

Navigating *The Arrivants*

Your next assignment is to read Kamau Brathwaite's trilogy *The Arrivants*. People have a lot of misconceptions about poetry, and one of them is that, in poetry, "anything goes." I'd like to gently suggest that while emotional impact and raw associative impressions may be important parts of a response to *any* piece of writing, nevertheless a poem doesn't grant you a special license to take wild stabs in the dark. On the back of this sheet are some principles intended to help make your study of *any* poem more methodical, more rewarding and (ultimately) more pleasurable. Below are a few guidelines directed more particularly towards *The Arrivants*.

Poetry is both the arrangement of words in space (i.e., the page) and the organization of sound in time. And just as, in order to discern a poem's visual and verbal patterns, you have to study and scrutinize it repeatedly—not just pass your eyes over it—so too, in order to perceive a poem's aural patterns, you have to *read it out loud*, which is different from merely reciting it. Braithwaite intended this as oral poetry—he performed it to great popular acclaim as he composed and revised it throughout the late 1960s, and he recorded the entire trilogy on disc, as well. (Unfortunately it's now out of print.) But reading a poem out loud is a process that's not always intuitive: it's one you have to work at, one that involves intense study and practice. You have to teach yourself to hear a poem's rhythms, rhymes, and other sound patterns; you have to figure out how best to read it, where to pause, where to place emphasis, where to speed up and slow down; and you have to do all that *as* you read it out loud. All of those aural features, heard right, help the poem make meaning, make sense. Generally speaking, you should try to read as naturally and conversationally as possible: don't adopt some strange, elevated form of diction; don't fall into some weird, oracular, incantatory tone. (I know, I know: poets often do this themselves, and sometimes it's called for—but poets often aren't the best performers of their own work.) You won't always be able to do so, but try to make the words of the poem make grammatical and syntactical sense. Be aware that the ends of lines—part of a poem's visual arrangement—aren't necessarily your best cues for where to pause orally; if the sentence or other grammatical unit you're reading continues into the next line or over several lines, then push on through those lines until you hit a punctuation mark or some other cue to pause.

Here are some options for your reading response this time:

§ Option 1: Pick one poem (suggestions: *Rights of Passage*: "Didn't He Ramble," "Folkways," "The Emigrants"; *Masks*: "The Making of the Drum"; *Islands*: "Caliban," "Eating the Dead," "Vèvè") and analyze it in detail, using the questions on the other side of this handout.

§ Option 2: Pick one poem and discuss its themes, images or other formal features in the context of the themes, recurrent images, and formal features of its surrounding "chapter," of its volume within the trilogy, or of the *entire* trilogy. **Or:** identify an image, theme, or formal feature you'd like to trace across all three parts of the trilogy by rooting it in one poem from each volume. A few possible points of entry:

- One big idea to track throughout the trilogy is *movement*, in all its multiple variations: exodus, exile, wandering, crossing, passage, migration, arrival, return, etc. (There are also things over and through which movement happens [paths, rivers, ships, winds] and towards or against which it tends [islands, coasts, limits, destinations].) How does the trilogy *itself*, or any of its three volumes individually, "move"; how, structurally speaking, does it progress, regress, oscillate, loop back, "arrive"?
- Some recurrent images to track: sun, soil, sand, dust, rock, iron, fire, drum, lash.
- A recurrent figure to track: Old Tom.
- A recurrent formal feature to study: the short, taut, clipped lines characteristic of many of the poems. A given poem's dominant rhythms (its regular distribution of beats, of emphasized syllables) sometimes follow those lines, and sometimes "cut across" them—unevenly or with regular syncopation.

§ Option 3: Apart from epics—long narrative poems like the *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*—we don't normally think of poems (especially short, free-verse poems) as "telling stories." Just the same, how might you see the poems of *The Arrivants* as telling the history and/or the pre-history of the colonial and/or post-colonial Caribbean—perhaps the very history that Naipaul claimed it lacked? You could of course answer this question in very broad and general terms, but try also to answer with reference to specific examples—i.e., individual poems or sequences of poems.

Finally: you might conclude your response by formulating one or two questions on a particular poem, a section, or the entire trilogy to throw out to the discussion forum: it could be a question about whose answer you have some ideas, or a question on some matter about which you're absolutely stumped.

CHEAT SHEET FOR POETRY

Many of us are needlessly panicky about poetry (something to do with 7th-grade English class, probably); we imagine it's a rarified, flowery form of language that only sensitive types who've really suffered can fathom, or that it's an obscurantist joke played on ordinary folk by a modernist elite. There are some insufferable posers who pretend that's what poetry must be, but for most of us, poetry is the lyrics that get played on our Walkmen every day. To recognize, much less analyze, any kind of poetry requires serious questions, which we may not be entirely prepared to pose, let alone answer. So here are some beginning questions designed to get you to teach yourself how to recognize, describe and analyze the features and the significance of some features of poetic form.

Some general questions to ask of any poem:

- Who's speaking? To whom (named or implied)? In what context or situation? About what? (Paraphrase as best you can, in plain prose, what is literally "happening" or being said or described.) How would you describe the speaker's tone of voice? (Is it consistent?) What other characteristics of the speakers or other persons (or things) in the poem can you describe? Any tensions or rhythms set up by shifts between speakers, personae, or points of view?
- What's the overall "mood" of the poem and its subjective effect on you? Can you pinpoint some of the elements—rhythmic, aural, imagistic, metaphoric—which built that mood?
- How is the poem structured? Is it long and sprawling, or short and compact? Divided into stanzas or sections? Punctuated by some kind of "refrain"? How long are the lines, stanzas, or sections? Are they generally of regular, irregular, or varying length? Are there natural breaks/pauses at the ends of lines and/or between sections, or do some run over into the next? What do any of these structural features accomplish; how are they significant?
- What kind of beat or rhythm is there? Is it steady and regular, or does it vary or even get interrupted? Where, why and how? If you "scan" the poem, where do the stresses fall? Is there any kind of a pattern that you can see (do certain words or syllables tend to get emphasized)? What about rhyme patterns, if any (including "internal" rhymes—rhymes within one line, rather than at the end of lines)?
- What words, phrases, or sounds (or variations on them) get repeated? How are techniques like assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds within words—I know Joe) or alliteration (the repetition of initial consonant or vowel sounds—wild and woolly) used to emphasize something or build up certain ideas over a section or an entire poem?
- What seems innovative or extraordinary about the formal, technical or performative features of this poem (compared, say, to other, similar poems that you've seen)—or by contrast, what traditions does it seem to be working within or against, and/or what other works does it quote, refer to, or remind you of?
- What seems to be the primary function of the poem: to emote, meditate, philosophize, teach, reveal, rant, tell a story, boast or ridicule, play with words (not the only possibilities)? How do its formal features operate in relation to or in service of its thematic intent?

If the poem is "performed":

- How important is the performer's individual voice—how would you characterize his/her style, in terms of speed, pitch, timbre, enunciation, etc.? What effects are achieved in performance that can't be communicated on the page?
- If there's musical accompaniment, does the musical beat reinforce, cut across, or undercut the speech rhythms and/or rhyme patterns? Are "a cappella" poems more or less effective than those with music, or does it depend?
- How would you compare features of this performance style with the style of other types of performance, or other types of poetry? Does this example of performance poetry clash with your preconceptions (if any) about poetry, poets, and their peculiar language and conventions?
- How does your "internal audition" of these poems—how they sounded in your head when you read them on the page—compare with actually hearing them performed out loud? (How much of a problem is language or orthography? Are there rhymes here that wouldn't exist in "standard" written English?)