

Rivers of Time

Collected Poems of Cy Grant

Edited with an introduction
by Ian Dieffenthaler



This short collection of poems by Cy Grant reflects facets of a life-long search for meaning. Some are reproduced from his three books: *Blackness and the Dreaming Soul*., *Race, Identity and the Materialistic Paradigm* [2007], *A Member of the RAF of Indeterminate Race* [2006] - his war memoir - and *Ring of Steel: pan sound and symbol* [1999], the story of the evolution of the Trinidad Steelpan. Others are taken from *Caribbean Voices Vol 2* [1970] and *Bluefoot Traveller* [1976].

Acknowledgements

*Keepers of the true knowledge,
I salute you -
tributaries of rivers that flow
to One Source :*

*Pythagoras, presiding genius of the West
seeker of wisdom under the shadow
of Egypt's ancient Pyramids
echos of an ode to beauty and to truth;*

*molecular biologists who traced
our common ancestry back
to a Mitochondrial Eve,
black, in darkest Africa;*

*Aimé Césaire, prophet of negritude -
concern for Nature's native values -
a long-lost vision for all mankind
rooted in our origins, our animistic Mother,
to rocks and rivers and trees;*

*and, from the East,
vision of Shambhala,
predating Chogyam's
sacred warrior's way -
ineffable Tao, non-duality
infinite ever present Now.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cy Grant was born in British Guiana in 1919 at the time when West Indian poetry was experiencing its first real awakening. Better known as a singer and actor, he has written all his life, his early poetic influences being those of the prevailing colonial education system of the time, the English Romantics. When Norman Cameron released his anthology *Guianese Poetry 1831- 1931* he recorded that only eight poets had been published in the colony up till then. In nearby Trinidad, a similarly recent British acquisition with a diverse cultural stock, English as a language of choice had only overtaken French patois around 1920. In school, Cy recalls that all learning was centred on the seat of Empire, England. Even his native BG, later to become Guyana, was described in history lessons only in terms of El Dorado and Raleigh's late 16th century exploits. Through his father, a well-read Moravian minister, Cy learnt of alternative heroes such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, who freed the slaves of St Domingue and came upon the Negro-American poetry of Langston Hughes but in a system dedicated to Cambridge exams and Rule Britannia, his formal introduction to poetry was limited to Keats and Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge and all the usual colonial models. All Afro-, Indo- and Native American- West Indian influences were driven underground, as was the potential for cultural diversity typified by BG and Trinidad in stark contrast to the more well-known and longer established colonies of Barbados and Jamaica who were more uniformly Anglican and African. These influences were to emerge much later in his writing.

The poems are presented in reverse chronological order as they represent for the author a return to source, in the manner of his later hero, the Martiniquan poet and philosopher, Aimé Césaire.*

* *The great Martiniquan poet-philosopher who died on 17 April 2008 was Cy Grant's greatest hero. For two years in the early 1970s, Cy toured his surreal masterpiece, Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal (Return to my Native Land) as a one-man stage performance in theatres across Britain. Césaire's redemptive take on negritude has informed his life's work since then and is reflected in several of the poems including Identity I, Identity II and Rivers of Time.*

Early Poems

Keats especially struck a chord with Cy in his teen-age years. Despite not comprehending fully, the Classical references, notions of truth and beauty filtered into the earliest work collected here. We have a glimpse of a young poet grappling with poesy and love through inherited language and as with most West Indian poems of the time, everything is couched in the antique, nature generalised and the emotion, though real, sits at a distance from its subject. The pentameter is paramount. Yet even at this stage, Cy was challenging the status quo. *The Drunken Lyricalist* for instance is gently shaken out of his pentametric tracks in Stanza 3's first line with its extra stress, then his pace quickened in Stanzas 4 and 5 with the introduction of tetrameters:

I love to do and question not the act
and hear King Bacchus laugh within
and fool myself that it is not a sin
to dance a reckless dance with him.

Despite moving to England in 1941 to join the RAF, Cy continued to explore these early themes and increasingly, his homeland. He was shot down over Holland in 1943 and spent two years in a POW camp, a time recorded separately in the group of War Poems. All the other poems in this section were written in the war years and into the 1950s. They demonstrate a constant restlessness, at times falling back on colonial models and at others taking off on a modernist tack. The fragments collected here are all post-War. They were never worked up as this was a busy period for the author. Having been forced out of his chosen profession, law, on account of his racial origins, his show-business career was beginning to take off and ironically, to give him prominence in the mainstream via a different cultural sphere.

In this period, we still find poems with 'dusk slipper'd feet' and 'autumnal leaves' and those devoted to a dawn who bares the feet of 'hush pregnated skies' to the eyes of Phoebus. There are still the Victorian inversions and lyrics content to rhyme 'naught with 'aught'. Yet the poet is rediscovering his native land. Many West Indian poets needed to migrate to do this. Sam Selvon, George Lamming and Kamau Brathwaite all needed the distance from the confines of colonial life in which to find an authentic West Indian voice. In *A timeless moment*, Cy

finds the moon

silvering the oily surface of the sea
mysterious and silent,
a breathing presence

at the mouth of the Demerara River. Edgar Mittelholzer, the Guyanese novelist and poet finds in *Island Tints* [1947c] 'Colour is a swirling, dynamic thing./ Colour has a turgid skin and a mumbled,/ suspicious buzzing.' Both are beginning to define their landscapes in terms of local characteristics. Cy uses the on-shore breezes of his 'island' (the coastal strip of Guyana) as a device to investigate his current position in England in 'Winds of the night'

Winds of the night,
do you see distinctions in contours of places,
the colour of faces?

There is in this fragment a creeping sense of fear and apprehension which is expanded in many of the other poems. This mirrors work of more established poets in Britain as they try to come to terms with being British but not wanted in the mother country. *Loneliness* was selected by John Figueroa for his first *Caribbean Voices* anthology and perfectly expresses this sense of foreboding and isolation, a condition also recorded in the calypsos of the day especially those of Lord Kitchener and the Mighty Terror.

Restless as a snake
upon the back of night,
my thoughts languish in a labyrinth of loneliness.

Apprehension presages the work of E A Markham who came to prominence in the 1970s:

a wind,
sudden as suspicion
swirling the mists

mist in the eye and throat
blurred vision, myriad ghosts

In the parapet, phantoms lurking
on cobbled stone work stalking
Will it clear tomorrow?

Markham investigates this growing unease and eventually the tendency of mainstream Britain to lump all immigrants into one undifferentiated 'other'. One of his many protagonists, Lambchops, in the poem *A mugger's game*, looks as if he is running away from the police: what he is trying to do is to draw the policeman out so you can see what is going on in the policeman's head:

Black them here stop them there
before they get too cheeky
too second-generation aware
and ape us over take us. [A Mugger's Game]

As Cy searches for a post-War 'home' in Britain, he sketches in words, little vignettes of the people he encounters. These are recorded in 'Fragments from Abroad.' As an addition to the canon of West Indian poems that seek to recover folk memories when by-and-large its poets were still engaged in extricating themselves from colonialism, the poem *Cumfa* [1945] is a notable, very early contribution, written in free verse, which anticipates the sort of offering that would become commonplace only after 1970.

The War Poems

The war poems need little introduction; most readers are perfectly familiar with the context of WWII and we are constantly reminded of its legacy. Two poems of note are *the world revolves but time stands still* and *Retrospect*. The former recalls Owen's *Dulce et decorum Est* -the old lie:

Barbed wire? Let me see,
There, it's not too bad
It will not hurt within the hour...

The latter at first exhorts us not to dwell on the past but when times are good to remember the past and learn from it: