

CANTICLES

I

(MMXVI)

GEORGE
ELLIOTT
CLARKE
CANTICLES

I
(MMXVI)



GUERNICA
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*Beauty is
a defiance of authority.*

—William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*.



*The greatest poet ... drags the dead out of their coffins
and stands them again on their feet.*

—Walt Whitman, Preface, *Leaves of Grass*.



For Geraldine Elizabeth Clarke (1939–2000)
& William Lloyd Clarke (1935–2005):
Adepts, Believers, African Baptists.

& For Timothy Kimbrough (1960–)—
African-American musicologist—
& his (*Slavery-destroying*) U.S. Patent #6977334.



THE BOOK OF INITIATION



Apologia / Gloss / Odes

Apologia

There is no choice but to go down
 into the Hell
 of *History*,
 go down
 to the sea
 where you see
 slavers floating new language.

To find your language—
 that lingo hysteria'd by *History*—
 black, bloody, white, bony
 (that diction piano—ivory, ebony),
 and the books you must echo
 to find your compass—
 you cannot encompass,
 nor truly echo,
 though it breeds
 (bleeds)
 all English
 poetry—
 all poetry
 in English—
 and you sue
 epic poets,
 pursue
 epic poets,
 and you come
 down to,
 come
 up with,
 The Holy Bible:
 The greatest *Poet* scribed The Bible....

So, how can I be original?
 (Only *Sin* is original?)
History ain't virginal.

And yet nothing's more forever virginal
 than light,
 and so "Let there be light,"
 precedes,
 "I came to a place where all light
 is moot,"*

proceeds
 until it falls mute.

But *History*—
 a demonic Bible—
 echoes
 voyages from Africa
 through Hell
 to "New World" Africa,
 reflecting
 both Hell
 and a new Bible,

and all our voices, *poets*,
 be echoes—

mirrors, shattering, splintering—
 reflecting—

poets,

now only echoes—

History,

splintering...

[Unguja City (Zanzibar) 20 février mmviii]

* Pound *pace* Dante.

Gloss

Beyond the deathless names whose examples
nullify an epic their examples nurse,

each story
is arbitrary
tributary
to every other story.*

[Unguja City (Zanzibar) 20 février mmviii]

* Cf. Graves.

Gloss (II)

I.

*B*lackness is either
ore or ether,
taboo
or *Beauty*.

II.

History is nothing
unless something dies.
Its lays are lies.
Its constitutions
be elegies and alibis.
Its chronicles prate
politic prostitutions,
Love engrossing *Hate*.

III.

Musket and cannon
gave Europe "Canaan,"
while "Injuns," displaced
(as if erased),
got this *Mercy*:
the Gospel
plus alcohol
(*Joy* and *Heresy*).

IV.

The epic
must be picky—
if it will keep.

(My hobo pen descants and descries,
astray amid templed histories.)

[Nantes (France) 28 *janvier* mmix & 8 *février* mmix]

À *Salvador, Brazil*

Green seaweed drapes singed-caramel rocks;
 blue-green water dashes celestial sapphire.
 Cloud wisps drift;
 snowy palm fronds—
 wasteful froth—
 accumulate and dissipate incessantly
 at rocks they wave at
 as they are waved off.

Suave.

Night is wavering blackness:
 The Atlantic,
 a canticle of soprano *Grief*
 (all those slaves perished
 in its frantic *Obscurity*,
 nagging and nagging roguishly)—
 slagging carnivorous *History*.

[Salvador (Brazil) 9 *novembre* mmvii
 & Playa del Carmen (Mexico) 18 *décembre* mmvii]

A Salvador, Brazil*

Cortinas verdes de alga, rocas de color caramelo chamuscado;
 agua azul-verdosa arroja zafiro celestial.
 mechones de nube a la deriva;
 hojas de palma cubiertas de nieve —
 espuma despilfarrada —
 se acumula y se disipa incesantemente
 a las rocas saludan
 mientras se las lleva la marea.

