

A Rose Grows in Whylah Falls

Transplanted Traditions in George Elliott Clarke's "Africadia"

George Elliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls* is a collection of poems, prose paragraphs, letters, photographs and fictionalized newspaper clippings focusing on life in the fictional Black Nova Scotian community of Whylah Falls in the nineteen-thirties. Although it employs many literary modes, Clarke's work is thematically and narratively cohesive, being organized into seven separately titled sections. It is, in addition, firmly grounded in the tradition of the lyric sequence, a tradition that it both celebrates and extends. In particular, Clarke's collection transplants, expands, inverts, and thus liberates two important European literary traditions, the sonnet sequence and the pastoral—both of which were influential in the development of concepts of the self—and gives them a new outward direction, toward more social concerns. Just as the earliest sonnets expressed personal, private material which previously had no voice in the European tradition, Clarke's polyphonic text opens to social voices that have long been ignored or silenced—voices of a marginalized racial group.

Even though it contains only eight sonnets, *Whylah Falls* is very much like a contemporary sonnet sequence. Clarke translates themes and imagery from Petrarchan and Elizabethan sonnets into a Nova Scotian context, but these elements are not confined to his sonnets; they appear throughout the text. By using and expanding the sonnet sequence in this way, Clarke discovers ways to open up contemporary poetry to new material and new voices. Clarke also makes use of the scope offered by the sonnet sequence to explore a theme through its numerous variations, to look at it from several different angles. As Sandra Bermann writes in her history of the sonnet:

Nowhere is the sonnet's ability to play upon difference as well as repetition so thoroughly marked as it is in the sonnet sequence or the lyric book. Here we find repetitions of similar but hardly identical texts, whose interlocking similarities and differences create the imaginative world so pronounced in these lyric collections (4)

An important aspect of this "play of repetition and difference" is that it focuses the reader's attention on the fiction of an individual voice:

In the lyric, with its concentration of first person pronouns and deictics that together gesture toward a moment and source of the utterance, the element the reader fictionalizes most powerfully is generally the poetic persona, the voice of the text. (Bermann 5)

The sonnet sequence, then, becomes for Clarke the root of a new literary form which is particularly suitable for the creation of the characters and stories behind his archival photographs. Clarke takes the essential elements of the sonnet sequence—the "new way of thinking about mankind" (Oppenheimer 3), the voicing of what has been previously silent in human culture, the focus on the reader's fictionalizing of the poetic persona—and liberates them from *form*. His text makes the collection of various lyric and non-lyric forms do the work of the sonnet sequence. It powerfully engages crucial new discourses in contemporary society in a way reminiscent of the sonnet's impact on thirteenth-century Europe (on this latter topic, see, for example, Oppenheimer).

The other influential tradition for the shaping of Clarke's text is the pastoral, and it appears in his work in two different guises. The first is the celebratory attitude toward the natural world, and human social life in touch with that world; the second is the figure who dwells in a borderland setting, mediating between two distinct "worlds" or ways of life. Clarke's interest in the daily lives of simple country folk, and especially in the courtship of young lovers; in the idealization of a timeless rural setting; in the apparent easy-going languorous life of characters whose world is filled with music, beauty and love, is essentially an interest in the concerns of the pastoral. But just as Clarke undermines the sonnet tradition as he invokes it, he also complicates the pastoral by expanding and questioning it. The rural Nova Scotian setting is both hostile and welcoming. It is idealized, in the sense that it seems to be infused with a golden light, and it is also seen realistically, in all of its bleak harshness. The characters seem to exist in a timeless space encouraging idleness, while simultaneously being surrounded by reminders of the hard work required for survival in the harsh environment.

The most essential element of traditional pastoralism, according to Leo Marx, is the herdsman as “liminal figure,” an “efficacious mediator between the realm of organized society and the realm of nature” who quite literally helps “to resolve the root tension between civilization and nature by living in the borderland between them” (43). The English literary tradition, as William Empson notes, removed the liminal figure as mediator further and further from the pasture; it is no longer necessary that he or she be a herdsman. In *Whylah Falls* this figure is the poet, a role shared by three men: X, Pablo, and Othello.

In transposing the pastoral mode to the location of a rural Nova Scotian Black community in the nineteen-thirties, Clarke writes of loggers, farmers, miners and housewives. Setting the work in the nineteen-thirties allows for an element of idleness to be apparent in the lives of some of the characters, for unemployment was high. Yet Clarke’s characters are not unduly disturbed by world events and seem to go about their lives relatively untouched, perhaps because they have always been so poor in material possessions that they are not greatly affected by the Depression, or perhaps because they have learned to be self-reliant during their generations of settlement in Nova Scotia. *Whylah Falls*, even though it is described in the Preface as a “snowy, northern Mississippi” and associated with blues, tears and blood, seems to be imbued, especially in the first section of the work, with a golden light and relaxed atmosphere reminiscent of the mythical Golden Age of the pastoral mode: “Outside, *Whylah* shimmers” (13).

