She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks

Memory and the painful but necessary process of re-membering one's history, one's identity and one's language are central to Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*:

> Hold we to the centre of remembrance
> That forgets the never that severs
> Word from source[1]

Crucially, memory and the act of re-membering are also fundamental to Caribbean creolization: Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau, in fact, take creolisation to signify a new space "at the crossroads of forgetting and remembering, of an elusive past to be re-imagined and an uncertain future."[2] Wilson Harris adds an extra dimension to creolisation—or creoleness as he calls it—when he defines it as "a cross-cultural nemesis capable of becoming a saving nemesis"[3] because it throws "bridges across chasms, to open an architecture of space within closed worlds of race and culture."[4] In "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" he focuses on the "creolization of [this] chasm," that is the appropriation (but not the purely formal appropriation) of cultural artefacts by a different culture through what he calls "involuntary associations."[5] Harris uses the word "chasm" to "imply that within the gulfs that divide cultures […] there exists […] a storage of creative

a new language to express themselves and, in particular, they echo the predicament of the many black female slaves raped by their white masters.

As a matter of fact, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, many female characters are submitted to unbearable and inexplicable cruelties by both men and gods. Just before they are metamorphosed, their grief either explodes into a cry or implodes in an inner, secret lament. In Book V, for instance, the nymph Arethusa loudly and desperately begs the goddess Diana to help her while Cyane nursed "silently in her heart a wound that none could heal." Philip refers to their stories in "And Over Every Land and Sea," the first section of *She Tries Her Tongue,* and the title of this section is once again a quotation from Book V of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The seven poems that constitute "And Over Every Land and Sea" are all preceded by an epigraph/citation from Ovid but, since Dryden did not translate Book V, Philip quotes from Mary M. Innes' prose version. Philip concentrates on the myth of Ceres and Proserpina, mother and daughter. One day, while Proserpina was gathering flowers, Pluto, king of the underworld and brother of her father Jupiter and her mother Ceres, kidnapped her and brought her down to the kingdom of death while "with wailing cries the terrified goddess called to her mother, and to her(r, sec)-2.3y-r-17.levr(r, sec)-2.3er(9582.3(r3)t)Sr,0-0.02vm

and turned it into a sterile desert. Later, with the help of the nymph Arethusa, she discovered that in fact it was her brother Pluto who had kidnapped her daughter. Full of indignation, Ceres decided to go to Jupiter, father of the girl and brother of Pluto, and offered to overlook the abduction provided that he would grant immediate freedom to Proserpina. Although reluctantly, Jupiter agreed, on the condition that, while in the kingdom of death, Proserpina had not eaten anything. Unfortunately this was not the case─Proserpina had indeed eaten some seeds from a pomegranate─and she was condemned to spend part of each year in the underworld.

The quotations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that engage in a dialogue with Philip's poem refer to Ceres' search for Proserpina. "Where she, where she, where she / be, where she gone?"[12] are the opening lines of "Questions! Questions!" the first poem of this section that creolises the myth adapting it to a Caribbean (diasporic) universe. The mother's search for her daughter—"crazy or no crazy I must find she"[13]—is mirrored by the daughter's search for her mother in the second poem, "Adoption Bureau:" "She whom they call mother, I seek."[14] The desperation behind the mother's search for her daughter and the daughter's search for her mother can be all too easily "translated" into the experience of African Caribbean people (Philip's target audience) who have suffered and are still suffering from the dismemberment of families by slavery and diaspora. Philip, once again, cleverly capitalises on these similarities. In Philip's collection, the daughter's search for her mother (expressed in standard English) and the mother's search for her daughter (in Creole) soon fuse and become one: in the mother's words: "She gone—gone to where and don't know / looking for me looking for she."[15] If mother and daughter share the same destiny they also depend upon the same determination: "she going find you, iS0(y)19.9ion: "(in)--8.ep me(in)--8 looking

section, however, Philip abandons this nostalgic and self-defeatist mood and highlights the necessity to create a "space" (she calls it "sacred ground") where all wounds can be cured:

> the oozing wound
> would only be healed
> on sacred ground.[21]

Interestingly, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* all the characters who contribute to the creation of this "healing space" and try to help (to re-member) mother and daughter are female: Cyane, Arethusa, an old woman who feeds Ceres during her wanderings, and Achelous' daughters who ask the gods to transform their limbs into wings so that they can se8.o crei()-4.emb

"And Over Every Land and Sea:" for example, in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," Philip refers to Dr Broca—who "devoted much of his time to 'proving' that white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples of colour"[27]—and inserts two edicts dating back to the time of slavery that she reports in the same poem:

> *EDICT I*
> *Every owner of slaves shall, wherever possible, ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethnolinguistic groups as possible. If they cannot speak to each other, they cannot then foment rebellion and revolution.*
>
> *EDICT II*
> *Every slave caught speaking his native language shall be severely punished. Where necessary, removal of the tongue is recommended. The offending organ, when removed, should be hung on high in a central place, so that all may see and tremble.*[28]

