MUTATIONS OF CHARACTER, FORM, AND LANGUAGE IN THE POETRY OF ANTHONY MCNEILL

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The late Anthony McNeill (1941-1996) was a Jamaican experimental poet influenced by the Beat poets and free-jazz musicians in 1960s New York City, and by the oral and literary practitioners of Caribbean-English usage. McNeill employed several strategies of resistance to the autonomy and "purity" of Standard English by deliberately subverting mechanical conventions such as spelling and punctuation in order to promote a freer manner of expression, a "mutant" form of expression, reflective of the plural dynamics of Caribbean reality. This paper, "Mutations of Character, Form, and Language in the Poetry of Anthony McNeill" focuses on his approach to and use of these literary elements primarily in his collections, *The Country of Shining* and *The Air-Wife Sings on Chalk Mountain*.

In *The Country of Shining* we encounter a figure named un God, that is to say not the conventional upper-case "G" God, but the poet's own metaphysical version of diety. In other contexts, this proper noun is used as a verb. In the poem "Aubade of the Unified Planet" which celebrates the dawn, a solitary figure attempts to make peace with himself with the self-command to "un God every absence" (9). Here he locates his interpretation of the concept of deity in a more metaphysical tradition with the call to remove conventional applications of God from any judgments made against him. He accepts full responsibility for his absences from those closest to him, because they are the necessary absences which art requires. While this often results in the poet´s aloneness, he is never lonely. He has a sorority and a fraternity of global muses as his companions. Dionne Warwick, for example, is "…on the turn-/table…." (9). His muses are his collective other half. Physical comforts are sacrificed for art and that reality renders both joy and grief. He acknowledges the forfeiture of access to his home through images of his lost keys and clothes (9) and has become an outsider for art. The threat of domestic ruin

forces an increased dependence and faith in art´s restorative power. The narrator notes that "the choir inside me [is] stilling/ the stab of such light/the h/urt of such fire" (10). He turns to un God and the natural world for solace, to the flame tree's purifying fire "deppon de han..." and "deppon de bone" to take him "out of the chaos…" and "on to the calm" (10).

Multiple representations of another figure, the mutant, appear in the collection *The Air-Wife Sings On Chalk Mountain.* Sometimes the figure appears as the poet's alter ego, at other times as a synonym for every poet; on other occasions, as one of the poet's several muses. This collection opens with the figure typing

> …his enigma-message out of the bone
> ought to have called this manuscript sea
> music out of the dark or something like that
> Anyway I'm going to falash myself twice com-
>
> ing back every mutant is saying something so
> precious only you know my lover my darling (9)

The poet is most comfortable "speaking" with written words. He is one of the many who are "saying something so/precious". In the above passage, McNeill is at his mutating diatonic best, staying in the same scribal key while progressing through a series of different notes (himself, other poets, his muse) which all belong to the common key of writing.

McNeill uses formal devices for a variety of effects. One such device is the use of terse lines bunched close to the left margin to denote a tonal shift towards constriction. We see this in a part of the poem where he associates the color blue with sorrow, the hand of Moses, and with himself who finally rebels against such constriction "until my/my star moves", until "ruin and choirs he sang/before time/till it hung" (11). Once again, McNeil seems to be underscoring the need to un God himself, to free himself from conventional notions of God, a struggle echoed in the tautness of the poem's line-breaths.

When McNeill introduces the Lady of Ash accompanied by her houri (13), this Koranic symbol of modesty and virginity instead appears to revel in an epicurean delight in physical pleasure as a metaphor for the poet's own formal and linguistic adventures:

constituent quotient
mathematics and language spinning

In rhythm the world in the wheel
Of the clock the earth
(18)

Furthermore, the use of extended ceasuras permits the couplets to each be read in at least six ways. As a result, the poet succeeds in augmenting the sonic and imagistic reach of each word or phrase to create a greater multiplicity of meaning.

In this same passage, McNeill also creates free-form structures through collocations of images and actions that reinforce the sense of free unfettered physical movement and consciousness. He does this by employing no punctuation at the end of lines nor at the end of thoughts. This is also a common device used in free-form jazz, and it is convincingly rendered by McNeill who is clearly more interested in tonal resolution rather than in any fully resolved actions or feelings.

