

The mighty gaze of power in Earl Lovelace's
The Dragon Can't Dance and *The Wine of Astonishment*

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'What then is the world? Who qualifies for the world? Who decides what is the world? Is there a world? Is there one world? Why are we not an automatic part of the world?

Earl Lovelace. 'Engaging the world' *WASIFIRI*
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The Dragon Can't Dance (1979) and *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982) have been read as gestures of resistance and their characters as social types moving from mere victims of cultural oppression into purportive agents of their own destiny probably due to Lovelace's open commitment to writing the folk. However, subjects and their identities should be read in wider networks of human relationships than the ones offered by the mere oppositional dualities of modernity. This work aims at describing Lovelace's characters as not only tied to their own identities by conscience and self-knowledge but also still subject to social institutions by control and dependence. Therefore, the description suggests that self-identity can never be totally pulled apart from social control and that there are always traps for the gaze authorising certain institutionalized subjects to see the folk the way they do.

Lovelace perceives that the objects of disciplinary power are behaviour and the individual body as represented in the surveillance carried out by institutional entities and he translates the imagery of classical institutions into the ones designed to discipline or self-discipline the folk. The church and the school, for instance, weave together the fabric of whoredom in *DCD* (16-22). And even resistant movements fall into the disciplinary force of institutional attitudes. In the same novel, the Corner – designating an institutionalised group opposed to the Hill and the Yard– would not accept Philo since he is not an outcast any more and, therefore, he falls outside the institutional scope of this site (143-160). 'The man is a enemy man.' (154). In the chapter 'We Church' in *WA*, when Bolo, 'as if his own words was there in his bowels waiting', calmly utters 'We have to kill Prince.' (37), the religious congregation

refuses his proposal acting as a corporate body against internal difference. ‘To kill a policeman is to set yourself on a road of no returning,’ replies Bee on behalf of all ‘his’ community, and he adds, ‘And we have the Church to keep alive.’ (39).

Classical, colonial institutions find their way through Lovelace’s narrative, they enter the texts and devise for themselves a mighty existence, as well as subjects are positively enslaved before them and their overwhelming presence. ‘The individual has been dwarfed by the hugeness of institutions which do not allow his voice to be heard. He has been a spectator in the parade of power.’ (Lovelace 1984:4). In this context, Lovelace’s fiction reflects an utterly discontinuous reality, that of disorder, powerlessness and frustration as colonial patterns of society break down and neo-colonial ways of oppression emerge. The “system” ensures its perpetuation at the expense of the persistent dependency of the powerless.’ (Warner-Lewis 1987:78) through institutions that are actually devoid of signifieds as they only stand for the carcasses of the old colonial power but which still regain part, if not all, of the power they used to have. In other words, they are not really empty of the concrete signifiers of colonialism. Moreover, they are still there, especially through law and education.

‘Absent in these representations of community are the practices, beliefs and controls of Europeans. Yet we are in a society governed by colonial edicts.’ (Thomas 1991:3). Overwhelmingly present in *WA*, the law is either significantly embodied in Corporeal Prince –‘He was the law’ (36)– or minutely scrutinised in Eva’s cogitation –‘When you break the law, you don’t hurt the law, you don’t change the law, you just make the law more the law;’ (64)–. And it is not just the colonial edicts but the whole representation of a people before the law that helps the ‘system’ go on. In *DCD*, consider, for example, the speech of the young lawyer in defence of the Nine (173-176), who positively ‘beg[s] for us well’ (176) and, by doing so, distils an overwhelmingly European conception of the Caribbean folk. ‘Rather than jail these men, we should applaud their courage to stand up to show that injustices exist in our midst,’ (176) –he says.

Police officers and magistrates who enforce the law are themselves products of the educational system, a plethora of institutions encompassing schools and universities which tailor its subjects’ identities to the needs of social control. The above-mentioned lawyer in *DCD* and Ivan Morton in *WA* are clear examples of the fact that ‘in travelling the road to power, the aspirants may so fully internalize the norms of those in authority that they no longer see themselves as part of their original

community' (Juneja 1996:92). The former 'had not forgotten poverty' but his progressive attitude and his speech on 'frustration and anger', become the façade of a new Trinidadian middle-classed intelligentsia (174). The latter 'open[s] his brains like Solomon to wisdom, knowledge and understanding' (40) through his very first act of betrayal towards his Baptist community, his turning Catholic (42). Schooling actually teaches him that 'We can't be white but we can act white' (13), and he would still go on singing *Rule Britannia* at school. (30)

