

*Michela A. Calderaro*

## FROM A CRITIC'S MIND

### PAINTING WITH WORDS AND MAKE US SEE: LORNA GOODISON'S *CONTROLLING THE SILVER*



Ever since the publication of *Tamarind Season* (1980), Lorna Goodison has been celebrated as one of the most authoritative Caribbean voices. *Turn Thanks* (1999) was praised as a “turning point in contemporary Caribbean poetry,”<sup>1</sup> and writer Kwane Dawes, in his review of *Guinea Woman* and *Turn Thanks*, went even further, placing Goodison in the company of a Nobel laureate and of the ‘father of Caribbean aesthetics’: “It is now officially, Walcott, Brathwaite, Goodison.”

Now, with *Controlling the Silver*, Lorna Goodison takes the reader on a longer and more complex passage out of the islands and across the wide seas (and back). The collection (of which some poems have been published or read earlier in various media) revolves around a voyage that transcends a personal, physical trip. Each poem is a tessera in a mosaic, a brushstroke in an enormous fresco whose concept resides in each stroke

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<sup>1</sup> Serafin Roldán Santiago, “The Koshering Process: Images of Redemption and Reconciliation in Lorna Goodison’s *Turn Thanks*” *Revista/Review Interamericana*, vol. 30, 2005

and each piece, yet is better perceived when we step back and take the whole work in – and are struck by its magnitude.

The collection opens with a long poem, “Island Aubade,” a song to dawn sung by the narrating “I” to her son. The artifice allows the poet to shift from one narrative level to another, introducing many different themes – such as motherhood, Jamaican landscape, Jamaican mythology, family and ancestry.

Morning has become my mother, bringer of curing  
bush tea. She is now mother to the whole island,  
grandmother to Miles, mountain born, who thought

‘Maw’ nin’ was a lady. “Show her to me” said my son,  
and we pointed him to a rose dawn over our village.

The long poem is a prelude to the journey that will take the writer, and the reader, “back to where our people come from.” In this journey each poem is a kind of road stop, representing a place, a moment, of a personal yet collective experience, with folk tales alternating with personal and communal recollections told in a language that gives mythical stature to the everyday and the familiar. A personal family history – of cousins, uncles and aunts – becomes a story of larger dimensions, of all men and all women of past and present generations. “Recalling the Fourteen Hour Drive from Kingston to Lucea, 1953” is a mental return of the present traveller to a past journey, a pilgrimage with “fourteen pit stops” – unavoidably bringing to mind the fourteen Stations of the

Cross and the passion, not only of an individual but of a whole enslaved people, uprooted and transported across the Ocean<sup>2</sup>.

The narrator's story, interlaced with historical cross-references, memories of past generations, of exceptional women and epochal events, becomes a choral quest to find the deeper roots of a people, to define a national consciousness whose origins lie in both the Caribbean and Africa, and to build a collective and historical memory that would encompass the various personal memories.

The poet, thus, becomes a *receptacle* (if we may borrow a T. S. Eliot coinage) of an infinite number of memories, and these memories are rendered by Goodison through startling metaphors, sudden clashes of contrasting images and juxtaposition of situations in a rich and strong language that mixes standard English with Jamaican Creole. The use of Creole, indeed, becomes the strongest and only means to give the Arawak a voice, and recount their ordeal:

Don C and the goldman posse  
arrived by leaky caravelle taxi,  
and barely made it to the beach,  
and as dem reach so, dem start  
with the hold down and take way.

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of pilgrimage is conveyed by many biblical references, rendered through either a Rastafarian interpretation – as in “Jah the Baptist” (“In those Bible stories our mothers read to us,/John the Baptist was dread righteous Rastaman”) – or characters whose tongues merge to give life to a new language – as in “The Wandering Jew and the Arab Merchant on the Island of Allspice” (“All the way along the Damascus road, the Jew/has come to sell his things to the freed Africans./The Arab came following the long spice route/to this island of Allspice. Shalom and Salaam/becomes ‘Sallo’ on the tongues of the Africans.”).

Buy out the bar with counterfeit.  
Eat off the bammy and roast fish.  
Turn round and wipe-out Arawak  
with pillage, plunder, and disease.

“Don C and the Goldman Posse”

In *Controlling the Silver* Goodison moves in more than one direction. If in the 20th century the new language of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* formed a breach with the past and was regarded as bearer of a new meaning, a new way of rendering reality, perhaps we may say the same thing about a number of contemporary Caribbean writers, with Lorna Goodison certainly being one of the most talented among them and her use of language one of the richest and most impressive.

The poetry of the new world takes the place of the past one, and though treasuring it gives it a new form. *History Odius Odius*, the first part of “These Three Butterflies and One Bird We Interpret as Signs,” is just one among many examples of this new form, of a playful, sophisticated use of words, virtuoso sounds and images that follow one another through the stanzas, to stop with a sudden turn to Jamaican Creole:

Leave earth Nymphalid,  
soar and stay bourne within  
spirit breath, doctor breeze's  
reviving, bearing currents.

Do not pitch now or pause  
to malingering over sugar mill's  
whatleft, trickledown leak,  
or lick blackstrap molasses.

Avoid caprice breezeblow  
or any old batterbruise fruit.  
To feast on over-fermentation  
makes you white-rum drunken.

Keep the pace, this trajectory  
will take you to fat-leaved  
feeding trees, far from poison pin  
and trap net, fly on, hard fi dead.

But *Controlling the Silver* is more than a personal and collective journey retold and more than a step towards the creation of a new language to give voice to the Caribbean identity: it is a mature reflection on the nature of a work of Art. The “hand-engraved calabash” (“Passing the Grace Vessels of Calabash”), created by African slaves, served also as a means of communication, passing knowledge from one generation down to the next, transporting “maps, totems/ symbols and secret names” from one land to another. The carved calabash on which “the first nameless woman [...] created/images of her children sold away from her” (“So Who Was the Mother of Jamaican Art?”) becomes

the receptacle of truth, the historian that carries memory across the ocean. Like John Keats's Grecian urn, this work of African art communicates far beyond what may be perceived by the senses, and will continue to tell its story to future generations.

However, this vessel is not, as Keats would say, a "silent form... teasing us out of thought." It does not offer a story that is out of time to be discerned by the poet nor is it a mere art object. Rather, it reports the untold history of Afro-Caribbean slavery, giving voice to the voiceless and telling a story that is painfully current. It is through the creative process that the calabash becomes one with the poet, both being the receptacles of memory. Lorna Goodison emerges here as a true historian of our times.

*Controlling the Silver* defies reductive categorizing such as Old World/New World or Western/Eastern. And if we were to say that it is the finest Caribbean poetry book we've read this year, we'd be limiting its importance. It is, quite clearly, one of the finest books in contemporary world literature, a rich and satisfying feast for the mind.

# Calabash

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