Yet it is actually Shelley, X’s beloved, who is most often associated with golden light, and it is his focus on her which seems to spread the light into all of his poetry: “. . . the sun pours gold / Upon Shelley” (18), “Shelley awakes to sunlight. . . . Her skin is gold leaf. . . . Her face shimmers with a light as diffuse as that glimpsed through bees’ wings” (19). There are gold daisies, gold dandelions, the Sixhiboux River’s roar “shines” (29). Clarke invokes the tradition of a Golden Age in order to question it. He does not really idealize *Whylah Falls*, and X’s statement to Shelley that “we wrest diamonds from coal, / Scrounge pearls from grubs and stones” (22) is a good metaphor for Clarke’s method. He gives us the community and physical presence of *Whylah Falls* in all of its contradictions; he refuses to edit out the images which negate the pastoral, but uses them, allowing readers to discover elements of the pastoral mode embedded in a larger realism. Reading this work can give us an understanding of how earlier writers of

pastoral poems had to distil their images in order to create a “pure”-enough world. The pastoral is usually thought of today as an idealized and highly stylized view of a world in the distant past which has disappeared or perhaps has never existed. Clarke shows us a pastoral which has not disappeared, which is still available if we learn how to mine reality for it, or even better, how to accept it in the context in which it naturally occurs.

Early sonnet sequences shared with the pastoral the interest in human romantic love, although most often the lovers were not shepherds and shepherdesses but nobility. In either case, though, the characters depicted did not seem to have to work hard, and the interest in song and poetry grew out of a boundless leisure. Most of the main characters in *Whylah Falls* fit this mold, and only minor characters are defined by their work: Rafael Rivers drives a mill truck, Biter Honey is a journalist, Saul Clemence mines gypsum. The theme of human love is developed throughout the book, with separate sections focusing on the experiences of specific pairs of lovers and the problems they face: X and Shelley, X and Selah, Amarantha and Pablo, and even Cora and Saul.

We understand the character “X” to be the speaker in most of the poems, and the author of others. Although he is named in the “Dramatis Personae” as “Xavier Zachary,” he appears throughout as “X,” paradoxically the sign of anonymity and illiteracy. Significantly, the sequence of texts in *Whylah Falls* does not belong exclusively to him. Others’ writings, in the form of songs, letters, journalism and even poetry, also make up parts of the work. We cannot even grant X editorship over the volume. The question of who includes these texts is unanswerable within the context of the work. X exists as the main figure of *Whylah Falls*, and reminds us of the traditional role of poets who wrote sonnet sequences, but the role of the poet as the hegemonic voice behind the text as a whole is questioned by Clarke’s invoking of other voices and views.

The persona “X” represents Clarke the author, at least in part. X’s dilemma about the role of poetry in his courtship of Shelley parallels Clarke’s dilemma about the role of poetry in contemporary society. Both poets are aware of society’s feedback which tells them that their language is irrelevant, even untrustworthy. Both poets must seek to develop new languages and strategies for making their art. Clarke uses strategies derived from the sonnet and pastoral traditions in order to question those traditions, expand them, and renew their vitality by reworking what serves his needs. In creating a poetic

persona who cannot have complete control over the text; in including portions of text which are not sonnets, or even poems; in allowing a part of the population which traditionally has been repressed by the mainstream to have a voice; and in creating a new cultural context for ancient tropes that literary pastoralism provides, Clarke has renewed the very traditions he also critiques. He has given people like Shelley a reason to read poetry.

The first section of *Whylah Falls* focuses on X's unrequited love for Shelley. Although this section contains only one sonnet, "Blank Sonnet," and although there are only eight sonnets in the entire volume, the *idea* of the sonnet sequence is central to the work. Just as important as the theme of unrequited love is that of the immortalizing power of poetry, a traditional theme developed earlier in Shakespeare's sonnets. In "The Argument" for Section I, we learn that Shelley's family, and Shelley herself as well, do not trust X's poetry:

They suspect that X will arrive shortly, after five years of exile, to court Shelley with words that she will know have been pilfered from literature. Smooth lines come from Castiglione. Shelley vows she'll not be tricked. She be wisdom. (13)

For the people of Whylah Falls, X's poetry seems to be an artificial language, and no doubt within the context of this settlement, it *is* artificial. Contrasting poetry to "the chastity of numbers," Shelley writes in a letter to X, "Words always have something to hide" (15). X is both courter and courtier, educated and literate, and also literary, and his language does not always ring true in the context of Whylah Falls' idiom.