Suave.

La noche es oscuridad vacilante:
 El Atlántico,
 un cántico de *Dolor* soprano —
 todos esos esclavos perecieron
 en su frenética oscuridad,
 persistiendo y persistiendo maliciosamente —
 arrastrando una *Historia* criminal.

[Salvador (Brazil) 9 *novembre* mmvii
 & Playa del Carmen (Mexico) 18 *décembre* mmvii]

* Trans. Andrea Martinez.

Reparations Ode

The Atlantic is seldom velvet *Luxury*.
 More regularly, it's a damp dump,
 a cemetery parading as a waterfall,
 where African skeletons
 and other delicate wreckage
 (broken kegs, *bric-à-brac*,
 nignogs, knickknacks)
 tumble unto *Erasure*...

It is bitter, sodden turf—
 turbid acid, woeful tearful—
 because the black marketeers
 (entrepreneurs),
 the privateers
 (pirates),
had to bust open skulls,
 set sharks to slurp brains.

Yet, each sable rebel,
 each kola-coloured king,
 each Sheba-elect queen—
 terrorized *Nudity*—
 cast overboard,
 still mounted waves,
 treading them down or flinging them aside,
 until a hostile musket
 yielded the cold-blooded nicety,
 the *coup de grâce*,
 so that once-capable *Grandeur*
 ceased its vain wrestling
 with lithe, twisting water,
 and drifted, derelict,
 down.

Look! This dreadful water—
its stifling sparkle—
obscures a cache of unstamped visas.

This seeping swamp—
lead-toxic, lead-dull liquid—
brine—smelling of acrid tar,

bids one hallucinate Ulysses,
terrifyingly sea-feverish,

at a loss—
crossed twixt X, Colombo, and *Calypso*,
upon an ocean that's all Sargasso.

[Unguja City (Zanzibar) 20 février mmviii]

Zanzibar: A Meditation on Slavery

I.

Starting out in Zanzibar,
literally on Zanzibar,
 Spice Isle,
 you suss out—
 in the spray and froth *de l'océan Indien*—
 the maddening aroma of clove
 set drying upon grass—
 and in the bright waves thundering home,
 a luminous clamour:
History—

II.

Or—
 the moaning spirituals of slaves still haunting
 our bank vaults
 (secret, blood-splashed dungeons);

or—
 queer sobs of dark matriarchs,
 legs spread like maps,
 as gold whelps holler;

or—
 a griot's cackle like cracking crockery
 as he spills his whacked-open and shackled self
 off the starboard side;

while rain shakes down in spasms,
 ravages and havocs sails;
 furthering orgasmic wreckings—
 vessels smashing upon sand or rock,
 tantrums of wood cracking,
 water splintering;

or—
 abundant screams
 as gleaming copper-bronze beings
 stream into the Atlantic,
 drop into a cutter's deaf, white wake;

amid light tap-tap of drizzle,
 boom of tom-toms,
 bark of muskets:

Each ship's a polyphony—
 miscellaneous lingo—
 in captain, crew, and cargo,
 all staging a labile Babel—
 the loud, lousy *Lewdness*
 of a crude, rude *Tyranny*—
 ship-borne—
 as racist as pearl-white foam
 trampling down black water...

III.

And we cannot omit either
 the indescribable sibilance
 of a cutlass slicing a pale belly,
 the stinking red intestines slicking out;

groans as intermittent as waves;

the slap of bullets splatting a face;

the hurtful crash of a slaver gone aground
 in the Azores, the Carib,
 or off Newfoundland's Grand Banks,
 then the choked-off screeching
 of black humans scattered,
 now waterlogged, beaching themselves,
 or sinking down, leaden,
 or turning ultra-white skeletons,
 as uncountable as raindrops;

their mass *Agony* sounding, resounding,
 in blues-pitched gospel...

IV.

