Michela A. Calderaro

A REVIEW OF KAMAU BRATHWAITE'S *WORDS NEED LOVE TOO*

Words Give Love Too

(St. Martin: House of Nehesi Press. 2000.)

KAMAU BRATHWAITE'S *WORDS NEED LOVE TOO* BELONGS IN THE POET'S GROUP of works that examine the act of creation of language. It forces the reader to question the function of language, to wonder how it is created and how it serves a writer's purpose, and, above all, to consider the relationship between a writer and his public — the community of readers who are the recipients of his creation. These questions are of particular interest today, as in the current globalized world, with its literary superhighways, words are shared by a much larger community than in the past, and writers have less control over and perception of its size and composition.

Called upon to review this new collection of poems, a critic soon finds herself in need of new words. The traditional critical tools would not do when reviewing such poems, written in part in the language of the New World, that is, *nation language*, which expresses a cultural, geopolitical and socio-historical diversity. Shedding her standard, self-referential stock of words, the reader is compelled to withhold analysis and simply sit back and absorb the cascade of vowels and consonants, images and associations. And after a while she feels as if she has landed on uncharted virgin shores where no one has set foot before, beginning a voyage through time and space to face up and acknowledge what was and what could have been. Each word and each poem is a new statement, either a stone hurled to shatter an old consciousness or a brick in the construction of a new one.

The collection, divided into four sections, is a major contribution to 'Caribbean aesthetics' and, as such, might be a considerable challenge to the non-initiated. But Brathwaite's poetry has never been known to be easy reading. It requires the reader to make some adjustments — to cast off any ready-made preconceptions and pre-constructed ideas and meanings. Yet once he opens up to the rhythm on the page in front of him, he will be carried off to new levels of meaning. It is a rhythm made of repetitions and alliterations, with no traditional line breaks (if you look for these here, you have not made the requisite adjustments).

The way a poem is laid on the page, its visual aspect, is as important as the sounds it evokes. Thus, the rhythm is brought forth also by visual means — with poems sometimes taking the shape of waves or wings. Words and verses are made clearer by their visual form. In "The SilverSands Poem," an alliterative long line is followed by an extremely short one, then by another pair of long and short lines, making the "hurricane" and subsequent "silence" stand out in a clashing opposition, suggesting the eternal contrast between sound and silence, word and lack thereof:

> how is the sound of this south sea so soft
> of the hurricane
> how so in a hurry to alter the landscape . to let fish slip
> under the silence

In the poem that closes the third section, "Xângo at the Summer Solstice," the contrast between sound and silence becomes part of the continuous cycle of life: every winter Xângo would store the sounds that would be heard in another season and another place. Here is where language is created, but also where

> [...] beyond the language of the summer's clock-
> work [...]
> you will already see the shadows

Sounds are a communicative means, and as such they make up a language. Here, the poet/Xângo is creating both a poem and the language to express it. The blowing of air into the flute evokes in our minds God breathing life into a piece of clay. Structurally, the poem is built on different coexisting levels, not only of time and place, but also of language: We hear, here and now, the sound that Xângo created in another place in another time in another language. Different languages coexist in the poem, and the continuous swinging from standard English to nation language and back brings the reader closer to the process of creating a language.

In "The Nansetoura of CowPastor," the function of memory and time and the significance of our heritage in determining what we are today, is highlighted by the alternation of narrating voices — the poet and Anancy the Spider. CowPastor, in Barbados, is where Kamau Brathwaite's ancestors are buried. It is the sacred place where memory brings the past into the present and Africa into the Caribbean. Here and now, through the juxtaposition of voices, we also witness the transformation of language into poetry — a nation poetry expressed in a nation language.

In other poems, Brathwaite's use of ideograms and logograms strips language of its embellishments and leaves it unadorned, naked in its true essence. Language becomes a tool, and can

be trans-formed and re-formed according to what needs to be communicated; its great power is its infinite capacity for self-regeneration.

Logograms, Brathwaite's trademark, await the reader upon entering — in the opening poem, "JerryWard & the fragmented spaceship dreamstorie" ("& xploded on impact", "& language & angel", etc.). And as we travel from the "green open fields of memory" to the "perfect circle" made by the "rain-grass" under the guava tree in the title poem, a pictograph (the computerized image of an eye) leads us to a "rotting concrete city needing love," set in striking contrast to images of Caribbean beauty where

> [...] at night the stars come
> silver down to where the canetops are
> so low you hear their tick & singing crickets
> comments

Like other books by Kamau Brathwaite, one of the most authoritative voices in Caribbean literature, this collection, too, is likely to be the subject of heated and lively critical discussions. We cannot but welcome his vivid, eye-opening verses, which are essential milestones in the creation of a Caribbean aesthetic and of a new poetic language.