In X's first appearance as poet, his language meets the community's expectations. His "The River Pilgrim: A Letter" is an unabashed plagiarism from Ezra Pound. Ironically, of course, Pound himself "pilfered" this poem from a much earlier Chinese poet, Li Po, and it is only his English translation which is original. Clarke is obviously poking fun at the idea that *any* literature could be entirely original, and his own work borrows unapologetically from the tradition as much as does X's poem. The translation of this poem to a rural Nova Scotian setting is well done and does not diminish the poem's beauty. The situation described in the poem fits the plot of Clarke's work beautifully, except that he gives the poem the twist that here the speaker is the young male lover returning from his long journey rather than the young wife left behind and longing for his (unknown) return.

X writes that "This April, pale / Apple blossoms blizzard" (14). Shelley's

reply to this poem, in letter form, partially echoes X's words when she says "Apple blossoms petal the snow" (15). The verb "blizzard" had indicated anxiety on X's part, but Shelley's reply is gentle and reassuring. Most of the rest of her letter asserts her strength and difference from his preconceptions of her: she prefers the magic of numbers and the "woman wisdom hidden in letters, diaries, and songs" to his poetry; she is dating someone else; she does not plan to be there during the summer: in other words, she cannot easily be courted. Their mutual reference to apple blossoms and snow hints that there is a possible resonance between Shelley and X, a possible basis for a romance; however, at this point it is only a potential, and Shelley is noncommittal.

In the fashion of the typical Petrarchan lover, X veers wildly between the soaring ecstasies of love and the crashing depressions of rejection. "May 19—" is the first poem in the sequence in which the uglier aspects of reality, of Shelley's and her family's rejection, become real to X. X's memory of this violent realization—"the liquid shock / Of lightning"—is depicted in intense images and sounds: "Othello staggered in the yard, he lurched, / Squared his fists in my face, and spat. . . . The river crashed like timber" (16).

The rose, a traditional symbol of beauty, is an important image in this section and throughout the volume. "In his indefatigable delirium of love, Xavier wires rugosa rose blossoms to Shelley" (17). Shelley's somewhat acid response to X is aptly described metaphorically, as she turns the rose blossoms into vinegar while at the same time preserving their essence. She values their beauty but at the same time sees through society's emphasis on superficial forms of beauty. Shelley views X's romanticism as immature, but she "trusts in reason" and therefore turns an ornament into an "investment"—another hint of a possible relationship in the future.

The rose has accumulated multiple symbolic meanings in western art, from its representation in the courtly love tradition of "all that one loved a woman for: idleness, gladness, courtesy, wealth, youth" (de Vries 391), to spiritual love and virtuous beauty, to "intellectual beauty" and perfection. The rose as symbol of a woman of virtuous beauty or excellence appears frequently in Elizabethan literature, as for example in Shakespeare's first sonnet: "From faintest creatures we desire increase, / That thereby beauty's rose might never die." In Dante the rose becomes the symbol for "the fulfilment in eternity of temporal things, since spiritualized courtly love . . . had made him understand divine love" (de Vries 392). Clarke achieves a layering of all of these symbolic meanings in his use of the rose symbol in *Whydah Falls*. The spiritualizing

potential of human romantic love is explored more fully in Section VI, “The Gospel of Reverend F. R. Langford,” which I will discuss below.

One of the most important tropes taken from the courtly lyric tradition is that of poetry-as-song. Pablo, another poet, plays guitar, as does Othello. Everyone sings the blues and plays and listens to jazz. X thinks of himself as a singer and musician as much as a poet, and hilariously depicts some of the great figures of the English literary tradition as blues singers: “Howlin’ Will Shakespeare, Blind Jack Milton and Missouri Tom Eliot” (53). Linked to the theme of poetry-as-song is the more important question of the problem of poetry in the modern world, and this is introduced in the poem “Bees’ Wings”: “without notes / There’s nothing” (18). In the context of this poem, these words refer to the immortalizing power of poetry, here seen in Othello’s songs

Of sad, anonymous heroes who hooked
Mackerel and slept in love-pried-open thighs
And gave out booze in vain crusades to end
Twenty centuries of Christianity. (18)

The phrase also echoes the foreshadowing of Othello’s death: “His unknown, imminent death / . . . / Will also be nothing.” Othello’s romantic heroes are ordinary rural Nova Scotians of his own time; like them, he is anonymous because he is Black, lives in a rural settlement, and thus is marginalized by the dominant white urban society. His death will be “nothing” because he, too, is anonymous.

