

ABSTRACT

The Vindication of the Voice in West Indian Poetry

One of the fundamental problems facing all post-colonial societies is the problem of language: articulation. We are all familiar with the schoolchild struggling to find pitch, medium, comfortability with his own voice, with the mode of language which the academy, the legacy of colonialism has bequeathed him. It is a problem inherent in script itself, literariness; and it is a political problem. Outside classroom discourse, the student uses language, in speaking, comfortably, without complexes, anxieties, freely and independently. Herein lies his genius; the language he uses is his own inimitable medium. The same situation applies to the "layman", the "peasant", the "common man". Part of the genius, the Volksgeist of his culture, he finds it difficult to articulate his innermost feelings in the forum of formal public space, office space, academy and book space. His genius struggles, seems out of depth, suffers anxiety, constriction and complex.

Writing, poetry-writing is a formal activity; it requires formal modes of thinking, organizing and setting down language. When confronted with the formal-ness of poetry-writing, the literary poet of the West Indies suffers a problem of articulation: Voice. It is a problem which West Indian politicians, and teachers have encountered. How to bridge the gap between the artefact of language inherited from book and academy, and their innermost feelings; how to ground within themselves, and in so doing, ground with their listeners? The literary poet, acquiring his mode of poetic imagination, his notions of the poetic, of aesthetics, of the poem, from West Indian Academy and Schoolhouse, and implicit in these, the colonizing culture, has been struggling throughout the 20th Century in attempts to ground with his Voice. He has been struggling out of the regions of anxiety, complex, constriction, to

articulate: dialogically and poetically. When this ideal is achieved, when, as it were, the Voice comes into its own, vindication would have occurred.

But how do we determine the controversial question of what constitutes the vindicated Voice? We cannot use the criterion of reader reception. Most West Indians, once they have left the schoolhouse and academy do not read poetry. In any event, the relationship between the vindicated voice and reception is a tenuous one. West Indian critics have used varying criteria for assessing vindication: aspects of native language such as metre, dialectal form, syntax, movement. This thesis examines the criterion of sensibility. Sensibility is at once implicit in, yet distinct from all the above criteria. We shall attempt to determine how much the sensibility-implicit in language, music, metaphor, muse, has grounded itself, or has become native.

In the process, we will show the relationship between sensibility (its complex aesthetics) and political vindication. The question of content, and how it functions vindication, is a variable on which we will not focus on. We will examine form, as it were, symptomatically. We will examine how it signifies the extent of vindication of the Voice of the literary poets. We will examine it idealistically; from the perspective of how it may function dialogization. As a means of comparison, we will examine the Voice of the oral poet; for here is a Voice which has found a locus in the imaginations of the people.

The problem of vindication has implications for all traditions of literature which attempt to "break away" or decolonize themselves from the Mother, legendary ones. It is a problem, ultimately, between native and the Other's native; of how cultures split, are torn and re-discover themselves--how this is reflected in, and may be functioned by Poetic Voice.