Then, if the middle classes are 'corrupted by callous materialism and they govern through social institutions which fail to fulfil their function of ministering the needs of the people' (O'Callaghan 1984:1), this failure has been gradually enforced to care continuously less about assisting people in need and progressively more about making them spectators in the parade of power. These social institutions use their 'tricks of repetition' to increase their status while attempting to alleviate anxiety about their not having any basis for authority other than the manipulation of images and signs. Thus the all-mighty organisation of the former colonial institutions multiplies itself into as many layers of the social life it can flood into and it even pervades what can be considered folk institutions in dissimilar ways. 'They have the lawyers. They have the police. They is the Government.' (34) –summarises Eva in *WA*.

But the State does not manipulate images and signs in the old traditional way but through its new twisted realisations and its degrading metaphors still centralising power under the mask of a democratic overflow of it into the overwhelmingly present religion, politics, free enterprise and cultural manifestations of the islands. Organised religion offers no vision in the state of crisis. The Baptist Church in *WA* decides to move, 'sing and dance and catch the power' (33) only late in the course of the story, not to mention the Catholic and the Anglican churches which remain just emblems of the reproductive models they propose and against which nothing can be done (*DCD* 178). Organised politics encourages self-seeking corruption, as in the cases of Guy in *DCD* and Ivan Morton in *WA*. Free enterprise services the vulgar consumerism it has created by disintegrating the scanty genuine cultural manifestations left in the Caribbean. Carnival, for instance, a folk 'institution', becomes just a bundle of empty images and signs as greedy sponsors and a neat marketable discipline drenches it of its ancestral power (*DCD*, 60).

Even though unable to produce concrete satisfaction, the centralising power embodied in religion, politics and free enterprise still creates passive narcissistic

desires of the symbolic order by which the subject aspires at the love and care of the ultimate authority. Nevertheless, due to the void of transcendental signifieds, these epitomes have been displaced in the novels and translated into new all-encompassing entities from which each individual seeks recognition. In *DCD*, the people –‘we is all one people’ (11)– takes the place of this imagined superiority which Philo endeavours to conquer with his calypsos and Pariag with his kindness. In *WA*, the Baptist Church –‘We Church’ (32-50)– casts a similar role. Both, people and church could be said to have become in each work new ‘master signifiers’ functioning as bearers of identity for what may be considered in this context, the Trinidadian folk.

Images and signs do not play at random in the novels but are intertwined in a never-ending game of glimpses and gazes. Even from the very beginning of each work, all of the actions are carried out through this interplay. Miss Cleothilda in *DCD* shows her thighs and displays her expensive purchases (9); Eva and Bee’s children in *WA* ‘*have their own eyes*. They know; so they sit down on the bench in the kitchen *watching me*, waiting for me to tell them more.’ (1. Italics mine.). And it is precisely through this game that institutions gaze at the subjects they dwarf with their hugeness and, at the same time, subjects abide to the degree of control and dependence they have to cope with in the process of building their self-image.

In Lovelace’s fiction ‘everybody is exposed to light and sight; nobody exists outside inspection but nobody can see themselves or anybody of their own status.’ (During 156). Characters –introduced much more as static social types than as human beings– are produced as looking and looked at, constructed from successive instances of being seen by others. In *DCD*, everyone inspects each other. The Queen has a clear perspective of the whole Hill, Pariag is ‘the spectator’ (69-90) but he would do anything ‘so that people would see him’ (76). And Fisheye and Aldrick ‘might view the Hill’ and ‘would be watching there, wise, alert’ (144). In *WA*, Eva, Bee and Bolo positively enter into a tangled interplay which mixes the institutional and the sexual, the public and the private, and which is only carried out through the insistent gazes of the three at each other. Moreover, relatively free to produce their self-images, some characters somehow manage to play the game they want to play wearing the mask they want to wear. Bee, Bolo, Aldrick and Fisheye ‘gain visibility and knowledge of self and their power’ (Down 1994:386) only to discover later that what they get is the minimum allowed to their social types.