Taking another meaning, the phrase “without notes / There’s nothing” foreshadows the theme of “Blank Sonnet.” Poetry has no immortalizing power if no one reads it, and Shelley’s lack of interest in X’s poetry, indeed, lack of trust in *any* poetry, raises the possibility that poetry has become irrelevant and that people will no longer read it. X laments, “I have no use for measured, cadenced verse / If you won’t read” (27). The writing of poetry can be an uncertain enterprise at the best of times, as X suggests of the terrain of writing:

I step through snow as thin as script,
Watch white stars spin dizzy as drunks, and yearn
To sleep beneath a patchwork quilt of rum. (27)

The thin snow, the dizzying white stars are the blank page, the space surrounding the written word. X is tempted to choose the oblivion of drunkenness to

the confrontation with what writing poetry means: “I want the slow, sure collapse of language / Washed out by alcohol.” This desire is fulfilled in “III: The Witness of Selah,” in which X pursues a romance with Shelley’s sister. Paradoxically, X also wishes for a freeing up of his tongue (which alcohol can sometimes help with), and a freeing up of poetry’s forms. Shelley’s suspicion of traditional poetry forces X to seek new ways of making poetry, which for him includes learning from the local idioms of jazz, blues, and rural Nova Scotian life, in order to win Shelley’s love. X is finally successful—as Clarke himself is in fusing many elements from Euro-American literary traditions with local Black idioms.

In the first section of *Whylah Falls*, Clarke explores X’s romantic illusions about love. The second section, “The Trial of Saul,” illuminates a darker side to human relationships, including physical abuse and infidelity, and culminating in Saul’s suicide. The incidents are framed in the “Argument” for this section, which records Saul’s physical and spiritual degradation during decades of working in the mines: “fifty years is too long to spend, a hunchback, stooped in a damp, vicious cave, dark with smoke and tuberculosis, shovelling gypsum just for the pennies to fix one’s shoes” (35). The text elicits sympathy for Saul but at the same time depicts his life as so morally abhorrent—“he makes his stepdaughter his lover and his wife his foe”—that it is difficult to feel that sympathy. Indeed, the book’s readers are implicated in the creation of the oppressive socio-economic conditions which have shaped Saul’s life: “So folks, our hands are dirty. As surely as iodine or gypsum dust, we’ve helped to poison him.” But “it’s too late for our tears,” of sympathy or of guilt. Saul “is tired of hope.” The text is troubling. It makes problematic and provisional any desire on the reader’s part for order (whether deriving from a sense of sympathy and reparation, or from a sense of moral judgement against Saul), or even any desire for the “truth” of the matter.

X discovers these thorny problems of “bad love” as he peruses Shelley’s letters in her absence. The trope of romantic love as a flower (though not specifically the rose) is continued here in the speaker’s description of this section as a “florilegium” (35), the Latin term for an anthology, or a “gathering of flowers,” and in the prose passage “How to Live in the Garden,” which evokes the Golden Age as the Garden of Eden. The symbol of the rose transmutes into the vegetable, fish, condiment—Cora is presented as “the concrete poet of food” (36). Cooking is Cora’s way of making love, her art, her poetry. Her dandelion wine “tastes like Russian literature” (37).

For Cora, the kind of romantic love sought by X is simply non-existent. She married Saul when she was very young, not out of love but to escape the unwanted attentions of an uncle, and to provide a father for her child born out of wedlock, yet in doing so she unwittingly moved from one abusive situation to another. The only sonnet in this section, spoken in Cora's voice, tells of the years of violence she endured, and shows that she confuses fear with fidelity: "Why he always beat me? / I was too jolly scared to run around. / I was true to him like stars in the sky" (42). This poem's litany of ugly images, mirrored in sharp, coarse diction, subverts the earliest sonnet tradition of depicting love in terms of beauty and grace, while at the same time reminding us that the sonnet sequence was capable of expressing, and even discovering resolutions for, problematic emotions:

Mean-minded Saul Clemence, ugly as sin,
 Once pounded, punched, and kicked me 'cross the floor;
 Once flung me through the second-storey glass:
 My back ain't been right for clear, twenty year.
 But I bore it, stuck it out, stood his fists.
 He be worms now. (42)

This sonnet speaks of the pain of love, a traditional theme, but undermines the tradition by depicting *this* pain as physical rather than emotional, and also by revealing that there is no real love here, only fear. The sonnet communicates Cora's perverse sense of pride that Saul could inflict so much pain (a perversion of caring) and that she could endure it. Paradoxically, "Cora's Testament" *is* her vision of love.

