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"And Strange Speech is in Your Mouth"

Language and Alienation in Laurence's *This Side Jordan*

In a brief retrospect of her writing career published in 1969, Margaret Laurence declares that her African works were produced by "an outsider who experienced a seven years' love affair with a continent."[1] The key word here is "outsider," a term which — like the phrase "heart of a stranger" encountered in other writings — serves to define both Laurence's authorial stance and the narrative technique she found most congenial during this phase in her artistic development. Not only did Laurence necessarily deal with African themes from the external point of view of the foreigner, but she introjected the relation between herself and the world she was describing into the fabric of her texts, focussing on characters who were themselves estranged in some crucial respect from their cultural background. This tendency is very much in evidence in *This Side Jordan*, in which an ironic parallel emerges between dislocated representatives of the black and white communities living side by side in the Ghana of the 1950s. Despite their different ethnic and cultural affiliations, the two personages who occupy the centre of the stage, and the antagonism between whom generates much of the emotional tension of the novel, can in neither case be considered truly typical of the societies from which they derive. Nathaniel Amegbe, the idealistic but largely ineffectual schoolteacher who aspires to contribute to the emergence of a new society in Ghana, and Johnnie Kestoe, the ruthlessly pragmatic opportunist who is concerned only to exploit the African continent for what it is worth, become paradoxical doubles for one another precisely because, in an important sense, they do not really belong to their own worlds.

If, as is arguably the case, the most important constitutive element of culture is language, then it is perhaps to be expected that the kind of alienation which Laurence is intent on exploring in its psychological and social aspects will be reflected within the linguistic domain as well. As I hope to show in the course of the following discussion of the novel, some of the major thematic concerns of *This Side Jordan* — the phenomenon of deracination, the nature of personal identity, the relation between Self and Other — are given figurative embodiment in a dense allusive pattern woven around references to language, voices, and speech. What is ultimately implied by the existence of such a pattern, however, is more than a vague symbolic correspondence alone. The predicaments in which the male protagonists of the novel find themselves, which are assimilated to one another inasmuch as they resolve in both cases into problems of identity, are in a very real sense, and not only metaphorically, linked with the ambiguity of these characters' relation with the "languages" through which they are both existentially and culturally constituted. Most immediately, perhaps, the tension between self and language manifests itself in the rift that can open up between the individual's self-conception on the one hand, and the personal name through which his identity is denoted in the public world on the other. Both Nathaniel Amegbe and Johnnie Kestoe are, in their different ways, deeply preoccupied with the status of their names and with their function as instruments of self-definition, and it would perhaps not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that it is precisely this anxiety which lies at the origin of their conduct.

Nathaniel is described from the outset as being divided between two realities, variously represented as past and future, Forest and City, tribe and nation. The son of a village drummer, he has been educated in a Christian mission school and converted to the white man's religion, although he has never been able wholly to repudiate the gods of his father. Because "he had never been brave enough to burn either Nyame's Tree or the Nazarene's Cross,"[2] both gods contend for dominion over his soul, haunting his dreams and his daytime fantasies, paralyzing him during the critical moments of his life. The claims of these rival deities seem equally compelling and equally exclusive, each incapable of leaving the least margin for the other. The consequence for Nathaniel is that he is afflicted by a kind of moral and spiritual schizophrenia, so that no unequivocally clear path of thought or conduct ever lies open to him. "Must a man always betray one god or the other?" he asks himself at one point: "Both gods have fought over me, and

sometimes it seems that both have lost, sometimes that both have won and I am the unwilling bondsman of two masters" (113).

This schismatic tendency of thought penetrates every aspect of Nathaniel's existence.[3] He teaches a course in the history of African civilizations, believing ardently that "there must be pride and roots" (22), but at the same time he broods obsessively over the barbarism of the past, and is adamant that his wife should avail herself of the resources of a modern hospital when she gives birth to their child. Nathaniel's position with respect to the people among whom he lives in the city is no less ambivalent: "Nathaniel was part of them, and yet apart. . . . He was educated, but he was not so much educated that he had left them far behind" (45). Nathaniel conceives his situation, even within what is ostensibly his own country, as one of exile. "You have forgotten your own land", he castigates himself: "You live in the city of strangers, and your god is the god of strangers, and strange speech is in your mouth, and you have no home" (104). It is Nathaniel's uncle who diagnoses the implications of this marginal status for his identity as a man:

