

Michela Calderaro

AN INTERVIEW WITH LORNA GOODISON

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MICHELA: In “How I Became a Writer,” recounting your visit to the district of Harvey River, you describe the dark nights, lit only by kerosene lamps, your longing for light, and your obsession with light and darkness ever since. Could you perhaps elaborate on the way you’ve dealt with this obsession in your poems?

GOODISON: My obsession with light and how I’ve dealt with it in my poems have always relied on rain and images of water to function as “light” in my poems. I draw too, on my training as a visual artist. I used to be able to draw and paint quite well and I got great satisfaction from doing pencil and charcoal sketches, so the technique of chiaroscuro is what I hope I transfer to my poems. I also rely on the use of certain colors, metals and precious stones about which I began writing from as far back as my second collection, *Heartease*, where I, the speaker in a poem called, “The Mulatta and the Minotaur,” acquire a bloodstone ring as a symbol of healing. In a poem like “The Ceremony For The Banishment of The King of Swords” I propose different ways in which an individual might receive light including healing light which runs “like mercury through the veins.” I read a lot about the properties of mercury before I wrote that. All these light images I place in relief to dark historical facts or hold them up as talismans against the sense of hopelessness and despair which can overwhelm us as human beings. I create little ceremonies of order, too, small gestures intended to point readers to possible sources of redemption. I also fold in bits of healing knowledge that I have

managed to acquire. I believe that even the idea of a character being appropriately attired for an occasion, can function as “light” in a poem or a story. I am particularly fond of that letter of John Keats’ where he talks about putting on a clean shirt and tightly lacing up his shoes whenever he felt as if he was in danger of being overcome by despair. I guess these things have replaced or extended my light versus dark repertoire.

MICHELA: The memory of the Middle Passage, of the uprooting and dispossession of a whole people, is at the core of your narrative, often seen through the eyes of a young girl: How should such memory be treated by both writer and reader; and how should one bear this memory in everyday life?

GOODISON: The memory of the middle passage and the uprooting and dispossession of a whole people will be with me until I die. I know that, there is no way of forgetting something like that. I believe that the remembering of it is part of the equipment I have been given as a writer. I wrote a poem like “So Who Was the Mother of Jamaican Art” because I see part of my charge as a writer as laying claim to the humanity of my ancestors, valorising ‘Quashie’ and putting a face and giving names to the faceless and nameless bands of men and women who did not just survive, but to some extent prevailed. I guess the chiaroscuro technique is applicable here too for while I must attempt to write about the unspeakable horrors of the middle passage and the Atlantic Slave trade, I must also praise the strength and nobility of spirit which enabled Africans to survive it, not just survive it as brute beasts, but as artists, musicians and storytellers, healers, scientists, spiritual leaders and empire builders; that is what I do, I celebrate the fact that the so called ‘master’ culture was not able to completely annihilate the culture of the Native Indians and enslaved Africans. I also celebrate the thinking that has gained greater currency in recent years: that several cultures encountered each other, a great struggle took place and something new was created as a result. I much prefer that to the victor and the vanquished version that I grew up with.

MICHELA: Caribbean women writers of recent decades belong to a tradition that is yet to be fully explored. Now, although the idea of “matrilineage” in Caribbean writing is slowly finding its place in the current literary discourse, we are still likely to encounter difficulties when searching for such “literary foremothers.” Their folktales and stories, which belong to an oral tradition, are often lost or found by chance in rare transcriptions.

In fact, the vast majority of works by West Indian women writers is out of print. Do you see a reason for this exclusion, and for the relative silence around this issue?

GOODISON: I must begin by giving thanks that the “half that has never been told”, i.e. the stories and poems by Caribbean Women writers have gained some currency in my lifetime. I clearly remember buying a copy of *Seven Jamaican Poets* in 1968 – all men. The advent of Mervyn Morris and Pam Mordecai’s *Jamaica Woman* was a benchmark in publishing and Caribbean women writers have had more exposure since then. Publishers like John La Rose of New Beacon Press, Jeremy Poynting of Peepal Tree Press and Ian Randle of Ian Randle Press have contributed greatly to spreading the word. Also we can never forget the giant shadow cast by Louise Bennett, who, thanks to Jahan Ramazani, has finally been included in the Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry. What I will say is this: writers, both men and women, should know that this is a game of chance. Throughout history there have been great writers who received little or no attention, in their lifetime, so I think that writers should regularly examine themselves and their motives as to why they are engaged in this whole enterprise. I guess it is hard to resist the urge to write whatever we believe will gain us favor with the “powers that be”, whomever those powers are – publishers, critics, your peers, the buying public – but there are real risks involved in doing that, and sometimes those risks pay off and sometimes they don’t. I often say that I have no agenda as a writer, but maybe that is not true, if I have an agenda this is it: I want to first of all write in a language that accurately represents the people I write about. I have a great fear of writing as if I’m from middle earth. I want to write stories and poems that resonate with anyone who is human, anyone who loves and who has known loss, anyone. I am deeply invested in the triumph of the “holy fool”, wherever he or she is to be found.

