EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE "HISTORY OF THE VOICE" (1979)

Roots: Essays in Caribbean Literature. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. 259-304.

Brathwaite's topic here is "language from the Caribbean, the process of using English in a different way from the 'norm'" (259). His particular concern here is with the "relationship between language and culture" (259) which for him are largely synonymous. In the wake of European imperialism and the arrival of slave labour from Africa, Brathwaite argues, the Caribbean became a multilingual society in which the African languages that the slaves brought with them were suppressed by the European masters in favour of the "imposed" (259) languages of the colonial master: English, Spanish, French, Dutch, etc. He stresses that the English used in the Caribbean is in fact "creole English, which is a mixture of English and an adaptation that English took in the new environment of the Caribbean when it became mixed with the other imported languages" (260). This is complemented by what Brathwaite calls "nation language" (260), the Africanised "kind of English spoken by people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors" (260) and in which one can detect "survivals of African languages" (260). There are also remnants of Amerindian, Hindi (brought by imported Indian labourers), and "varieties of Chinese" (260) spoken in the region. The result is "that spectrum--that prism--of languages" (260) which Brathwaite terms a "plurality" (259).

Although imported African slaves were from many areas of West Africa and spoke different languages, he argues that what one witnessed was the advent of a single "new language structure" (261) which "consisted of many languages, but basically they had a common semantic and stylistic form" (261). "What these languages had to do" (261), he argues, "was to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples . . . did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of the Congolese languages" (261-262). This resulted in the "submergence" (262) of these languages and a status of "inferiority" (262) conferred upon them and their users: "its speakers were slaves. They were conceived of as inferiors--nonhuman, in fact" (262). This submergence "served an interesting intercultural purpose" (262) in that "although people continued to speak English" (262), this was "nevertheless influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought" (262). This language was also "constantly transforming itself into new forms" (262), moving from a "purely African form to a form that was African, but which was adapting itself to the new environment and to the cultural imperatives of the European languages" (262). This in turn shaped the way in which European colonisers spoke their own language.

Brathwaite argues that the "educational system" (262) in the Caribbean, like all areas adversely affected by "cultural imperialism" (262), ignored the "presence of these various languages" 262) and recognised only the "language of the conquistador--the language of the planter, the language of the official, the language of the Anglican preacher" (262). The education system carried the "contours of an English heritage. Hence, . . . Both literature, and literary forms . . . that had very little to do, really, with the environment and reality of the Caribbean" (262). Caribbean people were forced to learn about "things that had no relevance to themselves" (262-263). Brathwaite believes that many of the most influential "perceptual models" (263) (at least those dominant up to the time of writing) are in fact alien to the experience of the region and forcibly repressed that which is indigenous: "[w]hat English has given us as a model for poetry . . . is the pentameter" (264) but, he argues, the "hurricane does not roar in pentameter" (265). The problem is, for Brathwaite, "how do you get a rhythm that approximates the natural

experience, the environmental experience" (265), one that "more closely and intimately approaches our own experience" (265).

'Nation language,' Brathwaite argues, "largely ignores the pentameter" (265). 'Nation language' (or what he calls elsewhere the "emergent language" [263] of the Caribbean) is, in short, the language spoken in the Caribbean that is "influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World / Caribbean heritage" (265-266). "English it may be in terms of its lexicon, but it is not English in terms of its syntax. And English it certainly is not in terms of its rhythm and timbre, its own sound explosion. In its contours, it is not English" (266). It is the English "of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people" (266). He contrasts the term 'nation language' to "dialect" (266) which has "pejorative overtones" (266) to its use--it is thought of as 'bad English', used to make fun of people: "[c]aricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people's dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave them" (266). 'Nation language' is the "submerged area" (266) that is "much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean" (266). This "submerged culture" (297), he stresses, is really an "emerging culture" (287).

Arguing that one of "our urgent tasks is to create our own authorities" (267), Brathwaite contends that "there has been little written about our nation language" (267). He argues that the

> forerunner of all this was, of course, Dante Alighieri who, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, argued, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304) for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular as the nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete, and accessible means of verbal expression. And the movement was, in fact, successful throughout Europe with the establishment of national languages and literatures. (267)

Ironically, he points out, such emergent languages then proceeded to ignore what Brathwaite calls "local European colonial languages" (267) such as Basque and Gaelic and to suppress "overseas colonial languages" (267). There have been several Caribbean linguists who have sought to "set out its grammar, syntax, transformation, structure" (269) but they have done little to address "nation language as it affects literature" (269), that is, "between the nation language and its expression in our literature" (269). Apart from Brathwaite himself, he points out that Edouard Glissant has done a little work in the area. Apart from these few, however, there is not much else, he writes: "that is all we have to offer as authority, which isn't very much really" (271).

Brathwaite then lists "some of the characteristics of our nation language" (271) as including an emphasis on "orality"(271) or the "oral tradition" (271), that is, the "tradition of the spoken word" (271), a different rhythm (the calypso "employs dactyls" [272], rather than the iambic pentameter so integral to canonical English literature, and is the "model that we are moving naturally toward now" [272]), and differences in the "shape of intonation" (312). He stresses, too, that 'nation language' is part of what he calls "total expression" (273):

> Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where the meaning truly resides. And this total expression comes about people live in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty, because people come from a historical experience

> where they had to rely on their own breath patterns rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums. They had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves. (273)

Brathwaite ends by tracing the history of the development of West Indian literature, touching on key examples or "models" (286) (such as Frank Collymore or Mikey Smith) in order to provide an "idea of how the 'mainstream' Anglophone Caribbean poets reached the stage signalled by Miss Lou" (286) where nation language could be confidently asserted. He argues in this regard that the

> mainstream poets who were moving from standard English to nation language were influenced basically, I think (again the models are important), by T. S. Eliot. What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot. And you can see how the Caribbean poets introduced here have been influenced by him, although they eventually went on to create their own environmental expression. (286-287)

The problem to which Brathwaite is addressing himself is that of transcending this enforced heritage which was what he describes as our beginning of an understanding of literature. Emerging Caribbean poets, however, are necessarily influenced by this "submerged/emerged culture" () and "use the resources which have always been there, but which have been denied to them--an which they have sometimes themselves denied" (297-298).