In "The Symposium" (whose title recalls Plato's famous discourse on love) Cora speaks again. This time she has a specific audience: her daughter Missy, who, ironically, is or will become Saul's mistress. This prose monologue is the vehicle for Cora's expression of the practical side to her romantic vision. As she instructs Missy in how to handle a man—instructions which playfully echo Ovid's poems of erotic instruction as well as being a perverse modern inversion of Castiglione's instructions in courtiership, alluded to in section I—the reader understands that these are all the actions she herself should have taken against Saul, but did not. She is paradoxically wise but powerless, cowed by years of abuse.

Traditional notions about romantic love are further undermined in "A Perspective of Saul," which takes up the theme of the eternal nature of true love, again associating flowers with love. The point of view is Missy's, as she

says of Saul, "He don't seem to 'preciate that fields / can't bloom with blossoms / forever and forever and forever" (44). The repetition of "forever" echoes once again Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," but here it mimics and trivializes traditional lovers' vows.

The shifting voices and points of view in the different texts of Section II work to destabilize any fixed point of view in the work. Traditional sonnet sequences were usually written from the point of view of the lover/poet, as are most of the texts of *Whylah Falls*' first section. Here, in contrast, it is not clear that X imagines the voices and situations of a variety of characters. The omniscient speaker of the "Arguments" tells us that "X discovered this florilegium of bad love encoded in five years' worth of Shelley's elegant epistles" (35), but we have no access to the original texts. Just how much of this story is X's perspective, and how much is Shelley's or, for that matter, Cora's, Missy's, or Saul's, is impossible to determine. Readers have only X's decoding to rely on.

The Black idioms of Nova Scotia's South Shore are more apparent in "II: The Trial of Saul" than in the first section of the work, but only in the voices of Whylah Falls residents: Cora, Missy, the "grey folks" who wag their heads, crying "All that for a black girl!" (45) when Saul poisons himself. Even the adjective "black," when used by these Black people, carries with it layers of meaning, but it is usually self-deprecatory, as when Cora instructs Missy to "sit back, relax, and be black" (38), by which she means that Missy should be quiet and docile.

X's role in these texts is possibly that of composer; but if not, he is at least their anthologizer/editor. In either case, he is listening carefully to the people of Whylah Falls, but the local vernacular does not appear in his own voice until "III: The Witness of Selah." Having seen what "bad love" has done to Cora and Missy, X, in Shelley's absence, begins a different kind of love affair, one focused on sensual pleasure. The object of his affections is Selah, Shelley's sister. The "Argument" for this section tells us that Selah "places pine branches in her dresser to perfume her clothes that otherwise would smell of roses" (48). Selah cannot be associated with the rose, symbol of perfection, because although she is beautiful and loving, she is incapable of experiencing the higher, spiritualizing power of love. She (and by implication any lover who makes her his beloved) is limited by her sensuality. Instead of the rose, she chooses exotic and sweet scents of "*chypre*, coconut, and honey" to express her extravagance, voluptuousness, and sense of

drama. She represents a love which is essentially narcissistic, in which every gesture is calculated to return the focus to herself. There is another reason why Selah rejects the rose as her flower. The traditional symbol of perfection is inappropriate for her, as we learn later, because she is lacking a uterus: “my womb is gone, / hallowed by scalpels / and Casanova cancer” (67). She says, “how can any poem / picture my beauty?” (67).

Significantly, there is no sonnet in this section. In its place is a blues lyric in which X sees himself as the ultimate sensual lover, using the metaphor of “king bee.” The focus in “King Bee Blues” is not on the qualities of beauty, perfection, and the possibility of spiritual realization represented by the beloved, but on the virility of the lover, who promiscuously flies from “flower to flower” (50). The symbolic rose of the first section becomes here merely a woman’s name, one among many flowers—“Lily” and “black-eyed Susan”—that are available to the king bee. In this poem we see an X for whom the traditional values of courtly love are now nowhere to be seen. Instead of offering his fidelity and the elevation of the beloved, perhaps even her “adoration,” X is now content to use his lover for his own pleasure, and trust and honor are no longer important:

You don’t have to trust
A single, black word I say.
But don’t be surprised
If I sting your flower today. (50)

X, however, pays for his betrayal of the values of courtly love by having to join Selah in her voluminous drinking. He is

slapped
to and fro like a black
bastard by alcohol’s white,
wide hand. (65)

From being the exploiter of “honeysuckle Rose” and “Lily in the valley” in “King Bee Blues,” X has become the slave of “Bloody Mary” and “Miss Rum” (65)—an ironic parody of the courtly lover as servant.

