

Potent Words, Unique Voices

ANTHEA MORRISON

IN SEVERAL LITERATURE CLASSES AT MONA OVER THE YEARS, I have thought it useful to cite an early text by Lorna Goodison, Jamaica's new poet laureate, which memorably highlights the power of the word. The poem begins: "Some of my worst wounds / have healed into poems. / A few well-placed / stabs in the back / have released a singing / trapped between my shoulders." These brief lines have frequently triggered interesting and even intense responses from my students, who have heard in Goodison's words an echo of their own ability – or desire – to find in scribal expression both a remedy and an outlet. Some of our students will become creative writers. (The Department of Literatures in English currently offers undergraduate courses in writing poetry and prose. Among the celebrated writers who have brought their talents to bear on shaping our students are Mervyn Morris, Edward Baugh, Erna Brodber, Vladimir Lucien, Lorna Goodison, Kei Miller, Olive Senior, and Tanya Shirley.) But the many students of literature who have areas of interest other than creative writing are also confronted, in their years with us, with the power – whether therapeutic, subversive or persuasive – of the word.

The celebrated poet of Négritude Aimé Césaire affirmed, in the 1939 epic poem *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, his intention to articulate to the world the colonial alienation and dismal poverty of his people. The Martinican's declaration that, "Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche" (My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities which have no mouth.) A contemporary reader might view Césaire's youthful confidence as inflated. However, his emphasis on an aspect of the writer's craft embraced by many Caribbean wordsmiths – the ability to use one's voice to speak for the voiceless, to be advocate and spokesperson – remains compelling. It is also

germane to what I see as an integral part of the mandate of a humanities faculty. Whether their focus has been on literature, history, philosophy, modern languages, journalism, linguistics, education, information studies or popular culture, we believe our students have learnt, through the discussion which is an integral part of the classroom experience, that language is a singular tool, one to be deployed carefully and creatively. We believe that they appreciate that words matter, that their words are potent.

More specifically, courses in literature inevitably valorise both oral and scribal expression, in addition to developing and sharpening critical skills, using the literary text as fertile, raw material. Our graduates harness this acquired and rewarding sensitivity to the resources of language in a variety of career options including professions in the media, law, human relations, editing, teaching, diplomacy, administration, the creative industries – and the list goes on! I would argue that literary studies not only allow and prepare a student to use language creatively and effectively, but also offer a compelling example of the breadth and inclusiveness which should be characteristic of a humanities degree. Recently, for example, in addition to the traditional genres, innovative courses in the areas of film studies and popular culture have been added to the Department of Literatures in English curriculum.

Certainly, the love of language and literature has marked out rewarding pathways in my own life. Before joining the staff of the UWI, I had worked as a translator, after a UWI first degree in French and postgraduate work in francophone literature. The transition from translation to teaching was not a difficult one. I had always known that I wanted to teach and in both professions I found myself obliged to pay attention to linguistic detail and nuance, to value form as well as content. In 2004, I made another shift – this time from one campus to another, and from francophone literature to comparative literature. Once again, I was able to identify a certain reassuring coherence in these diverse activities: a concern with the power and the potential of language, a lasting fascination with the dense and fruitful terrain of literature.

Our students are similarly rewarded by their close scrutiny of (and hopefully their delight in) the literary text. Yet some may be initially intimidated by the requirement to produce multiple analyses reflecting close reading as a part of their coursework. The challenge of moving from the safe periphery of passive

learning to exposing their ideas in the discussion groups facilitated by tutorial sessions may also appear formidable to new students. From a pedagogical, and simply from a human point of view, how satisfying it is to hear those same students, nearer the end of the semester, offer interesting insights, sometimes preceded by a modest though not necessarily tentative disclaimer such as “This might seem like going too far”. For one of the pleasures of teaching literature is surely the latitude afforded thoughtful readers to “go far”, to go deep, to discover and to trust their own originality, to analyse and to tell compelling stories, to dare to offer what may seem to be unorthodox interpretations. Fluency and accuracy in oral and written expression, attention to detail, and a thoughtful though passionate engagement with ideas are ultimately, I believe, empowering for students.

In May this year, I had a wonderful opportunity to witness all those qualities demonstrated by three UWI students/former students who spoke at the Two Seasons Talking Trees Literary Fiesta, in Treasure Beach, St. Elizabeth. At the start of a programme which celebrated literature and performance, a programme featuring internationally known Jamaican writers, I was gratified to hear two of our graduates and one final year student hold their own as they addressed the large crowd with confidence and clarity. This stage was a far cry from the intimacy of the tutorial room, but these budding scholars demonstrated, I would like to believe, abilities nurtured in our humanities classrooms. (One of those students, Cornel Bogle, now a first class honours graduate, wrote one of the articles published earlier in this series, in which he eloquently illustrated the value and variety of a humanities education.)

The several departments in the Faculty of Humanities and Education all embrace as part of their mandate the need to extend activities beyond the campus. Events involving the wider community are regularly organised, including public lectures, book launches, discussions, readings and film festivals. As I look back over the years, many such events compete for attention in my memory, marking moments when I have been reminded that the appeal of the humanities (and specifically of my own discipline) is much wider than – though it does not exclude – the pragmatic pursuit of tertiary studies leading to a career. In the context of this brief article I will mention just one such moment, powerful in its impact. The year was 2007: I will never forget the excitement of

being in the presence of hundreds of Jamaicans, many not related to the UWI, who had come to the Mona campus to hear the remarkable Chinua Achebe. I discovered, as I chatted with a few members of the audience, that some had studied his iconic first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, at school and still remembered it vividly. Others were drawn to the novel's socio-historical dimension, interested in its incisive portrayal of the repercussions of colonisation in West Africa. I thought it significant that the lecture/celebration was in several respects an interdisciplinary undertaking. Professor Achebe had been invited to Jamaica to speak on the occasion of the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in Africans, and a colleague from the Department of History and Archaeology who chaired the committee responsible for the national commemorative activities offered the Department of Literatures in English the chance to collaborate in hosting him on campus.

And yet despite the exhilaration and the value of such opportunities for interaction with the wider community, I must come back finally to the most significant enterprise in which the Faculty of Humanities and Education is engaged, to the productive intimacy of classrooms which are, ideally, permeable, nurturing and empowering spaces. It is in these spaces that those pursuing tertiary education may learn, irrespective of the different curricula corresponding to a range of programmes, to analyse, to argue, to critique and to justify. And I come back to the rich resource which is the literary text, to the possibilities it offers students – and lecturers – of extending knowledge far beyond the familiar, of revelling in the seduction of language, of wielding the authority of the word.