> "You are young," his uncle said. "Some day you will know where you belong."
> Nathaniel grinned, and bitterness welled up in him.
> "I belong between yesterday and today."
> Adjei Boateng smiled also.
> "But that is nowhere."
> "I know," Nathaniel replied. "Yes, I know." (106-7)

The only way that Nathaniel can make sense of his experience is in terms of the metaphor adumbrated in the title of the novel: that of Israel in the desert, released from thralldom to Egypt but not yet admitted to the Promised Land. The symbolism becomes overt during a prayer meeting which is described in brilliantly evocative detail towards the end of the novel (240-48), but even at the subconscious level Nathaniel tries repeatedly to reconcile the contradictory aspects of his background within the framework of this metaphor, as when he dreams for instance of Jesus crossing the river Jordan in the ceremonial apparel of an Ashanti king (76-7).

Nathaniel is by no means alone in his dilemma. Of the boys in the Futura Academy who are unsuccessful in government examinations and so unable to embark upon any productive career it is said that "the past was dead for them, but the future could never be realized" (64). Nor are even the English exempt, despite the mask of superiority and self-

possession they assume for the benefit of the local population. The socially accomplished but professionally inept products of the British public school system, disparagingly described as the "relics of a dead age" (123), are exemplified as a category by the urbane and perennially inebriated Bedford, whose "world was dead, and he did not know the language or currency of the new. Nobody wanted gentlemen nowadays" (124). If Nathaniel remembers his childhood haunts as "that was Eden, a long time ago" (167), there is something even more pathetically Arcadian in the British community's nostalgic attachment to the expatriates' club where "the exiles of three generations had met... to drink and to mourn the lost island home for which they longed but to which they did not want to return until they were old" (140). The deepest fear of the English is that of being obliged to return to an Eden which has altered irrevocably in their absence, and in which they no longer have a place. Virtually all the characters, then, white no less than black, are painfully racked between the old world and the new, psychologically anchored in a moribund tradition and propelled despite themselves towards a future that is conceived by turns as desolatingly vacant and overwhelmingly menacing.

The one member of the British expatriate community who seems to be essentially immune to this syndrome is Johnnie Kestoe, who is anxious to obliterate a past that for him is associated only with squalor and humiliation, and who is wholeheartedly oriented towards a future in which he hopes to achieve the personal success upon which his sense of self depends. If commitments divide in his case as well, the choice is not between the old and the new, or between one culture and another, but between the imperatives of friendship — or at least of group solidarity — and those of professional expedience. The crisis is precipitated by the decision of the London-based head office of the company for which he works to recruit local personnel for its African branch, although this entails making its English staff redundant. Having cynically gauged the climate of the times, and determined to wrest whatever personal advantage he can from the situation, Johnnie forges a secret alliance with the chief instigator of the company's Africanization policy, thereby betraying the colleagues who have confided their anxieties to him. This breach of trust has a number of unforeseen moral ramifications, and in the end even Nathaniel, who has taken upon himself the task of selecting suitable candidates for Johnnie's recruitment scheme, is induced to compromise his own ideal of disinterested public conduct by accepting a bribe.

Both Nathaniel and Johnnie are in some sense strangers in their own communities, and both experience psychological difficulties which are attributable in the final analysis to their resulting insecurity with respect to their own identities. One of the more effective means by which Laurence dramatizes the problem of identity and its relation to culture is in terms of the linguistic metaphor which, in its various manifestations, is a recurrent element in her fiction. Although the metaphor is elaborated most extensively in connection with Nathaniel's situation, its relevance to Johnnie's plight also becomes increasingly apparent as the novel proceeds. In a certain sense, the problem for both men reduces into one of names, because whereas Nathaniel is burdened with two names and wavers indecisively between the conflicting demands of each, the only name that Johnnie is ultimately prepared to acknowledge as his own is the name he is trying to make for himself.