The jaded X eventually tires of a life of unmitigated sensuality: “I am tired of gold sunflowers with jade leaves” (66). Selah’s inability to understand his passion for poetry is described in a haiku using the same flower metaphor which had originally hinted at an understanding between X and Shelley, the apple blossom: “Selah glares at me / impatiently, not seeing / the apple blossoms” (64). This, and X’s recognition of his own mortality—

“wisdom is late and death is soon” (66)—cause him finally to leave Selah.

“IV: The Passion of Pablo and Amarantha” explores the beauty of emotional love. Most people in Whylah Falls recognize that Pablo and Amarantha are perfectly matched, their love harmonious. Only Pablo’s would-be rival, Jack Thomson, creates a disharmonious note with his continual pursuit of Amarantha, which leads eventually to Othello’s murder. Here the strong sensuality of X’s description of his affair with Selah is repeated, notably in the rich sensuous imagery of poems like “Amarantha/Maranatha,” in which Pablo celebrates their love:

Now this barbed-wire is a vine of dark grapes; the moon, a great bowl. . . .
Am’s words have become plums and chrysanthemums, and her pronunciation,
gold butterflies.
I’m gonna drink the moon’s milky ouzo and then sip a gold glass of the sun’s
scotch. (77)

As the speaker here, Pablo employs the traditional *blazon* of early sonnets, but now translated into a Black Nova Scotian context:

Her long, ebony hair glistens in writhing vines; her wrist’s liquid curve tumbles
darkly in clouds. The stream rushes over her voice . . . Am’s hair . . . cascades
and wild rose petals storm. . . . (77)

Red leaks from the roses, pours onto Am’s full, Negro lips. (83)

Metaphors comprising the Renaissance *blazon*, such as golden wires for hair and alabaster or ivory for skin, are replaced here by images of ebony and indigo, a “night-smooth face” (81). Clarke uses this strategy to question traditional tropes for feminine beauty which focus exclusively on white women, and to expand this tradition to make it more racially inclusive.

Here flowers, and the love and beauty they represent, are seen as providing a necessary haven or escape from the world’s violence. Amarantha expresses this need in a strong female voice that relies on imagery from the traditional women’s occupations of gardening and needlework: “I quilt, planting sunflower patches in a pleasance of thick cotton. / We need a blanket against this world’s cold cruelty” (85). The poem “Quilt” alludes to the disturbing events taking place in Europe at this time—Mussolini’s presence in Africa, the Spanish Civil War. Yet the effect of framing Whylah Falls within these historical events is to foreground the sense of peace and security in the Nova Scotia settlement, contributing to the sense of timelessness associated with the “Golden Age.” However, the sense of delight which permeates

the lives of Pablo and Amarantha at this time will soon be broken as Whylah Falls experiences its own violent events. This disturbance of the garden is foreshadowed in the last two poems of this section, "Unnatural Disaster," which reveals the motive for Othello's murder to be Jack Thomson's sexual jealousy, and "Two Dreams," in which Amarantha, like a seer, dreams the coming murder of her brother.

In "V: The Martyrdom of Othello Clemence," suffering attains a new dimension in Whylah Falls. No longer simply a function of the lover's longing for an unattainable beloved, nor of the masquerading of fear and violence as love, nor of the physical degradation that accompanies concupiscence, nor of the emotional turmoil of a maturing love which values the other as much as the self, suffering appears here as martyrdom. The theme of this section is best expressed in the poem "On June 6th": "It is our fate / to become beautiful / only after tremendous pain" (95). Here reference to the pastoral tradition appears mainly in the emphasis on music and music imagery, and in the trope of music for poetry/beauty/love. Othello is Whylah Falls' consummate musician. When Pablo joins Othello in music-making, Pablo evokes flower images (94), but Othello's artistic search for beauty is depicted in terms of music: "O follows, remembering the lost music of sub-Saharan Africa and trying to perfect the blues" (94).

This section contains two sonnets. The first one, "A Vision of Icarus," like the sonnets of the previous sections, is pivotal. It describes in lush imagery of precious jewels just *how* Othello will be valued as beautiful after death: "His eyes, amethyst isled in ambergris. / We'll comb periwinkles from his bleached hair, / And pick early pearls from his bared ribs" (91). The second sonnet (and the second of two poems with this title) is "The Lonesome Death of Othello Clemence." Like the previous sonnets, this poem has no rhyme pattern, although it contains numerous slant rhymes like "lynched / branch," "news / yellows" and "history / truly." It is a variation on the traditional theme of the immortalizing power of poetry. Here it paradoxically claims that the written text (of the journalists) cannot immortalize Othello. Rather, the production of their kind of text is disturbing to the natural order of death: it will not let Othello die. Only when the "banging" of the typewriters is finally silenced will Othello be "truly dead" (111). In contrast to tabloid journalism, poetry is seen implicitly as having the power to preserve Othello's beauty. This sonnet itself, and the text of *Whylah Falls* as a whole, *does* immortalize Othello.

