

Ralph Thompson

ON WRITING & PAINTING



All art is an attempt to encode in a more permanent form the transientness of the world-whether its beauty or its sorrow, its epiphanies or its tragedies but always with the compulsion to share with others the joy of the creative process. All artists are exhibitionists which is why painters exhibit and poets publish. As primarily a figurative painter and primarily a narrative poet, the stuff of my work is plot (not pot). In painting I get my highs with my eyes; in poetry imagination generates the greatest satisfaction. In painting I strive to capture what I cannot see; in poetry I strive to lose what is no longer needed.

TONY is a genre painting about a motorcycle accident, the victim immobilized in a cast, dependent on a crutch. Subconscious symbols of submission? Perhaps. But there is no mistaking the head as being that of a proud black man. I have a poem entitled "Death of a Honda Rider", not connected with the painting in time, in which the victim is a Rastafarian whose truth is hidden under his locks. The poem ends

*.... a million
revelations, spliff certified,
flared to a faith you could not face
unless you dared to ride the pillion*

Notice the pun in the word *face* i.e. the physical act of *looking forward* or to *confront*. Puns and ambiguity are possible and desirable in poetry. I do not think you can pun in paint.

Years ago my wife and I were having breakfast with Derek Walcott in the coffee shop at Bloomingdales in New York when he announced that he was going to give up poetry for painting. "Painting is more immediate. I am tired of the toil of poetry". I was stunned and tried to record the incident in a poem entitled "In Contemplation of a Poet's Head" which ends:

*Rapture is a risk all poets take.
You alone with pen or pallet will compose
the balance of your days.
For the bronze armory of bone give praise.*

The words *compose* and *balance* can be read two ways. *Compose* can mean to tranquilize agitation and it can mean to design harmonies; *balance* can mean getting proportions right or it can mean what is yet to happen. Both senses work in recording Walcott's decision which, fortunately, he did not honour.

What is more transient, fragile and beautiful than the light of the world and where is light more refulgent than in the Caribbean and my Jamaica? . Although transient, Light is also a palpable presence in the tropics, a presence I have tried to capture in paintings like PORT ANTONIO and SAN SAN BAY. But in painting the landscape of the West Indies one has to be careful not to sentimentalize scenery just as one has to shun romanticizing poverty in poetry.

In PORT ANTONIO the village shacks at the water's edge could have been painted as social propaganda. Instead I chose to simplify (purify?) the shapes and make a pattern of their repetition. The slash of light across the harbor serves to define its curvature and at the same time to undercut mere realistic perspective. SAN SAN BAY is suffused with light but is another example of creating distance without traditional perspective. The stylized angle of the jetty and the line of bathers forms an arrowhead which points to the horizon and pulls the viewers eyes into the picture.

My obsession with light overflows into my poetry. In the prologue to "View from Mount Diablo" the opening lines report the dialectic of light and dark.

*The light that I have so long loved turns
Its gaze grudgingly from the old, romantic view
Of islands, from the stubbled silver sheen of mountains
Guarding villages waking from their sleep, dew*

Overflowing the green uplifted chalice of a leaf

Rhyme helps to discipline the emotion and the imperative to undercut sentimentality clicks in:

*.....now the dream
Is draining from the valley shadows, edges hardening
As the light changes to a harsh, uncompromising glare.
This day's sun is turning cynical, taking
Its early morning tally in the tarnished air, a complacent
Prison warder twisting a thumb print into Kingston's face -
At high noon a hawk circling a laden
Feeding tree, pure scrutiny without a trace
Of insight*

Painters and poets share this in common - they must have 'outsight' as well as 'insight'. The genesis of my painting LEDA was a look over my shoulder at Yeats' "Leda" which equates the swan with the universal power of Eros. My insight was to substitute lizard for swan, which in the Jamaican context records the ambivalent attitude of Jamaican women who believe that if a lizard jumps on them they will get pregnant. My painting exaggerates the size of the lizard in relation to the head of the bemused woman, her body elongated between the red uprights of the chair on which she sits. I have tried to capture a certain nobleness in the lizard's pose and another important aspect of the composition is that the planes of the painting, the carpet, the floor, the garden, the sky, are all of the same tone to preserve the integrity of the surface of the canvas. This eschews old-fashioned perspective and recognizes the reality of the medium we painters and poets are forced to use to convey the message and the emotion.