Although Nathaniel "did not have the gift of spoken words — only of imagined words, when he made silent speeches to himself" (22), he inhabits a maelstrom of competing tongues, each associated with a particular worldview or mentality or cultural posture. Educated English is the language he has imbibed at the Christian mission school, and it is this that continues to be the language of his professional life, recognized by him to be the only viable idiom of the future even as he berates himself anxiously for the fact that "strange speech is in your mouth" (104). At home he speaks Twi, the language of his native village, to his wife and her relatives, while he resorts to pidgin English to communicate with people originating in parts of the country different from his own. During an altercation with Johnnie in a nightclub, he lapses defiantly into pidgin as he reverts atavistically and irrelevantly to the simplistic formulas of ethnic confrontation in order to vent frustrations which are not really racial in origin (222).

Nathaniel is responsive to other varieties of language as well, each urging their own perspectives, their own distinct patterns of thought and sensibility. His father is described as "he who knew the speech of the Ntumpane and the Fontomfrom, the sacred talking drums" (28), and although Nathaniel has forgotten much of this "drum language" he experiences acute discomfort when Europeans attempt to imitate it (152). Other ancestral voices have been awakened in him at his father's funeral, when "the keening voices entered into him, became his voice" (29), to the point that "his voice [became] more frenzied than the voice of the drums" (31). The different

languages with which he is conversant are at once circumscribed and circumscribing, meaning being exclusively determined by the particular idiom within which it is formulated. It is for this reason that when Nathaniel is talking to Johnnie's wife Miranda about the history of indigenous art he feels tongue-tied, for "there was too much to say. And so much that could never be said" (42).

It is frequently remarked in current critical discussion that identity and "selfhood" are not private constructs but constituted by a discourse which is itself a function of specific social circumstances.[4] The meditations of both Nathaniel and Johnnie indicate the degree to which their sense of self depends upon the language they use, and more specifically upon the names they are assigned within the framework of that language. But because Nathaniel and Johnnie are both, in their different ways, adrift in a sea of conflicting languages, the incompatibilities between which mirror the fluidity and instability of the social order they inhabit, their respective self-conceptions are correspondingly fragile and bereft of secure coordinates. The relation between identity, names, and the language which gives meaning to those names, though not identical in the case of each, is nonetheless comparable. Johnnie, whose belligerent self-assertiveness is the defensive strategy that has enabled him to survive a childhood blighted by poverty and trauma, is defiantly resolute in equating his identity exclusively with his name, and more specifically with the name he is trying to make for himself. In his reveries he ascribes an almost preternatural power to his own name:

> Magic symbols — a rune, a spell, a charm — the thing that made him different from any other man on earth. His name. John Kestoe. What proved identity more than a name? If you had a name, you must exist. I am identified; therefore, I am. (57)

While Nathaniel's relation to the world of names is problematic for somewhat different reasons, his reflections on the interdependency of names and identity are very much congruent with Johnnie's own:

> Nathaniel. That was his name. Before he went to the mission school, he had had an African name. He never thought of it now, even to himself. His name was Nathaniel. They had given him that name at the mission school.... And after they had given him a different name, they began to give him a different soul. (242)

Although Nathaniel has been given a new name, the old has not been entirely eradicated. "The new name took hold, and the new roots began to grow," we are told: "But the old roots never quite died, and the two became intertwined" (243). The two names correspond to two possible formulations

of his own identity, two self-conceptions, two souls, with the consequence that there are potentially devastating existential implications to the fact that "I was of both and I was of neither" (243).

The breaches of faith that both Nathaniel and Johnnie commit are given symbolic resonance, and at the same time partially assimilated to one another, through the identical metaphor of languages and voices. Nathaniel accepts the bribe because there are so many claims on his meagre resources, "so many voices" (192) to which he must attend. Because his every act is susceptible to divergent interpretations, depending on the particular language that is used to describe it, there exists for him no possibility of wholly unambiguous conduct. As is illustrated by the dilemma precipitated in him by the feud between the Togolander Yiamoo and the Twi-speaking Ankrah, in which he is torn between the claims of friendship and justice on the one side and of tribal affiliation on the other, what appears to be betrayal in one language can be construed with disconcerting facility as loyalty in another (109-14). Because meaning is inevitably constrained by the language used to formulate it, Nathaniel recognizes that any attempt to explain the reasons for his taking the bribe to an Englishman such as Johnnie would be as futile as "straining to make your voice heard across an ocean" (207).