MICHELA: Reading your last collection of short stories, *Fool-Fool Rose is Leaving Labour-in-Vain-Savannah*, with its moments of crystallized epiphanies in everyday life of a small community, one cannot but notice the positive energy of your characters, all fighters who find hope within themselves, ready to rebuild their lives over the ruins of their misfortunes. This is quite rare, if we were to think of a somewhat similar small community narrated by Joyce in *Dubliners*, for example, where acceptance of fate is more common than hope and redemption. Do you feel that the ‘positiveness’ in your stories

reflects the actual reality of the world you describe or rather your own personal attitude towards life?

GOODISON: Ah, 'positiveness' in my stories. If I could, all my stories would have happy endings, but then my characters would only be cartoon characters. What I will say is this, I cannot explain this, but from time to time I have been visited by joyful spirits. I am also quite familiar with the company of darker spirits, but when the agents of hope and possibility are visiting me then my stories and poems reflect their presence. I often marvel at my own life; not in any (I hope) boastful show-off triumphalist way, but with a sense of real amazement. To tell the truth, there are many days when I can identify with "the stone that the builder refused." Not that I am now the corner stone, but I do believe that I have managed not to live down to some people's expectations of me. You see I did not come to this business in conventional ways, I started off as a visual artist who wrote and I have become a writer who hardly ever paints. Some people do not like that, some people still behave as if I'm something of "a vulgar upstart with no right to aspire to poetry" (as a critic said of John Keats). And still I write (to paraphrase Maya Angelou). I have also become a teacher at the University of Michigan, how did that happen? It certainly was not ever going to happen for me at the University of the West Indies? I have been blessed with a dear companion in the person of Ted Chamberlin and I am grateful to be mother to my son, Miles. Look, what I'm saying is this, in my own life I have seen evidence of this 'positiveness', I am grateful, grateful, grateful, grateful beyond measure if I pass some on to my characters. But, honestly, I have seen other people's lives powerfully transformed when they began to access something in themselves that was and is paradoxically, greater than themselves, and even if the conditions of one's outward life do not change all that much some people do come into a kind of peace and wisdom that is remarkable – that is what happens to some of my characters.

MICHELA: All your characters have their own very clear voice; while your voice as "author" is seldom felt. Characters like Fool-Fool Rose – who is also present in your last collection of poems, *Controlling the Silver* – seem to act autonomously. Do you sometimes find yourself in conflict with your personae – as Pirandello was with his six characters – and, if yes, how do you resolve the needs of characters and the needs of you as author?

GOODISON: I do wrestle with my characters. Sometimes it takes me years to finish a poem or a story because I imagine that characters in the poems and stories are unhappy with the endings. Take a poem like “Annie Pengelly” I had several different endings, none of which worked, after about a year, I sat down and wrote the ending it now has, which suggests that both Annie and the woman who owned her, were enslaved, one by slavery and one by unrequited love; the guard and the prisoner are both in prison, I don’t know, Annie seemed to want that ending. When I wrote “Baby Mother and the King of Swords”, I honestly felt as if the women in those stories were telling me what happened to them and that they were entrusting me to write down their stories. In one or two of those early stories I think that I might have brought about a different ending to the one the characters wanted. Like in “Angelita and Golden Days”, I’m not sure that Angelita would have rejected Golden Days when he made a “slackness” record that became a hit, that ending was probably me, the writer as moralist. If I wrote that story now, I’d probably write it with an open ending.

MICHELA: Your writing seems a mosaic where stories and poems are pieces of not only a single collection but of a larger design, of a larger body of an ongoing narration. Would you agree with such a description? And if yes, would you share your view of this larger body of work?

GOODISON: Yes...That would be true. There are subjects that I keep revisiting and I suspect that I will keep revisiting for as long as I write. Some of my poems began their life as ‘leftovers’ from paintings. By that I mean, I would often have an idea for a painting, I’d then do the painting but find that I’d not exhausted the idea, so I’d write a poem about it, I find myself going back to clarify things or to speak about some things in a different way, especially as I’ve become more conscious of form.

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