Nevertheless, some characters are permitted to experience the epiphanic freedom of self-knowledge. Aldrick and Fisheye can actually see the origin of their enterprise and the way in which it is twisted by the discourses of power. Bee can see and stand for his people after a long period of immobility as the spirit catches him up and ‘spin him around and bow him down and It hold him up and walk him down from the pulpit to the Centre Post’ (61). And all his followers ‘break the law as the law was nothing.’ (63). As if it were the first time in their lives, Bee and Eva re-discover, at the end of *WA* that ‘yes, God is great’ (146). Subjects are sometimes free to gaze at themselves without the burden of institutions. This possibility, however, only exists at the level of the merely individual. In other words, in Lovelace’s narrative epiphanies are personal, they are never social. They do not mean a change for the whole of a group or the whole of a social type. It can be posited then that the essence of Lovelace’s message is that real change occurs only through change within ourselves.

So far, some of Lovelace’s preliminary questions may be answered. In his novels, what the world depends on how those who decide what it is gaze at us and on how we play with that gaze and subsequently look at ourselves. Two problems, however, seem to stem from this attempt at a response. The first one is that the possibility of truly looking at us in Lovelace’s narrative world appears to be circumscribed to the level of the merely personal. Whether the private epiphanies of the characters can be translated to their social groups or not is an issue of which only hints are offered but no answer explicitly given. The second one is closely related to the mighty gaze of authorial power. If nobody can see themselves or anybody of their own status, then the question is whether Lovelace the author can gaze at himself or at his social group through his novels. The second part of this paper consists of an attempt at a preliminary answer to this issue.

Post-colonial critics have been extremely enthusiastic on the fact that Lovelace challenges concepts of West Indian identity by writing the folk. Moreover, in some cases, they have even reached the conclusion that

Lovelace’s *text* narrows the distance between narrator and *reader* so that for the Caribbean *reader* it is his own *voice* that he *hears*. The artist becomes truly the medium through which the community *speaks* and *hears* itself and legitimizes itself (Down 382. Italics mine.).

No wonder the presence the Caribbean ‘voices’ of carnival, calypso and the steel band are powerful in Lovelace’s novels. But, in displacing the field of literacy to the field of orality, the critic seems to be forcing an issue in an otherwise cogent interpretation

of Lovelace's fiction. The Caribbean reader *reads*, he or she does not *speak* or *hear*. Furthermore, this fact even makes the critic miss or even confuse a point. Imbued with the idea that Lovelace is positively writing the folk, she posits that his work does not derive significance from its relationship with the middle classes (Down 380), which seems, at least, hyperbolic. The literary work in fact does relate itself with the middle classes through the question of literacy.

That the Caribbean reader is not the folk can be proved just by a quick glance at Lovelace's texts. Even though a myriad of colonial institutions designed to flood the colonies with the almighty West are present in them, literature, one of the most powerful vehicles of this enterprise, does not show at all. Nor does literacy. Nobody reads in *DCD* or in *WA*. Moreover, nobody seems to be able to handle the most rudimentary elements of either reading or writing, the visible signs of reason for the Western mind, exception made of Eva, who only writes religious verse, and the characters connected with the educational system who only write and read with the pragmatic purpose of passing Cambridge examinations (*DCD*, 174) or College exhibition examinations (*WA*, 41).

Thus the equation author/narrator/folk seems out of key and, therefore, it may be posited that the author/narrator, who does read and reads literature, literary theory and cultural criticism, gazes at his characters with different eyes from the ones with which they look at themselves. Be it as it may, his literary gaze is not that of the 'folk'. Or, to put it in other words, it may hold blueprints of the folk to which Lovelace's once belonged, but it contains more powerful traces of the ways of looking at the world Western eyes provide their subjects with. It may not be totally middle-classed in its rendering, but its beholder somehow recurs to the references and techniques inherited from the still present colonial institutions or from the most recently developed neo-colonial strategies imported from the United States of America, the cinema, the television and the media in general.

Lovelace commands our imaginative "vision" all through the text. 'The reader is in the author's power, seeing through his eyes' (O'Callaghan 2). Either one way or another, the narrator retains his power and his gaze becomes the point from where everything is surveyed. Through a glimpse at the contents of *DCD*, it can be inferred that, in the novel, not only the characters are introduced as if they were a cast but also the main events are roughly given a title as in a script. More important is the fact that all through the novel, this effect is created by the use of a cinematic technique by

which the narrator never abandons the power to direct the eye of the reader through what in a film would be panning. Moreover, he is totally free to cut and paste scenes for us as he pleases without leaving us with the bittersweet taste of discontinuity because, by the time we realise about that, we are already engaged in a new scene and looking at a new direction. In *WA*, a female narrator has the power to direct the reader's eye. She sees everything 'in a woman's way' (38), her eyes roaming over the whole story turning every attempt at a dialogical gaze into her own monological scrutiny, and she uses this endowment to create an image of male sexuality and of the male body which actually pervades the narrative.