If *History* were as honest
 as a bowel movement,

we could agree, say, of Colombe:^{*}

“Only a guillotine could have improved him,
 or approved of him.”

Ivory, ebony, Moroccan leather, rum, silver,
 mahogany, coffee, caramel, and molasses, tea,
 corn, cotton, copper, gold, chocolate—
 these articles of *Trade*,
 all articulate shades of being—

The people—

hated, hunted, haunted.

What happened to these ancestors?

* Cristoforo Colombo / Christoffa Corombo (1451–1506).

Nothing “historic,” maybe—
just the usual, casual massacres.

Don't civilizations always date back
to mudbanks and cesspits,
blood bursting, suicidally, from bodies
too irritatingly rickety
to bear *Aggression*
(i.e. “*Progress*”)?

V.

If the Negro is “nothing”
(Hegel),
then nobody was enslaved.

Displace the Middle Passage
to the piddling, middle distance.

Why declare African *Servitude*
any more cruel than a slip up at chess?
(When a Queen is coralled by a pawn,
is that *Revolution*? Is that *Rape*?)
Slavery was (wasn't it?)
the God-granted method
by which Europe taught Africa to accept
crucifix propaganda plus paper currency
as well as how to fix a “proper” breakfast
involving coffee — or tea —
with clotted cream
(curdling).

VI.

The Masters bleat this meditation:

“Do not look on *History* as a tombstone.
It is a lamp.”

VII.

From the sewer bottoms of the slave ships,
 hear ineradicable shrieks,
 the yowling of pale phallus
 in pink (though tribal) vagina

("idyllic" wealth transfer
and reproduction).

The perpetrators of this *Pain*
 drilled home thick chalk, not snow.

VIII.

And yet, one might say,
 as if divining
 (if not, simultaneously, *divine*),

"In the beginning, there was
Slavery,"

and so seed
 (or *cede*)
 a genesis
 fusing the drone and crunch of waves
 with blood-brine —
 the fiery furrow sharking after every slaver,
 the transubstantiation of dawn and dusk —
 (*The Dusk of Dawn**) —
 as African life-liqueur, scarlet,
 salts, sweetens, th'Atlantic
 & th'Indian Ocean too.

* Du Bois.

And one may maintain—
 that this wake
 —This Awakening—
 (crimson incarnadining the white-washed oceans)
 where fish gnash o'erthrown Afro'd carcasses—
 is just a Dead Sea scroll, anyway—
 an *Apocrypha* not even the Vatican sees,
 peering at the *Prophecy*-laden past.

IX.

But there was *Logic*—
 a *Faith* that saw beyond the delicious accident
 of onyx nudes chained together on a beach,
 or saw beyond bleached skulls stacked in a coconut grove,
 to scope out a hinterland of gold,
 an El Dorado of (free) *Labour*—
 the thin, gilt line of the slave coffle
 illuminating the approach to the slave ship
 (a floating coffer),
 even if bobbing, brilliant, sun-lit,
 upon a sodden graveyard...

The scientific and the politic could measure
 the surge of African assets
 burnishing th'Americas,
 to imagine a gold-leaf Renaissance
 founded upon all those stooped, black backs,
 to plot a coal-smog Industrial Revolution,
 founded upon all those stooped, black backs,
 while pallid philosophers warred over
 "The Nigger Question" (Carlyle),
 "The Negro Question" (Mills),
 "The White Man's Burden" (Kipling),
 and whether Caliban
 is as noble
 as Othello—
 or just a cannibal...

X.

But origins are their own justice.
Mud is primary.

So let us agree
that *Slavery* births
the pissy nigger,
yacking saltwater yinkyank,
pidgin English,
cartoon-doodle speech,
befitting the “thick-tongued, double-jointed,
pigeon-toed, flat-footed, woolly-haired,”
Occidental Artifact.

We can only credit this “creature’s larynx snarl,
noxious animal passions
(feast, get drunk, fuck, snooze),
baboon fussing,
gorilla—or *Missing Link*—caterwauling,
to his—and her—genetic malfunctioning
(or *generic malfeasance*).”