Johnnie's motivations are entirely different, but to the extent that his actions, too, are determined by deep uncertainties regarding his identity — an identity which is inextricably bound up with language and with the "name" which that language accords to the individual — he too is the puppet of voices in and around himself. As Johnnie hovers irresolutely on the brink of betraying his English colleagues and their wives, his imagination evokes the desolate echoes of the "womenvoices" lamenting their situation (172), voices that are disturbingly reminiscent of the "girlvoice" of his dying mother (60).[5] Once the decisive step has been taken, "the dead voices were still. Now there was only his own voice, shouting inside him, shouting his identity" (174). Even if he has succeeded in silencing the voices of those whose trust he has violated, however, the position of duplicity to which he has committed himself continues to trouble him, to the degree that "his own voice sounded strange to his ears" (179). It is of course profoundly ironic that the voice through which he has sought to formulate his own identity, to establish a satisfactory name for himself, should itself become as alien as it is alienating.

The fact that Nathaniel and Johnnie are each obscurely attracted, despite the ideological reservations professed by the one and the outright repugnance

evinced by the other, to representatives of the opposing culture is another indication of their inner fragmentation. In Johnnie this attraction assumes a blatantly sexual form, for although he is scathingly dismissive of the Africans in general he is preoccupied to the point of obsession with the local women. For his own part, Nathaniel, while he is painfully conscious when in the company of white people of "the thousand years that parted them" (158), and in his imagination bitterly asks at one point "how many centuries' clotted blood lies between your people and mine?" (209), is also aware that the Europeans possess the apparatus of modernity that his own country must assemble if it is to survive in the twentieth century. He decries the history of imperialistic exploitation on the part of European powers, yet approaches Johnnie in the hope of securing positions for his students in an English firm that still remains in Africa as a tangible vestige of the colonial epoch.

The characters who, in their limited and largely ironic ways, function in the capacity of mediating agents between the contraposed worlds of Nathaniel and Johnnie are Johnnie's own wife Miranda and the African prostitute Emerald. The similarity between the names of the two women suggests that they might legitimately be perceived as the counterparts or mirror images of one another, although the parallel is not worked out with the kind of mechanical rigidity for which the novel as a whole has been criticized.[6] Miranda is drawn towards the Africans because she is fascinated by precisely those aspects of native culture and history which arouse Nathaniel's deepest misgivings. While there is no overtly sexual component to her relationship with Nathaniel, the ribald commentary inspired by the visit of the two people to the local market suggests that it might be open to this construction (155-56). In her own way Miranda, too, is susceptible to the allure of the Other, although this otherness is, as in the case of her husband's sexual fantasies, largely a projection of her own morbid imagination. Ironically, it is Miranda's casual forays across racial boundaries which inspires Johnnie with the idea that spells the ruin of their English friends, creates the conditions for Nathaniel's acceptance of a bribe, and precipitates the conflict between the two men.

The climax of the novel occurs when both of the male protagonists are compelled, in consequence of their confrontation with their counterparts on the other side of the racial divide, to recognize within themselves at least the germ of the faults that they have each been ascribing

exclusively to the other, and thus to take the first steps in the direction of personal authenticity. Nathaniel, who has discredited himself even in his own eyes over the incident of the bribe, encounters Johnnie in a nightclub and allows himself to be provoked into attacking him. When Johnnie threatens legal action, a colleague of Nathaniel tries to settle matters by offering him the services of the young prostitute who had been designated for Nathaniel himself. Nathaniel, whose thoughts are perpetually haunted by the long chronicle of slavery that has left an indelible scar upon the African mind, is painfully conscious of the irony inherent in the fact that in order to save himself from prison he has allowed a girl of his own race to be used to bribe to Kestoe into silence: "It seemed to Nathaniel that she was a human sacrifice. And he had allowed it. He had been relieved that there was someone who could be sacrificed" (226-27). Overwhelmed by this sudden glimpse of himself in the character of exploiter of his own people, Nathaniel is obliged to acknowledge his own latent complicity in the most savage crimes of history, as he realizes with disgust that "I have embraced what in my ancestors I despised" (227). His response to this discovery is to feel that like Esau "he had sold his birthright and now could not take up his inheritance. Independence was not for him?" (227). At this point he relinquishes all hopes for a future of which he feels abjectly unworthy, resolving to return to the village where "a man knows what to do, because he hears the voices of the dead, telling him" (227).