Unconsciously connected I suppose, I wrote a poem entitled "Leda" which, as far as the emotional reaction of a viewer or a reader is concerned, would instantly conjoin Yeats' swan and Thompson's lizard, a type of instant communication and rapport common to painting and poetry. The poem is more light-hearted than the painting. It begins:

*Why are we
black daughters of Jamaica
so afraid of lizards?
Confronted by such a wall
of prejudice I think*

*that they, the bloodless ones,
have climbed it with aplomb.*

It ends:

*White girls deserve unruffled
long-necked swans.
Under a Poinciana tree
I keep a crimson assignation.
With a parting of the leaves he comes
and in the red shade
this other Eve, breasts tightening,
is only half afraid.*

Since the invention of the camera, portraits have become a problem for a painter. My painting of JOHN HEARNE, the renowned Jamaican novelist, was an attempt to capture a likeness as well as a personality. Hearne's mixed racial background put him in the category known affectionately in Jamaica as a 'red man', most common in the parish of St. Elizabeth. Hearne had an intimidating stare, more theatrical than real. He was in fact an innocent, one eye open to all aesthetic experience, the other often blind to the harsh realities of life in Jamaica.

In a poem entitled "On Turning Fifty", dedicated to Hearne, and written after the painting, I tried to capture the special ambience of the occasion:

*That is the blessing of half centuries -
wine left to breathe before the drinking,
love less frantic for the savouring,
friends more loyal for the keeping
and the greeting of anniversaries in wool socks
with much wriggling of toes in the turf of the earth.*

This poem was read by Edward Baugh, one of Jamaica's outstanding poets, at Hearne's funeral. I think it has received greater emotional response over the years than the painting.

My watercolor portrait entitled LYNFORD reflects the Jamaican reality of an underclass which, unfortunately, has achieved little social mobility since slavery. Lynford is barefoot and seems to be reluctantly reconciled to posing. He is not cowed but, unlike Tony, he does not present himself as the descendant of a fierce African chieftain. Social

commentary is easier in poetry than in painting. I have written a novel in verse, "View from Mount Diablo", which traces and castigates political corruption in Jamaica since Independence.

Jamaica is a fragmented society, socially, racially and economically. There are those whose aesthetic in painting see abstract art as appropriate to reflect these discontinuities. Walcott disagrees. Denizens of New York and Chicago who only know concrete and skyscrapers may need to retreat into Expressionism but we who are fortunate to live in the lush generosity of the tropics have a moral obligation to celebrate it faithfully in our art. I take a middle ground. *BROTHERS* is an ironic abstract composition which lives somewhere between realism, surrealism and the abstract. The cliché phrase "Brothers at Arms" cannot apply because two of the figures have no arms yet there seems to be an embracing, one monolithic whole approaching sculpture. The stylized arms of the middle figure of the trinity seem to be raised in prayer and the three bowed heads convey an overall sacramental atmosphere.

There may be nothing specifically Jamaican about this painting but I feel it reflects a universal humanity, strong and vibrant (check the colour harmonies) but desperately locked into the need for solidarity. Oh, for this combination of humility and strength in the Jamaican society.

Another non-realistic painting of mine is entitled *CYCLING* which was used on the cover of my second poetry collection, aptly named "Moving On", cover and content symbolic of the connectedness of the two disciplines. It is usually easier to capture speed and movement in painting than in poetry but in a poem of mine with the title "My God" I have tried to define *space* and *time* as follows:

*Time is space unravelling and space
is the time it takes to trace the limits
which the pen has shaped.*

CYCLING records my fascination as a youth with the bicycle. Back then the cycle was the method of transportation for school boys and the working class. Only the rich had automobiles. The poem counterpart to *CYCLING* contains these lines:

The leap upon the bike -

*feeling the animation of its steel
between my legs, pedal elevated,
head hanging over handle bars,
rocking from side to side.
Then the glide down South Camp road
spokes spinning in refracted light.*

In this case the poem came considerably earlier than the painting and was the direct inspiration for it.

Cityscapes are a subtext of landscapes. My painting KINGSTON NORTH is an attempt to explore the odd combination of ramshackle and the modern which is characteristic of our capital city. Kingston is also unique in the amount of trees and greenery that punctuate its buildings. But the most significant feature of the city is the mountains standing guard over it.

I have painted them boldly so that their monumentality overwhelms the concrete and steel of the modern buildings scattered throughout the composition. There is a slightly different perspective in my poem "Third World" in which:

*High rise hotels, concrete shoulders thrown back
stand like soldiers self-consciously at attention
while round their boots the third world city sprawls.*

I started painting long before I tried my hand at poetry but have long since put away my easel and my pallet. The challenges for a third world poet are formidable. The anxiety of influence must not be allowed to bloom so abundantly that our gaze remains fixed on our navels. On the other hand we need to free ourselves from the influence of anxiety, the lack of self-esteem, which is the inheritance of slavery.

As Caribbean poets we must cherish the particularities that sparkle in our culture while at the same time not hesitating to grapple with the universal verities which mark all great poetry. It has been my privilege to be on the fringe of this great adventure.

Calabash

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