Or we could venture further and denounce
Europe’s predations,
its inclination to chow down on children
to tusk up gold,
to work and wrack humans damned as
“ashy faced, bushy haired, and hard-headed.”

Say we begin the history of Xianity in th’Americas
with *Savagery, Slavery, Piracy, Slaughter, Rape,*
or sword, cannon, chain, torch, penis,
scourging African flesh and wombs,
purging Aboriginal peoples,
we could yet name these ceremonies
a touchstone,
a start....

XI.

Let us admit that no African-Nova Scotian
 (i.e. a Coloured, Occidentalized, Christian—usually,
 kowtowing to the English Monarchy,
 and dwelling in what a Scottish King
 dubbed “New Scotland” in Latin)
 could step into his or her Baptist Church
 to denounce Reverend So-and-So’s ram-goat proclivities
 every Sat’day night,
 or fistfight over doctrine,
 or sing
 (oh my dear sweet God)—
 so preternaturally beautifully—

if Slavery had not first dragged our ancestors
 across a marine *Inferno*—frost-blazed, Stygian water.

XII.

After her birth and schooling in Trinidad,
 then chalking up blackboards in Montréal, Québec,
 and once belting out poetry in Nairobi, Kenya,
 Shirley Small looks “across boundless ocean
 to dreams of Zanzibar,”*
 thus granting an African-Nova Scotian
 —an *Africadian*—
 this revelation....

Yes, though *Slavery* is so backward in *History*
 that it appears as unreal as a *Miracle*,
 one monument
 is a hand jetting English,
 or a mouth black with English,

* Small, “On the Shores of the Indian Ocean,” *Kola*, 1.1 (1987): 26.

Hers, mine, ours—

beached across the Atlantic,
stranded across the Atlantic,

yet recalling, uplifting, Atlantis,
where Ethiopians lectured Plato....

[Unguja City (Zanzibar) 18 & 19 février mmviii]

THE BOOK OF ORIGINS



Raced Traces

Dante Divines the Dead (A Preface to Inferno)

I.

Even pasted into poems, then posted for *Posterity*,
thoughts are communiqués from the *Dead*,
our buried selves, so plush in wisdom—

vested in all secrets and versed in all *Science*—
they treasure their public silence,
and grant us only clandestine signs.

How else should I audit Latin, deathbed whispers,
snatches of errant ejaculations,
or heresies conjured in sighs?

Even embalmed corpses, decorous,
prove urgently plangent,
intense icons,

a poet attends,
if he'll not be Arctic-mute himself,
a grave all snow-white,

blank of sense,
or only a black ink blot—
a sot.

(*Love* does survive the grave—
because it cannot live there.
Sorrows weight down cadavers.)

I pass into a cemetery—concentration
camp of confessionals—
and fathom, for instance,

a diabolical holiness backing a slave seller,
 some pallid barker marketing
 Ethiope brawn & breast,

and notching the nigrescent sexes.
 I do deplore this dead one's once-vile
Venery and Violence,

yet his personal evil is ended.
 His thought wrought his *Fate*.
 (*Memory is Judgment.*)

I prefer the moon — that pleasant stone —
 that piece of marble that's escaped:
 Moonlight out-creams cream.

(Even a modest graveyard
 houses
 blissful, deathless whiteness.)

I inspect the tombs,
 inscribed or plain alabaster,
 the moneyed craftsmanship,

and, despite odd ornaments,
 I say all the monuments are petty marbles —
 blank trophies.

But in sifting their epitaphs,
 their epithetic immortality
 amid *Oblivion,*

their evaporating vespers,
 I register rumours of *Truth*.
 With funereal finesse,

I down a glass of moonlight in Hell,
 uncover even the cupidity of judges —
 each skeletal tribune —

in their decrepit *Eternity*,
 and should want to mix my tears with my ink.
 In these fields of burial,

in each adroit cell,
 I discover the plenitude of *Story*,
not the extinction of *Song*.

