

intervention. In the twentieth century it is best known as an extreme element of American culture, which often flirted with the Republican Party. Both English and American entities still exist but the word is also used for sexual radicals.

I write this soon after the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who news reports often typify as a “radical libertarian.” His latest film released was on Islamic oppression of women but his last film completed was on the gay liberationist and anti-immigration politician, Pim Fortuyn. That liberation and “anti-immigration” should be so linked must seem strange. Perhaps the possibilities of liberation as we have known it in the twentieth century are gone. The postcolonial liberation struggles have resulted in Zimbabwe, Cuba, Vietnam, Turkmenistan, none of which is exactly the poster child for freedom. Women’s liberation leaves women still enslaved by childcare. Black liberation leaves African-Americans as relatively poor as they were forty years ago. Gay liberation seems to have worked at some levels but a high percentage of those who have worked for “gay lib” now oppose the gay marriage that the rest of gay—and straight—society sees as the *sine qua non* of gay liberation. Liberation might be not a hope but an antique. For some, van Gogh’s libertarianism is an alternative. For the rest of us the best response to Fortune’s wheel is perhaps “muddling through.”

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Literature

Who may dare improve upon Raymond Williams’s dexterous mapping, in *Keywords* (1976), of the socio-political morphings, through centuries, of the term literature and its connotations? Not me, certainly, though I feel compelled by Williams’s example(s) to attempt a provisional update/addendum.

Williams’s reading of literature observes that the term began to be applied in the 1770s, in Germany, to denote the *oeuvres* of nations and their author-citizens (185). Post-modernism and deconstructive critiques evacuate concepts of “nation” and “citizenship” and “author(ity).” In addition, electronics-based, corporate capitalism, or “globalization,” ensures that countries and nation-states (excepting the militarist United States and

Russia, Islamist Iran, revolutionary Cuba, and proto-superpower China) cannot exercise any genuine sovereignty beyond the police coercion (suppression) of their worker-citizens. (Capital “flows” beyond borders, but labour “pools” within them.) For these reasons, along with the monitored migration of skilled workers, entrepreneurs, professionals, and intellectuals from ex-colonies to imperial metropolises, it is chic now to speak of “deterritorialized literatures” and “exilic writers.” The concept of a “national literature,” say, of Canada, or France, or Brazil, or Iraq (for that matter), must now be treated warily. However, countries continue, somehow, to exist (as anyone who pays taxes must concede), and degrees of “national” (multi)cultures, local practices, laws, languages, and governance structures (including armies) also persist. Moreover, while every “national literature” (perhaps none more so than that of Canada) boasts numerous writers born offshore, these writers also assume (depending on length of residency) aspects of the “host” or “adoptive” culture. For example, Austin Clarke is a Barbadian—Bajan—writer by birth, but he is also now a “Canadian” one, as any comparison of his work with those of intra-Caribbean authors will reveal. In sum, the idea of a *national literature* is less stable now than it seemed to be in 1976, but it can hardly be accounted a fiction.

Another major shift in our conception of literature has been its expansion to the arts of *orature*—or “oral literature.” Coined in 1983 by three Nigerian critics—Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechuckwu Madubuike—*orature* denotes the form of literature most amenable to implementation by socio-politically marginalized, racial and religious minorities, and post-colonial peoples, many of whom may never “get into print,” but almost all of whom readily “come to voice.” Thus, “Dub” poets, Spoken Word poets, Hip-Hop rhymesters, Calypsonians, singer-songwriters (including the 2004 Nobel Prize for *Literature* nominee Bob Dylan), “storytellers” (hear Lousie—Miss Lou—Bennett of Jamaica), folklore presenters, orators (Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Fidel Castro, etc.), and even stand-up comics, may now be considered creators of literature, especially once their recorded, performance texts are published. Other oral-derived forms that can become literature include slave narratives, sermons, recipes, talk show transcripts, trial testimony (see *Poetry Under Oath: From the Testimony of William Jefferson Clinton & Monica S. Lewinsky* [1998]), and the argot of “cool” communities. Ironically, the eruption of *orature* within the precincts and canons of literature returns the latter term to its pre-Romantic sensibility. Williams points out that the vocal-rhetorical side of literature was once expressed by *poetry*, defined in 1856 as being applicable to either “*speaking* or *wrtyng Poetically*” (186–7, my italics). Williams also states, “*Poetry* had

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been the high skills of writing and speaking in the special context of high imagination..." (187). What a terrific debt we owe to the African-American recording artists, Sugarhill Gang, and their 1979 hit, *Rapper's Delight*, for initiating a global revival of interest in witty, pungent, acerbic, political, and truth-telling rhyme.

