

**2a~George Elliott Clarke to Derek Walcott.****“I write in a cold place”**

Dear Poet *par excellence*:

I write to you – and I have no right. I sound your order and imperium and delirium of words and I am beguiled, astonished, shaken. You have dared to seize your coral and conch-shell and slave-coffle archipelago and shine an Afro-Latinate sun upon its Nilotic-Aegean waters, so that *Myth* courses out of *History* like honey out of surly rock. Your miraculous grace with locations, your juggling of geographics and their matched terrors and ecstasies, is the art I cling to – in my own inner exile, in a land-and-seascape drafted by horror. I have been planted, though uprooted, in a New World Stonehenge of the most brutal and awesome boulders heaped up, implacable, against a homicidal, cold-blooded Atlantic Ocean, thoroughly furious, vomiting death and threats of death upon the coast of Nova Scotia. *Nova Scotia!* – Nouvelle-Écosse – New Scotland – *New Darkness*. I feel the same way about its stark cacophonies – unsoftened, however, by mas and carnival – as you (your persona) feel(s) about the calypso islands you have known (St. Lucia, Trinidad, Jamaica) and that apocalyptic island (England) that has surrendered to you its language, its anguish.

I write to you – in a kind of rite. Because I have felt the pelting of snow and billy clubs, in the waste of an empire-sized colony – Oh Canada – that sold its soul for sculptures of a plush Queen Elizabeth II set – in sea-green – aboard a woolly moose. Here the white racism is so, so polite, everyone forgets that African slaves were whipped in the streets of Ville de Québec and that one of those forgotten beings arsoned Montréal and another – thousands, really – tried to harvest potatoes from stones in damned and damnable Nova Scotia. The black folks there wrung love from Caribbean rum, just as Caribbean folks took strength from ‘Nofaskosha’ salt cod. Apart from that commerce, these snow-chilled black folks were alone, abandoned, and jettisoned from Black Atlantic chronicles. No one remembered this flotsam and jetsam of Rhode Island, Virginia, Maryland, Connecticut, and New York. I have come down from them – their historic illiteracy, their social invisibility, and your art has been all that has said, “Ye marginals must fashion your own songs, in your own voices, but never be afraid to thief the language of those who scorn you and to throw it back in their faces.” You have said, “No language is neutral,” and I find myself yearning for a similarly combative aesthetic that still knows how to swoon before *Beauty*.

I have no right to claim any kinship with you. You are a Caesar – no, a L’Ouverture – of letters, an expansive opening to the future. I take up your *Collected Poems* like a religion, your *Odyssey* like a weapon, your *Bounty* like a cache of rum, and I am entranced by your stern cornucopias, your baroque clarity, your evil virtues. I read lines – savvy, savage – and dream to likewise map my paltry peninsula, the salt-spray dominion of Caligulas and Macbeths, a craggy warren of Huey Long wanna-bes and second-rate Madonnas, a nowhere of nothingness. Your verse-dramas – their severe lyricism – exemplify the agency of the succinct line. I admire your honing, refurbishing, of metre – all those anapestic tetrameters and spondee- and trochee-broken alexandrines in *The Odyssey*, all those appeals to a blackened blank verse in *The Fortunate Traveller*. Thank you, too, for staying black in your utilization of music and speech, in letting some lines pour out like Sparrow or Smokey, even while you re-enact Yeats.

Your writing is civil rights. I mean, your adoration of John Clare recalls, no, resuscitates, all those lost Marxian interests in “peasant” song, in the purity of simplicity. You have always had this leaning, this tendency to absorb – like Yeats, like Garcia Lorca – the elegant heart-feltness of “people’s” song. This zeal has turned my ears to the rough, drunk shouts, the scary wails, the hot moans, of too many African Baptist Association members in bonny, ugly, Nova Scotia, their faces scoured by tears, singing without hymnals because the hymnals have no useful words. Some critics say you are apolitical. I say “good”! Your poetry insists that there is no politics but song in the lungs. You bring postmodernism back to classicism by means of an insistence on the relevance of song. I treasure what you do with Ovid’s frank, democratic, talk-show oratory in *Midsummer*.

I write in a cold place where I possess beleaguered rights. Canada wants nothing to do with any combustible sorrow or inflammatory blues. It demands a clipped, precise speech, some tone of majesty to restrict American slovenliness, republican vulgarity. It demands a metre akin to its own War Measures Act. The climate will hardly let you spark any fire. But your books are portable infernos I use to warm and illuminate this hostile, killing environment.

I write to you – and I have no right. Commonwealth Bard, born thirty years before I was born, born in another backwater province (but warmer than where I was born), born in an era of war, I thank you for pioneering a way of blackening English, of roasting syllables upon the righteous fires of your anger and your love until they split and crack. You cannibalize the Canon and invite your brethren and sistren to the intoxicating, exhilarating feast.

George Elliott Clarke