This method also reflects a philosophy of art and human consciousness in which "…the heart burst all the wah/open and shut at the same time." (89) and the poet "…will follow the drift/of the poem wherever it takes//so the sky fell up inside me."(103).

In *The Air Wife Sings on Chalk Mountain*, McNeill´s use of internal enjambments (as opposed to the conventional end-line enjambments) create the sense of automatic narrative, and the almost total disuse of punctuation achieves the same effect of multiple meaning and cyclical

truth in a deliberate resistance to linear one-dimensional renderings. New sentences begin mid-line often without any markers or cues. Here's another example:

> There was only the seed bursting the head followed
>
> home from the signing the gigantic gull planet the
>
> water inside her she sang…(11)

The poet explicitly states these streaming renderings are explicit and deliberate efforts aimed at undermining conventional representations of emotions and actions. He says

> …I break up grammar
> at will the weight of its tyranny political tool in-
> to evil I say so curse the name Langland O curse the
>
> name Wayne Brown O curse ….
>
> the poem goes on anyway loose as a body fluid as water (12)

In *The Country of Shining*, this break-up of grammar also facilitates an automatic narrative effect where ideas, at first glance, seem not to link, but which a closer reading reveals some unifying thread. From "Byzantium passes away" (20) to "the shoe of the plantation" (20) to a "city of cow turd" (20), the "dissociation" of image and setting reveals a powerful historical truth: "pure" art is diseased and tarnished by materialism/imperialism; colonized peoples are reduced to a condition of living death through slavery. It's not surprising that Eddie B (Kamau Brathwaite) emerges not long after the above assessment as a griot who documents history until we reach "…at last u-//nity and the found wreaths/calling away from// the graves" (22). At least we know where our dead are buried through our writers' rediscovery and reevaluation of our ruins, where, in newness of life, "the found dance over the burning" (23).

McNeill views reality in cyclical rather than in linear terms, and this perception is revealed in his use of recursion to emphasize and extend an idea or concept. And this is also a musical construct. A page later, the poet returns to the diatonic home key after some measures of improvisation to escort us once more to "the place of the found" (24). Again, through iteration, the poet returns to the condition of ex-colonials who have been rendered mute, an "under-voice" who must find a new voice, a new way of speaking. "The mutant tapped out the code" (25) suggests the creative ways in which former slaves retained as much of their language and culture as they could under the nightmare plantation system. Ex-slaves mutated in language, music, and religion to create a dynamic new hybrid cultural reality.

This re-imagining and re-creation give the poet enormous freedom to use language as a means of deconstructing and reconstructing his own reality. So, we witness in McNeill's work a relish in word-play, deliberate misspellings and surprising placements and displacements of punctuation, all acts of linguistic rebellion: "o e-lectrical mutant// the stone sticking a note/throug:h the plane:t" (22). (Note the spelling of "throug:h" and "plane:t"). These surprises are in keeping with the remaking of the imposed inherited language and they thus rupture the arbitrariness of that language. This allows for a more truthful representation of the mute, the under-voice, the shadow-face, to be reborn and to shine again (27). The poet notes "O grief going/away as I twist with the music/as I clutch at the face/walkin-g inside me" (27). He references Whitman, one of his many muses who championed freedom in both human and artistic terms, as a "…brother of vision" (39) with a hope for his own country to "go up from the graves/the graves on them shining." (39). In this new vision, this new country, even suicide poets and artists such as John Berryman and Sylvia Plath are restored "…in the country of shining" (45).