If history is a nightmare, according to Joseph Campbell, myth instead is a dream everyone has, just as everyone also dreams her or his own personal myths: in other words, "dream is the personalised myth, myth the depersonalised dream."[29] As we have seen, in Philip's "And Over Every Land and Sea" mother and daughter meet precisely in a dream and in *She Tries Her Tongue* as a whole, Philip, who recognises the strategic value of myth as a "verbal method" to translate her "i-mage into meaning"[30] succeeds in dreaming and creolising a depersonalised dream/personalised myth and in producing an alter/native epic. As a matter of fact, in Philip's opening sequence the encounter between mother and daughter takes place in a dream and within the field of force of myth but, ultimately, one can say that this encounter takes place *in the poem*. In order to fulfil its function—that for Philip is "to speak to the essential being of the people among whom and for whom the artist creates"[31]—poetry must bring into being a space, a "sacred ground" on which all wounds can be healed, as Philip herself suggests in "And Over Every Land and Sea." Dreams, myths and Philip's version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (which, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo would say, is "in a state of creolization")[32] do open what Harris calls "an architecture of space within closed worlds of

race and culture" where mother and daughter, past and present, Africa and the Western world, Creole and standard English can finally meet on an equal basis and generate something new and powerful. In "The Absence of Writing or How I Almost became a Spy," her afterword to *She Tries her Tongue,* Philip describes the way in which this space is created: "Fundamental to any art form is the image," or rather Philip's "i-mage." For "i-mage," drawing on the "Rastafarian practice of privileging the 'I' in many words," Philip means "the irreducible essence—the i-mage—of creative writing."[33] The i-mages created by the artist are crucial because, when they speak to the essential being of the people, they can definitely contribute to "altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually its collective consciousness."[34] In fact, Philip points out, it is through poetry, story-telling and writing that

> the tribe's experiences are converted and transformed to i-mage and to word almost simultaneously, and from word back to i-mage again. So metaphorical life takes pnni

I have no mother tongue
[...]
and english is
my mother tongue
is
my father tongue
[...]
english
is a foreign anguish.[40]

> History as a record of the past has been told almost entirely in terms of its outer eventfulness and, in a sense, this is the least of history. History progresses on two levels, a manifest one and a profound one which is irresistible but not fully expressed, demanding to make itself known through the way we shape our lives in the world without, and through the failures and disasters brought about because this hidden, inner eventfulness is not fully recognised and given its due role in the human spirit and its societies. There is no dimension of history of which this is more true than the way the feminine half of the human spirit has been dealt with by masculine-dominated societies [...] the result of this neglect [is visible] in the decay of the feeling and caring values of life.[41]

In "Discourse on the Logic of Language," Philip both records the history of outer events and re-members the usually neglected inner history (or rather her-story) of feeling and caring values while foregrounding "the loss" of her and her own people's "history" and of her and her own people's "word."[42] As anticipated, "her-story" runs vertically along the page and can only be read if one is prepared to look at the page from another angle, both figuratively and literally. The mother tongue then subverts the (page-bound) western tradition: the poem

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Significantly, her concluding remarks in the afterword to *She Tries Her Tongue*, situate Philip

reinforces the idea that upper and lower worlds are reunited in cyclical regeneration. To quote Ovid once again: "All things are alter'd, nothing is destroyed." It is noteworthy, moreover, that the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," source of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, foregrounds her-story like Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue*: as Helen Foley reminds us, the text is "framed by the separation and reunion of mother and daughter" and at the centre of the Homeric narrative one finds "the female experience of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, as well as the disguised Demeter's interactions with the mortal women of Eleusis [where the goddess dwells for a while during her search for her daughter]."[55] The "Hymn to Demeter," besides, ends with Demeter visiting the kings of Eleusis to reveal to them "the conduct of her rites" and to teach "her Mysteries to all of them, / holy rites that are not to be transgressed, nor pried into, / nor divulged"[56] thus founding the Eleusinian Mysteries, the most important of the Greek mystery cults. The exact rites are still unknown (the rituals were a secret known only to the initiates) but there is consensus among the scholars that they were associated with fertility and the sowing of grain. Demeter's emblem, in fact, is an ear of wheat and many marble reliefs at the Eleusis sanctuary as well as most of the painted vases representing the mysteries have one or more sheaves of corn as a recurrent decoration.[57] The Eleusinian Mysteries, besides, accepted "initiates of both sexes" and in other cults of Demeter such as the Thesmophoria, "women played