Enthusiasm, however, must not make us believe that the literary representation of 'indigenous' forms constitute these forms themselves. Of course, there is carnival, calypso and steel bands in *DCD* and *WA*. But writing a book and publishing it is not dancing in Carnival or playing in a steel band at all. Literature, as literacy, is a cultural expression of a different class and, therefore, gazes at these 'other' cultural forms, even only reads them, from a perspective that may not necessarily be the one of the folk. So, when Ramchand (1970:4) states that 'it is worth suggesting at once that this social consciousness is not class-consciousness', he may also be referring to this class of socio-cultural consciousness which is, in fact, more inclusive than class-consciousness but which does inevitably comprise a certain degree of it, at least in the choice of the medium, the letter, and in the personal perspective of the cultural producer.

The cultural producer *par excellence* in the novels we are considering is Aldrick. As Lovelace in his texts, he weaves the stories of his community within his dragon mask and he seems to have been dwarfed by the hugeness of colonial institutions. Both of them are 'the authors of a language that tries to speak the truth to power' (Said 1994: XIV), but both become involved in parade of power that engulfs them. Aldrick becomes part of the marketed Carnival and later a victim of the play staged by the police and the law. Lovelace seems to be reviving the folk but in fact he is just writing it using the tools of his class and the gaze inherited from the colonial institution of literature. And it is in this sense that they reach a condition that may be actually and here truthfully labelled post-colonial, that of a borderline intellectual stance. And it is precisely this stance what does not let them be trapped into the binary oppositions of modernity, what does not allow them enter the Gramscian well-known dichotomy of traditional versus organic intellectuals.

For some critics, Lovelace's fiction retells 'revolutionary movements that fail' and that allow its characters 'to postpone the real business of living' (Williams 1987: 144). They even posit that 'All Aldrick can offer the waiting audience as a revolutionary message is a deterministic statement of the powerlessness that he shares with them.' (Williams 145). But the dragon is later saved because 'he becomes the artist who can finally conceive of revolution because he now believes in the value of commitment to people as well as to artifacts.' (Williams 147). May the same be stated about Lovelace's narrative? Can it be said –as of Aldrick– that his creative project has failed but is later imbued with the possibility of conceiving a revolution?

The stance of post-colonial criticism about Lovelace's narrative –as it has been proved– puts so much emphasis in its resistant traits that it forgets that it is still part of a capitalistic game of production and consumption. Put in other words, the literature we label post-colonial may not necessarily be understood as an 'other' logic because it exists within the mechanisms of the capitalistic society. Therefore, it may not be so rapidly conceived as a tool towards 'real' social change. Lovelace and his counterpart Aldrick, however, are both controlling in their power to write and to gaze yet uncontrollable in their gift to create. Moreover, the former's literary production and the latter's making of his dragon costume stand for practices which are to be thought of as post-colonial but not in the still binary sense discussed in the previous paragraph but in a new one which conceives of cultural producers as Lovelace and Aldrick as borderline intellectuals. These are still part of the capitalistic circle of production and consumption but should represent what they profess through their work and interventions 'without hardening into an institution' and 'actively representing the truth to the best of your [their] ability' (Said 90).

In this context, Lovelace's literature is entitled to give an answer to his questions about the world. Maybe that is the reason why literature and its reading are absent from *DCD* and *WA*: because they actually exist in the materiality of the books themselves. Or perhaps they are present in the very dragon costume whose description clearly resembles the plots hidden among the interstices of written narrative and into whose latticework Lovelace/Aldrick works it all. Now, the very same power that stems from our being outside the picture and that constitutes itself 'a trap for the gaze' authorises Lovelace to see the folk the way he does, entitles post-colonial criticism to cast its view on his narrative the way its producers decide it to be, and still permits me

add this modest contribution to the on-going never-ending discussion about literature, its writing and its reading.

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