcolonial African literature in the late 1950s when it was added to the English canon in African universities. As a result of this reshuffling of modernism’s where and when, modernism recovered “its drive as the aesthetic of the international avant-garde and in the process [rejected] its ossification as the aesthetic ideology of high European culture” (Gikandi 422).

Adopting the resources of prototypical Euromodernism but translocating and tranhistoricizing it for a postcolonial aesthetics, postcolonial writers “extended the language and structure of modernism in what might initially appear to be its disavowal” (Gikandi 423). As for temporal dislocation, the timeline for this process deviated from the sequence observed by the Western world. In his essay “Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity” Ramazani points out that by the time developing world poets began to leverage Euromodernism in the 1950s and 1960s as an antidote to tradition, modernism was already outmoded in Western eyes to which *it* was tradition.

Ramazani examines the ways postcolonial writers used and remade the forms and vocabularies of modernism to express their cross-cultural experiences. In the heart of his essay he traces the influence of Euromodernism through four themes which fit naturally into postcolonial literature that navigates intercultural experience: translocalism, mythical syncretism, heteroglossia, and apocalypticism.

Ramazani does more than just show how postcolonial literature shares these qualities by showing how remaking can be more than simply localizing. For example, he shows how the translocalism in A. K. Ramanujan’s “Chicago Zen” differs from the same technique in Euromodernist poems like T. S. Eliot’s “Waste Land.” But the techniques are used differently: the Euromodernist poem maintains one setting as more real while the Other’s alterity serves a backdrop to “de-realize the local.” In contrast, “Chicago Zen” oscillates equally between Chicago and India because it was “born of a more fully interstitial migrancy than that of the modernists” (450). Even more dramatically, “Rights of Passage” mingles Africa, the Caribbean, and urban centers of the West in one space, and composite personas representing varied experiences of the African diaspora. The poem’s translocalism coalesces as the discrepant settings are layered through a continuous narrative; similarly, exile and cultural discontinuity coalesce into an identity.

Like translocalism, mythical syncretism is a useful device for describing intercultural spaces. Ramazani compares how Eliot and Agha Ali compress different mythologies, gods, and religions, but notes that “whereas Eliot grieves in the gaps between one version of a myth and its successors, in the instabilities and ruptures of cultural multiplicity, Ali freely moves…mobilizing these [inheritances] against monistic structures of recuperation from loss” (453). A transreligious spirituality also infuses “Rights of Passage” as Brathwaite mingles African, ancient Greek, Judeo-Christian, and Rastafarian mythologies. The multiplicity is complete, but this syncretism does not offer recompense, and suggests instead the unavailability of spiritual or mythical salvation. The first God, protector of shelter, safety, and household, is “tricked” (7) by empire and conquest and further appeals to God only structure Uncle Tom’s laments. The speaker of “The Journeys” becomes subject of a Greek heroic myth, but he is the monstrous minotaur navigating the tricks and traps of women. In “Wings of a Dove,” the speaker is a composite Rastafarian-biblical prophet who twists the logic out of New Testament beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor / in health, he mumbled, / that they should inherit this wealth” and Christian religious meaning is further perverted as the dove, a symbol of peace, love, and the Holy Spirit, becomes a vehicle for violent threat.

The third device, heteroglossia, figures memorably in “Rights of Passage” and in modernist texts like Eliot’s “Waste Land.” Ramazani notes that while Eliot used African American vernacular as “vital yet debased” (453), Brathwaite mixed languages and styles to portray code switching, which is entirely different in being truly interstitial. Brathwaite’s literature didn’t simply localize modernism, but “altered, abandoned, or inverted the linguistic hierarchies” (Ramazani 453), and therefore it is a literature that goes against the grain of its predecessor.

Ramazani identifies four Englishes: a prophetic voice in “Calypso”, a satiric ode on white plantation life, calypso music, and West Indian Creole. The most prominent and deliberate tension in the poem’s language comes not from the interplay between different voices, but from the musical style and visual form of the language. For example, the Rastafarian’s monosyllabic chant in “Wings of a Dove” takes on the rhythm of a beating drum (“So beat dem burn / dem, learn / dem”) and the rhythm of the rhymes in “The Twist” echoes the accented and regular beats of calypso. This draws attention to the rift between the meaning of text and the way it sounds when spoken or the way it looks on the page—the enjambments, the most dramatic of which even break apart words (“E- / gypt / in Af- / rica / Mesopo- / tamia / Mero- / ë ”), and lack of stanzaic form also influences the sound of the text by modulating the time each line takes. The visual layout of the words also has the expressive quality of an image, visually representing through the splintering of sound, diaspora and the splintering of identity, like in the “Postlude|Home” lament “For we / who have crea- / ated nothing, / must exist / on nothing” (80).

Ramazani again compares Eliot and Brathwaite in his description of modernist apocalypses, which reveal crisis via intercultural travel. Brathwaite’s fiery Rastafarian apocalypse, prophesized in “Wings of a Dove” shares its religious language and vision of transformation through violence with “Waste Land”, which ends in a great purifying flood. But Brathwaite’s poem also ends in circles. The first stanzas of the “Epilogue” are almost identical to the first stanzas of “Prelude” and the images of fire and water reverse between being regenerative and purgative. Finally, the poem ends with the question “Should you shatter the door and walk in the morning fully aware of the future to come?” (86). This foreknowledge is what the poem’s lateness is constructed around. Any chance for change through an apocalypse is enfolded in the poem’s dominating sense of fatality, which precedes the poem itself, beginning in the epigraph from Exodus about the Israelites’ exile from Egypt. In its late style of productive unproductivity, “Rights of Passage” describes in the language of lateness, a journey fated to be without end.

Works Cited

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