unearth another fascinating "involuntary" association, one that truly creolises the chasm that divides cultures and throws a bridge between the two heritages Philip is laying claim to in *She Tries Her Tongue*. Many ancient and contemporary scholars argue that the Eleusinian cult and the Thesmophoria are of Egyptian (that is African) origin. In *Aeschylus and Athens*, for example, G. Thomson suggests that the Thesmophoria came from Egypt and Cashford and Baring reinforce this point quoting Herodotus as a source.[59] Cashford and Baring declare that "elements of the Mystery cult at Eleusis originated from Egypt as did much of Greek philosophy" and they also refer to Plutarch and Herodotus who agree in linking the Eleusinian Mysteries with solemn Egyptian assemblies in honour of Isis.[60] Cashford and Baring also draw interesting parallels between Persephone and Osiris "whose prostrate body sprouted shoots of wheat" and who "was actually identified with the grain."[61] In their notes, Cashford and Baring acknowledge the influence of the still controversial *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* where Martin Bernal argues that the development of Greek civilisation was heavily influenced by Afroasiatic civilisations and asserts that this knowledge had been deliberately obscured on racist grounds.[62] It cannot be the purpose of this article to enter into this debate but, if we believe Bernal and the widespread ancient testimony maintaining that Greek Mysteries had come from Egypt, then Nourbese Philip's search for a mother tongue and mother culture actually comes full circle encompassing both her European and her African heritage. The "voluntary" but especially the "involuntary" associations established by *She Tries Her Tongue* throw bridges across different cultures creolising the chasms that separate them, thus revealing the existence of those "connections and linkages" that Philip set off to re-member at the beginning of her quest. "When the smallest cell remembers" (or cares to re-member), the extraordinary potential that lies within what Harris calls "a storage of creative possibility" can therefore be unleashed with intriguing results.

[1] Marlene Nourbese Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (London: The Women's Press, 1993), 70. Subsequent references are given as "Philip."
[2] Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau, eds., *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida/Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: The Press University of the West Indies, 1998) 9.
[3] Wilson Harris, "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" in A. J. M. Bundy, ed., *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination: Selected Essays of Wilson Harris* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 239. Also published in *Caribbean Creolization*, 26.
[4] Harris, "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?" 238. In *Caribbean Creolization*, 25.
[5] Ibid., 241. In *Caribbean Creolization*, 28.
[6] Ibid., 239. In *Caribbean Creolization*, 25-26.
[7] Ibid., 238. In *Caribbean Creolization*, 25.
[8] Marlene Nourbese Philip, personal communication, February 3, 1999.
[9] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, John Dryden trans. (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), 32.
[10] "Might I …like Philomela …sing / continue / over / into / …pure utterance," 72.
[11] According to Ovid, Philomela "gazed steadfastly at the ground, and her gestures conveyed what her voice could not." Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Mary M. Innes trans. (London : Penguin, 1955), 151. The quotations in English from Book V of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* all come from the above translation (125-133).
[12] Philip, 2.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 3.
[15] Ibid., 4.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 5.
[18] Ibid., 6.
[19] Ibid., 6.
[20] Ibid., 9.
[21] Ibid., 10.
[22] "Alter/native:" for this pun I am indebted to Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Caliban's Guarden" (*Wasafiri* 16, 1992), 2-6 (4).
[23] Philip, 41.
[24] Ibid., 71.
[25] See James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Hans W. Gabler (London: Penguin, 1986), 28. Actually Joyce's term is "nightmare" not "dream."
[26] Marlene Nourbese Philip, "In Matter of Memory," in Joan Anim-Addo, ed., *Centre of Remembrance: Memory and Caribbean Women's Literature* (London: Mango Publishing, 2002), 3.
[27] Philip, 31.
[28] Ibid., 30, 32.
[29] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series XVII, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton U.P., 1968), 13.
[30] Philip, 78.
[31] Ibid., 78.
[32] Antonio Benítez-Rojo, "Three Words toward Creolization," in Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau, eds., *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Langu8) Literature, and Identity*, 5568(.
[33] Philip, 78. Ovid's work may be of special interest to Philip because it consists of *epyllia* or miniature epics, and the epic scope that the reference to Ovid brings in is certainly very adequate for Philip whose poetry, as we

[34] Philip, 78.
[35] Ibid., 80.
[36] Ibid., 86.
[37] Ibid., 87.
[38] Ibid., 88.
[39] Ibid., 88-89.
[40] Ibid., 30, 32.
[41] Sir Laurens Van Der Post, Foreword to Anne Baring and Jules Crashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Penguin, 1993), ix.
[42] Philip, 91.
[43] Benítez-Rojo, 59.
[44] Benítez-Rojo, 55.
[45] Balutansky and Sourieau, 9.
[46] Philip, 90.
[47] Ibid., 89.
[48] Ibid., 7.
[49] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, John Dryden trans., 3.
[50] Helen Foley, ed., *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1994), 18.
[51] Baring and Cashford, 364.
[52] Ibid., 368.
[53] Ibid., 369.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Foley, ed., 126 xii.
[56] Ibid., 26.
[57] See the illustrations in Baring and Cashford, 364-390.
[58] Foley ed., xii, 72
[59] G. Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens* (New York, 1972), 119-23 qtd in Foley, 103; Baring and Cashford, 374.
[60] Baring and Cashford, 372; Herodotus, *Histories* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996), 141.
[61] Baring and Chasford, 389.
[62] For a full account of the controversy regarding the African origins of the Eleusinian Mysteries (and of Classical civilisation in general) see Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, (London: Vintage, 1987) vol. I, "Introduction", 69-70 and vol. III chapter VI, *passim*, and *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to his Critics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 386-389.