Because *orature* eases the entrée of the formerly unheard-of into literature, we have witnessed, in the past three decades, a great, heartening expansion of its (potential) genres. Partly or fully audio forms—songs, radio plays, and screenplays—may now, particularly if printed, be classed as literature (see Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* [1994]). Furthermore, though a graphic form, the comic book, if manifesting an "artistic" combination of plot, text, and drawings/paintings, becomes a "graphic novel" and is scanned and taught as literature (see Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* [2004]). Our pedagogy now presumes that instruction in literature includes screening films and spinning audio recordings, or assigning comic books or anthologies of actual graffiti as mandatory "reading." Moreover, the influence of cultural studies means that *any* "material"—newspapers, magazines, letters, posters, comic strips, films, songs, histories, pop-star bios, catalogues, advertising, and, for that matter, literary criticism itself, may be suitable for the analysis that literature invites.

Web logs or "blogs" constitute another vital and half-graphic addition to the category of literature, as do other forms of electronic communication, such as text messaging via cellphones and, of course, e-mail (although these latter forms are subject to the frequently rapid deterioration of quality and *sense* that is visited upon slang—and journalism). Electronic "writing" seems best for "instant" opinion-sharing as opposed to the composition of essays of searching, intellectual probity, or, for that matter, of simple "fact." The Internet is a fiesta of ephemera and paranoia, of chatter and blather, but also, here and there, of intricate, sculpted eloquence and enduring beauty.

That literature now encloses audio-visual and electronic "texts" is, I wager, established. We have witnessed the triumph of Marshall McLuhan's ideas regarding mass communication and pop culture over those of Northrop Frye regarding archetypes and myths. Most importantly, the access of suppressed communities to new means of expression, thus sidelining print-based hierarchies, has multiculturalized (if not democratized) literature. Not only may literature be broadcast (as opposed to "read"), so is it open now to unprecedented degrees of hybridity, collage, *bricolage*, and polyphony. In English-Canadian poetry, then, African-American blues, Hebrew proverbs, Japanese haiku, First Nations' chants, Persian ghazals,

and Italian sonnets, along with prose passages, dialogic script, postcard photocopies, and e-mail excerpts may all be employed within a single text (with, perhaps, an accompanying CD-ROM or DVD).

At the conclusion of his entry on literature, Williams recognizes that *literacy* and *illiteracy* had become, by 1976, “key social concepts” (188). In the (over-)developed nations, these terms are now often prefaced by *computer*, suggesting that “effective” literacy demands the ability to function comfortably with this technology. Yet, less-developed nations often enjoy high rates of “actual” (reading / writing) literacy. I speculate that the looming economic ascension of China and India may see a literary Renaissance of no mean consequence within these new commercial “empires,” while the West satisfies itself with the resonant joys of electronic beeps and squiggles.

Williams’s discussion of *literature* ends with an alphabetical guide to other key words of related interest: *aesthetic*, *art*, *creative*, *fiction*, *image*, *myth*, *nationalist*, and *novel*. I would maintain his list—except for *myth*, *nationalist*, and *novel*—in 2005–06, but would also add *gender*, *globalization*, *hybridity*, *ideology*, *orality*, “*race*,” *religion*, *sexual orientation*, *technology*, and *translation*. Ultimately, the only legitimate definition of *literature* now is, anything a thoughtful community deems worth reading, extensively and intensively.

Language

1

[from *Event*]

for Wendy “Motion” Braithwaite

I hate this language that *Hate* dictates to me.
It gusts the tang and bray of a savage civilization—
Violent words violently arrived at, violently loved.

Balderdash and *braggadocio*: what English is—
Squabbling cabals in Bibles and newspapers—
A tongue that cannibalizes all other tongues.