The complementary revelation to which Johnnie is subjected is triggered by his sexual encounter with the prostitute Emerald. His first sensation after finally satisfying his craving for an African woman is to feel that in acquiescing in the offer of the girl "he'd sold *himself* just as much" as she by exposing himself to ridicule in the eyes of the Africans (232). He has not only compromised his dignity, but demonstrated himself to be as susceptible to corrupting influences as he derides the Africans for being. This preoccupation with his own reputation begins, however, to give way to less egocentric concerns when he discovers that in the violence of his assault on her he has provoked a hemorrhage in the girl, who has undergone the sexual mutilation her society prescribes for women. The spectacle of blood evokes the memory of his mother, whom as a child he watched die in consequence of a self-inflicted abortion, and this in turn awakens in him the dormant sentiment of compassion. Significantly, in view of the role played by languages and voices not in bridging but in delimiting realms of meaning in

this novel, the possibility of mutual comprehension that begins at this point to open up asserts itself across linguistic barriers. The girl "began to speak in her own tongue, a low rhythmical keening sound. Her voice rose for an instant and then shattered into incommunicable anguish" (232). The awareness to which Johnnie attains as he listens to her is one that comprehends the dual aspects of the human situation — the irrevocable isolation to which every individual is condemned, on the one hand, and the universal humanity in which all individuals participate on the other:

> He knew nothing about her, but she no longer seemed anonymous to him. . . . He would never know [the details of her life]. He could not speak to her. They had no language in common.
>
> But it did not really matter who she specifically was. She was herself and no other. She was someone, a woman who belonged somewhere . . . (233)

This represents, in a sense, the culmination of the novel, at least as regards the English point of view. Johnnie externalizes his newfound awareness in a symbolic gesture — that of covering the girl's nakedness with the cloth he has earlier wrenched from her — which, however eloquent in itself, is pathetically inadequate to the magnitude of her suffering: "It was all he could do for her, and for himself" (234). The cloth betokens respect for the mystery of the Other, for the sanctity of the individual soul, but it is also in its way — like the hospital screen concealing the misery of Miranda later (262) — an emblem of division, the means by which the self is consigned to its own essential solitude. There are, moreover, distinctly ironical overtones to the restitution of the girl's private identity which is implicit in Johnnie's gesture. The cloth, green in colour, has been chosen for Emerald by her employers to accord with the sobriquet which they have imposed upon her because her own name is unpronounceable (220). If the name is a token of identity, as both Johnnie and Nathaniel believe it to be, then it would seem that the girl has been robbed of her identity together with her original name, and that in restoring the cloth which is the external correlative of her acquired name and her enforced professional identity Johnnie is merely setting the seal on her alienation.

Despite Nathaniel's insight into his own latent capacity for exploitation and betrayal, which exposes the spuriousness of the categorical distinction between oppressive white man and victimized black man which he has hitherto used to organize his experience, he proves incapable

in the end of proceeding any further than Johnnie himself along the road towards universal brotherhood. Though he becomes caught up in the euphoria of a prayer meeting that "provided for every man, every tongue" (241), and which seems to annihilate barriers of race and language in a millenarian vision of Jordan crossed and Jericho achieved, he is in the end thrown back once again on himself and on his own frustrations: "What was Jericho to him? What was Jordan to him?" (248). The parallel to Johnnie's epiphanic experience with the novice prostitute is, as Jane Leney points out,[7] Nathaniel's response to Miranda's suffering in the hospital where his child is born. Miranda has made friendly overtures to Nathaniel's wife and been repulsed, the failure of communication stemming partly from the fact that the two women speak different languages. For a while Nathaniel considers the possibility of repairing the slight: "He had only to speak to the white woman. Surely it would be easy to call out something . . . All he had to do was open his mouth and say the words" (262). In the end, however, he cannot bring himself to speak, despite the fact that he recognizes the common humanity linking Miranda and himself when he is seized by "the sudden knowledge that she could feel humiliation and anguish like himself" (263). At least as regards the possibilities of communication between different cultures, it would seem, the last word is silence.