Another language strategy which McNeill often employs is collocated imagery to emphasize a mood or a dominant atmosphere, and this method is one of the most accessible

windows or doorways into his poetic process. The collocations function in much the same way as diatonic notes in which the musician plays in a particular key using the notes belonging to that key in a multiplicity of arrangements. He notes, "my toga is must/the goat electric…//…the tiger ecle!ctricl…the symphony exits…//the hollow starts guessing…/…inside the reed flower/the road swings//hymning to heaven" (58). Here the words "electric", "symphony", "reed", "hymning" are diatonic words that reinforce the importance of music, of sound, and of language, as an antidote for loneliness and permits the mutant (the shape-shifter, the experimental artist) to be "washed clean by the wind" (68). Later, we see the mutant/artist coming "… back with his wind" (84) suggestive of the earlier "reed" both of which apply to musical instruments and the speech that comes from them. This prompts McNeill to declare in the coda: "The last of the air washes home and me in it singing" (84).

The poet has the liberty and right to change (to mutate) language. When, in *The Air Wife Sings on Chalk Mountain*, he makes the call to "…curse the name Langland O curse the//name Wayne Brown…" this is a way of saying that England, Langland, no longer has any imperative in the post-colonial Caribbean, certainly not in relation to the Caribbean poet's usage of the English language (12). The angry attitude toward Wayne Brown may have to do with McNeill associating the late Caribbean poet with England via Derek Walcott (the how-choose-I-between-this- Africa-and-the-English-tongue-I -love -Walcott) to whom Brown was a protégé. This is also a political stance as much as it is a linguistic one. McNeill goes on to say: "Later he showered realizing the snake the pirate-/iambic its bristling pirates// so the song stayed lovely for him and his lady" (12). It should be noted that the most infamous of pirates operating in the Caribbean came from England. Just as the Empire enslaved and destroyed so many native peoples, so too it's language can undermine the freedom of the poet to most adequately address his own realities.

McNeill's rebellion against imposed expressions of the English language is also reflected in his deliberate misspelling of words.

this time I will feed on the bone of the dead

children and watch the quick moths

somehwre there hands waving like flags

the mutant inside them washing his teeth (13)

And it's not just changing the words (from "somewhere their" to "somehwre there". McNeill reveals a deliberate subversion of conventional use of the English language with his call to "split de line/mek it wuk//jack" (52) while celebrating the aural effects of Caribbean English. The above passage also reveals the poet's identification with the frailest, most fragile members of society through the symbols of dead children and moths. This implies the imperial idea of control and oppression seen in McNeill's political reactions to the English language. The poet splits language, uses iteration like a free-jazz pianist, and mutes it (often through the use of caesuras) at his pleasure. The result is that "sense ceases to matter only the lovely long// fluid line fluid as summer…" remains (17) as the world "hinged on the word of the poet" (19).

The element of air, also a muse-like representation, is both McNeill's line-breath and his literal breath. It is the breath of his wife who is also a muse, and it is the breath of free-jazz musicians and of vocalists like Billie Holiday and Dionne Warwick. They inspired him and "sang the ship of his making" (29). He is a linguistic mutant made so by history and the fate of Empire, whose poetic quest is to maintain "his perilous balance" with self (60). McNeill is aware of both the beauties and dangers of the artistic life. He comments on his role as "…only a watcher and blue/with the terrible knowledge" (65), and he recognizes that "…everyone hated and loved equally poet and mutant" (66).

In another collection, *The Wife at the Top of the Stairs*, the representation of mutation is also a verb construct "to be muted", something the enemies of poetry wish for the composers of

poetry and also an outcome which the misunderstood or maligned writer fears: his silencing, his breakdown, "[his] wing on the floor of the ceiling" (105). At worse, such frustration can lead to alcohol abuse and thoughts of suicide (117). Even so, the poet finds the strength to deny that despair, at least for that moment. He will continue to "…in-// struct persevere" (125).

The Air Wife Sings on Chalk Mountain closes with an efflorescence of images that suggest the poet´s anticipation of days of dynamic flowering and restoration when, from "under the hollow rose the gold sun…" (74). This dawning is signaled by the "…mutant's appearing hard on collision" as "… out of the crac came the utter perfection" (83). When bird-sounds enter the mutant and he cocks his ear "…to the piano inside everything" (87), I'm tempted to think it is the piano notes of Earl "Bud" Powell accompanying Charlie Bird's sax rifts, as mutant/poet, through his written messages, makes "the slow-footed line out of hell" (32).

WORKS CITED

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