Consider:
 The *Resurrection* itself is
 an explosion of earth.

(Christ was liberated at Golgotha,
 yes;
 but dwells lonesome til Judgment Day.)

Twisted shadows—reflex cherub
 or reprobate saint—
 emanate from geranium-scented dirt.

II.

I know that *History* disinters all:
 worms diddle a corpse; roots riddle a coffin.
History is never disinterested.

Even a glittering king sports a blackberry crown;
 or a harsh, windy hero slumps,
 drilled by a spear.

After flogging a lewd wench
 or a curd-faced crone,
 Bible-puffed-up blowhards

deflate under scarcely trod graveyard soil.
 And hungers for gold ebb too.
 Or bashful gal meets gallant lad,

and he plies the ivory mound twixt her thighs,
 launches his trembling lance —
 (his throbbing shaft

thrilling her sobbing shaft) —
 takes his itty bitty lil bit of titty,
 savours *Lust* that is fishy,

until both, deceased, become
 cold, petrified shadows —
 like the statuesque dead of Pompeii.

(Lovers breathe in whirlwinds
 and breed in fog —
 play incandescent, transcendent spectres —

spelling out the hottest scribing
 of their fucks, sultrily sweaty,
 yet coldly impervious to morals.)

Too, demonic, smutty priests
 leave their foul harems —
 their nests of bastards —

and slump back in caskets;
 each displaying a deadpan, winsome visage,
 mimicking waxwork saints.

Criminals killed in capital letters,
 plus soft-spoken, low-key tyrants,
 plus orators with ground-down sentences

and well-ground teeth,
 plus celestial beauties — bestial, erotic —
 nuns with ratty habits —

all prove unacceptably septic,
 oozing macabre filth.
 My visions?

Cadenced eavesdropping.
 Nowhere is as sad as a cemetery.
 Words weigh like lead dust.

Nothing is more chastening than *Decay*
 for getting at *Truth*.
 Each of us is a morsel of dirt

fit for the grave's mouth:
 Vain are our intimate gymnastics—
 rapturous fury—

exertions for procreation.
 Each abrupt baby—
 after hysteria of birth—

lives on smuggled breath:
 All end in suffocating black cells
 where monks and monsters jostle,

but where I can lurk and listen, jest and sob.
 As the dead become translucent,
 so I become lucid....

III.

In my white-moon paradise
 of chilling light,
 give eye to my speech.

Out of the illustrious grave,
 the great rent in the earth,
 I hear humiliated whispers—

or the boisterous joking of lascivious old age,
 or inebriate howls,
 or sonorous, reverential prayers,

and I deliver them here—
 in a slightly bony voice.
 Yet, I don't know if I can be

an angel's poet.
 Outside my mother's house,
 no one loves me.

(Some condemn my songs as off-key,
 bad-luck chirping.)
 The ways of gods and poets

seem imbecilic, if not improvident.
 (*Life* metes out sugar, but outweighed
 by the salt of flooding tears.)

Is my revelation *Light*,
 or is it a *light* revelation?
 Hush! I hear the first *Regret*

and the last *Temptation*.
 Under tapering, cypress shadows,
 the *Dead* congress in the grass.

Always we *cognoscenti* are late.
 Ivy survives us wondrously—
 as if unkillable as ink.

[Ravenna (Italy) 19 *septembre* mmxii]

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Michael Mirolla welcomed this project as soon as I proposed it to him, way back in 2011. I'm proud to be associated with Guernica Editions, and I anticipate, with relish, the subsequent volumes of *Canticles*.

David Moratto executed the design of this book, but the titular font and interior drop caps reflect the artistry of William Lloyd Clarke (1935–2005). Digitized in 2011 by Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press, *Bill Clarke Caps* is a font my late father drafted—with yardstick, pencil, and ink—in 1969.

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