Speculate on the words still bottled blackly,
In placid ink—fear what may leap from that innocence:
Sound forgeries of lust in lovers’ faithless songs.

2

[from *Vallum*]

This homely poem's a queer nigger 'rig,
A botch of art in slovenly English,
Bad grammar, bad everything;
It cannot perform ethically.
It even fucks up Black English badly:
The metre harries, but the words refuse to fit.

3

[from *Vallum*]

That bang, blackening, of English syllables
In my black-black mouth hurts,
Them syllables hurt,
So I can only vomit up speech—
Half-digested English—
Soiling it with acidic Negro stomach juices.
My voice ain't *classique!*

4

[from *Vallum*]

Grammar is a pollution, some poison in my lungs,
So what emerges from my mouth—spit, phlegm—
Looks tubercular.

My lopsided tongue spoils Her Majesty's English.
The jawbreaker words wad my mouth with blood,
Even busted teeth.

5 **Autobiography**

[from *Vallum*]

All my English-Canadian poetry
Be African-American rhetoric.

6 **Of Black English, or Pig Iron Latin**

[from *Geist*]

for Kaie Kellough

My brain were brass, fucked, alloyed,
By alliteration. It were dazzlingly dull

For a nigger, niggling with English,
Haggling o'er some moping poem,
Cut from a second-hand grammar,
Rhyming Oxonian et Negronian.

Zounds! My lyrics was tin-plate,
Not steel sheet, some gift of gabble,
Une blague, maybe glib bilge.

Oui? What was needed were, was—
After some hectic loss of respect—
Higher quality coal—or iron—or gold....

(A tinny Shakespeare, I would like, I'd like,
Black English to sound more like tempered steel.)

7 Spoken Word

[from *Lichen*]

(à la manière de Oni Joseph)

My imperfect pitch is pitch,
mingling woodpile (niggerish)

and woodwind (ebony)?
Sheeeit, motherfucker, all you do's

invent stray, pungent lyrics,
callous as *jacquerie*, violent

as troubled presidents,
to get boisterousness into poetry,

to collide words together.
Go, scratch poems in frost,

daub poems in sweat.
Shakespeare be a broke-ass tongue,

mixing pig's breath of sulphur
with horse's breath of sugar,

some unpronounceable English trash—
rancid, acidic, rash: Balderdash!

Topaz, patois poets—
why use somebody else's language

badly,

baldly?

Rather, labour
over Braille.

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Organicism

Since the demise of the New Criticism, the word “organic” has fallen into disrepute on both aesthetic and political grounds. Increasingly removed, as a dead metaphor, from its context in the life sciences, it has come to signify a whole greater than the sum of its parts which is totalitarian with respect to these subaltern parts, as well as a self-developing entity whose unfolding through a kind of entelechy confers a certain inevitability on the manner of its growth. Leavis’s valorization of organic communities (cited by Williams), the St.Simonians’ distinction between organic epochs (or periods of synthesis which are ideologically coherent) and critical epochs (which are more chaotic but merely transitional), Hegel’s exaltation of the organic state over an “atomistic” civil society, and Coleridge’s valorization of form as indwelling over shape as superinduced provide a genealogy for a concept whose conservative social consequences become entrenched in the mid-nineteenth century, but whose initial aesthetic elaboration can be traced to the infamous “Romantic ideology” (as McGann terms it). R. H. Fogle has described the American version of this ideology, in which an organicism imported by transcendentalism from (a sanitised version of) Romanticism and German Idealism valorizes a concept of “growth” that “discards the old and leaves its shell behind,” thus underwriting a myth of the United States as “a growing and potentially perfect democracy.” This myth reaches its summit in Whitman’s vision of America as the “archetypal organic body” of society (92–3). Fogle’s account is particularly interesting because of his own New Critical affiliations. For it is in the American New Criticism that the theory of organic form as the reconciliation of opposites, and the notion of a whole or structure as “parts arranged in their proper order,” receive their definitive modern restatement. This organic “form,” it should be noted, conveniently forgets organic “process,” in a supplementation of the organic with structural metaphors (like the well-wrought urn) that is the reverse of Kant’s troubled supplementation of the metaphor of the building with that of the body in his notion of “architectonic” in the first Critique.