Othello's murder has brought the people of Whydah Falls to the breaking point. All sense that "[t]here's a change that's gonna have to come" (108). The death of Othello's aged babysitter Cassiopeia Israfel during his funeral introduces the theme that death can be welcomed as well as feared, "'cos it brings the peace of God and you get to go home and lay your head on Christ's soft bosom" (110). As we progress through the volume's seven sections, we encounter beauty in increasingly spiritualized forms. The association of beauty with holiness and death is further explored in the section following Othello's murder, "VI: The Gospel of Reverend F. R. Langford." Here the pastoral tradition is evoked again in Langford's belief that Whydah Falls is a "New Eden, the lost colony of the Cotton Belt" (114). The rose becomes the image for spiritual passion, such as that experienced by St. Theresa of the Roses, a sublimation of physical and emotional desire. Othello's earthy blues and the jazz radio cadences that permeate the Clemence home become in this section Negro spirituals.

In the sonnet "This Given Day," Rev. Langford speaks of his vision: he resolutely sees a separation between the earthly and spiritual realms:

All we can prove is the sun and the bay
 And the baying hunter that is the train,
 All joined in a beautiful loneliness—
 Separated from our pure world of wounds. . . . (117)

For him, love is linked to holiness, but through the agency of Christ's suffering ("sharp nails hammered through palms")—hence "our pure world of wounds." Langford preaches all the right things about love: "Love satisfies. Love is the only thing that can't be oppressed. . . . You gotta feel love, live it, and make it true" (118); yet he is blinded to real love by his own rhetoric, as Liana correctly sees in the sonnet "The Sermon of Liana": "The brilliant sun centres, brands him with light. / Yet, he's blinded by words, can't see that love / Is all that created and keeps our world" (120). This sonnet thus provides a twist on the traditional theme of the immortalizing power of the word: whereas poetry can preserve love, its rhetoric can be an obstacle to knowing love. The pastoral as symbol for the Golden Age / New Eden survives in this poem in "the other names for heaven— / Daisy, lily, the River Sixhiboux," but Langford has forgotten them. This is his error, but he does not see it yet. He is as passionate as Dante in seeking to know God, but the sonnet is imbued with his resulting isolation and loneliness. Rev. Langford, too, yearns for the "change that's gonna have to come" that was foreshadowed in "The

Ballad of Othello Clemence,” but this change is understood by him in religious terms. In the early poems of *Whylah Falls*, we understood the people there to be living in a version of the Golden Age; the pastoral was a present reality, albeit embedded in a larger context which contained pain and injustice. In Langford’s religious view, however, the Golden Age or New Eden is forever just around the corner, out of reach, and something to be remembered as a birthright: “Remember gold streets, sweet pastures, and doves by the river of waters” (119). Drunk with the prophetic sound of his own voice, he exhorts his congregation: “Come home, little children, to that land of milk and honey. . . . Praise God! None of us will be the same!”

Before we experience that necessary transformation foreseen by Langford, we must encounter the basest version of religious faith in “The Ladies Auxiliary.” These “ladies,” with their “impossible hats” and “funeral parlour fans,” represent all that is most self-righteous, humorless and judgemental in religious attitudes: “Gotta prove respect. That’s what faith is all about” (123). Fortunately Rev. Langford begins to have his world turned upside down: “I hardly think I tread on solid earth” (124). He begins to question his certainties. The sonnet “Mutability” asks “Is the world now ending or beginning?” (124). This is both the sonnet’s first and last lines, a repetition which mimics the problem the sonnet poses and makes the poem cyclical. Langford is unsure about the boundaries of self and other, and Clarke depicts this in pastoral imagery invading Langford’s subjectivity: “We are mere waving grass, momentary / Lightning. . . .”

Before Langford’s transformation is complete, he must confront the inevitability of death: “Roses open / To worms and dust” (131). Finally, just as Dante had found unity with his God through Beatrice, Langford finds spiritual transcendence through his beloved Liana. Now it is not only roses that open to worms, but “The text is open” (133), the secret is revealed. Langford discovers that “We turn to love before turning to dust so that the grave will not compress our lives entirely to insects, humus, ash” (134). The spiritualizing power of love, symbolized by the rose, is here fulfilled.