The coda to the novel represents the author's endeavour, valiant if somewhat strained in its final effect, to dissipate the prevailing gloom of the vision that has emerged in the course of her work. Both Johnnie and Nathaniel become fathers, with all that this implies concerning the perpetuation of life and the possibilities that such perpetuation contains of moral and social regeneration. The fact that the two babies are born in the same hospital within hours of each other might also be construed in hopeful terms as portending future harmony between the races,[8] although it must be acknowledged that there is little else in the text to bear out such an interpretation. Johnnie puts the voices of the past to rest by naming his daughter after his mother, to whom both the expatriate wives and the prostitute Emerald have in their turn been distantly assimilated. At the same time, Nathaniel determines to sever himself decisively from the old world governed by ancestral voices, in order to commit himself without reservation to the new reality that is struggling to be born. The name with which he has been christened by the mission fathers is no longer conceived as an alien imposition or as a source of internal division, but as a positive token linking

him to the only reality with which he now feels he can identify: "I have a new chance and I have a new name and I live in a new land with a new name. And I cannot go back" (274).

In view of the crucial role played in *This Side Jordan* by names, by the languages of which names compose a part, and by the identities that names designate and help to constitute, it is significant that the book should conclude with yet another symbolically charged gesture of naming. In the penultimate scene of the novel Johnnie listens to the "ancient untranslatable voices" of the past contending with "another voice on the wind," that of the "new song" which is sweeping over the land (280). Just as Johnnie's choice of a name for his daughter symbolizes his reconciliation with the past, so by the same token does Nathaniel's decision to confer the name Joshua upon his son represent a sort of compact with the future. By investing the child with the name of Moses' successor, enjoining him at the same time to pass over the river which must for himself remain an untraversable barrier (281-82), Nathaniel is implicitly affirming his faith in the process of social and spiritual metamorphosis in which he can personally participate only in vicarious anticipation. But he is also doing something else, for if the authority of language as a medium of self-formulation has been relentlessly undercut in the course of the novel, then the improvised ceremony of name-giving with which the work concludes would seem to imply its triumphant rehabilitation. By vindicating the possibility of a language of selfhood that is at once both uncontaminated and uncontaminating, Nathaniel is giving practical expression to his newly won conviction that in spite of everything "my own speech is in my mouth" (275), and contributing in his own way to the emergence of the "new song" that Johnnie has earlier heard on the wind.

NOTES

[1] Margaret Laurence, "Ten Years' Sentences". *Canadian Literature* 41 (1969), p. 11.

[2] Margaret Laurence, *This Side Jordan* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, rpt. 1989), p. 32. All further references to this novel are in this edition, and are identified by means of page references inserted parenthetically in the text.

[3] George Woodcock perceives Nathaniel as representative of "a bicameral mind in the process of detachment from the world of myth". Woodcock, Afterword to *This Side Jordan* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), p. 286.

[4] For an application of this kind of analysis to the female characters in Laurence's Manawaka cycle see Diana Brydon, "Silence, Voice and the Mirror: Margaret Laurence and Women", in Kristjana Gunnars (ed.), *Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), pp. 183-203, and Christl Verduyn, "Language, Body and Identity in Margaret Laurence's *The Fire-Dwellers*", in Christl Verduyn (ed.), *Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* (Peterborough, Ont.: Journal of Canadian Studies/Broadview press, 1988), pp. 128-40.

[5] His mother's last words have been "what am I going to do at all?" (60), of which Helen Cunningham's question "if we're sent home, what shall we do?" (124) is a distant echo.

[6] See for instance Clara Thomas's remarks concerning Laurence's "insistence on symmetry and balance in plot and character" in this novel in *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, rpt. 1988), p. 50.

[7] Jane Leney, "Prospero and Caliban in Laurence's African Fiction", *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 27 (1980), p. 73.

[8] For an interpretation in this vein see Patricia Morley, *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, rev. ed. 1991, p. 66.