By this point in the text, the problem of X and his role has become unimportant. X cannot possibly be responsible for these poems of spiritual intimacy in others’ voices; he cannot possibly have any but a very second-hand knowledge of these experiences. There is no longer a question of these being his poems, his poem sequence, as the anonymity suggested by his nickname comes into full play. But in its final section, *Whylah Falls* returns to its orig-

inal innocent lovers, X and Shelley. This section ironically repeats the title of Section I, "The Adoration of Shelley."

In this section the sonnet and pastoral allusions reach their highest importance. The scene is again a pastoral setting, the fresh, green spring of another April in Whylah Falls. This time it is not only X but also Shelley who returns from "exile," suggesting that their relationship is now one of equal partners. X no longer has any advantage over Shelley because of his education and wide travels; and Shelley's voice, always a strong antidote to X's tendency to over-romanticize, is even stronger than before. In "Absolution" she affirms, "X, we are responsible / for Beauty" (150). She has the last word in the text, summarizing the transformations that have taken place and recognizing the value of beauty's power at last:

X and I ramble in the wet
To return home, smelling of rain.

We understand death and life now—
How Beauty honeys bitter pain. (153)

Significantly, X does not exclusively occupy the position of liminal figure in the text; here it is shared with Shelley, the other "exile" who returns to repossess her heritage.

Clarke again uses pastoral imagery of sunshine, green fields and flowers in this final section to evoke a sense of a Golden Age, but the imagery is richer and more sensual than before. The principal flower images of apple blossoms, roses and sunflowers are present, but extended by the rich variety of "Swiss pansies, sweet peas, carpet-of-snow alyssum, Iceland poppies, sunflowers, mardi gras snapdragons, dwarf jewel nasturtiums, calypso portulaca, squash, marigolds, mayflowers, leaf lettuce, cabbage, and carrots" (138). It is delightful that Clarke mixes Cora's prosaic vegetables into this exotic garden.

In transplanting these traditional images, Clarke creates a new geography, a site rich in history from which new voices speak, which he defines in *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile* as "Africadia" (6), an alternative to the view of Canada as "bush garden":

In the Canadian "Orient," that is, the eastern provinces, the pastoral is valued. Indeed, Northrop Frye's venerable cliché of the "bush garden," a phrase that conjures Canada as a barren land, barely applies to the long-settled and often lush ruralities of Nova Scotia. . . . ("Orienting" 52)

Clarke is speaking of the pastoral in this context as a mode through which Maritime poets communicate a celebration of the Maritime natural environment. It matters little that this environment is harsh and rugged: its settlers have often seen it as a land of promise and opportunity, and sometimes as a safe haven from oppression. When Clarke tells us that Jarvis County is “a snowy, northern Mississippi,” he alludes to the fact that the reason for many Blacks’ migration from the American South to Nova Scotia was to escape slavery; ironically the image also suggests that rural Nova Scotia *is* a version of Mississippi because racism and discrimination are as rampant and ultimately as destructive there as in the American South.

Both the Renaissance lyric sequence and the pastoral traditions, then, provide Clarke with themes, formal structures, and sources of imagery which he translates, transforms, and transplants into a Nova Scotian setting, evoking a celebratory attitude toward the natural world and toward the rural lifestyle of Nova Scotian Blacks in the nineteen-thirties. Clarke’s extended lyric sequence, his “elegy for the epic” (“Discovering” 83), is interested in retrieving from the margins Black Nova Scotian voices which might otherwise have been lost or silenced, but the lives of these people do not translate easily into the pastoral or sonnet traditions. The experience of the Whylah Falls community includes accidental violent death, adultery, jealous murder, the unresponsiveness of a corrupt judicial system, and repetitive exhausting labor. Although the people of Whylah Falls do not define themselves primarily as victims of racism, readers understand racism to be the ground for the corruption of the justice system and for the status of Othello, important as a community figure but paradoxically anonymous in death when his murder is made known to the wider society: his “unknown death . . . will also be nothing” (18). In this face of this harsh reality (Othello’s murder is based on recent historical events), Clarke’s allusions to the Arcadia of pastoral tradition invoke but also expose the contradictions of a universalizing humanism which paradoxically marginalizes the racial “other.”

Clarke’s “Africadian” pastoral vision questions and expands the role of the traditional liminal figure, the borderland dweller who mediates between two worlds. Here the Black Nova Scotian poet inhabits and traverses territory divided along economic and, especially, racial lines. X and Shelley, as such liminal figures, refuse marginalization and return from their different exiles to reclaim their cultural, romantic and spiritual home. They tentatively reaffirm a vision which believes that justice and freedom, combined

with the power of beauty and love, provide the basis for building true communities, but they have also learned that “It is our fate / to become beautiful / only after tremendous pain” (95).

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