Execution Poems  
by George Elliott Clarke  

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In this elegantly produced re-issue, Gaspereau Press has demonstrated its devotion to excellence. The slender black fly-leaf volume, subtitled “The Black Arcadian Tragedy of ‘George and Rue,’” evokes an older but not necessarily more misguided world: as editor Andrew Steeves points out in the preface, George Elliott Clarke does not set out simply to raise our anger and indignation about the historic atrocities committed against Blacks but, instead, to intentionally “blur the line between perpetrator and victim” in order to cast in our minds a more convincing portrayal of the situation to which we may relate. Not only do we hear about the subjugation of Blacks through the slave trade as a background for the tragedy of George and Rue; at the culmination of the poems we also hear the view of the prosecutor on the heinous nature of the two murders this pair committed and from an “Anonamus” citizen whose education is suggested by the way he spells this moniker.

Throughout, Clarke reveals his fine ear through his use of beat and the synchronized subsidiary counterpoint of jazz rhythms. In “Ballad of a Hanged Man,” the rhyme catches the beat and the internal rhyme the subsidiary underbeat.

I had the intention to ruck some money.  
In my own heart, I had that, to rape money,  
because I was fucked, in my own heart.  
I took scared, shaking inside of me.

I knows Fredericton reporters can prove  
zoot-suit vines style not my viciousness.  
I was shaking all that evening, my mind,  
shaking. But my child was hungered. (13)
In the next stanza, the semi-illiterate “Geo” asks the reader with moving musicality if he or she has ever gone without eating for two days and beseeches him or her to understand. Also, the contributing factor of liquor is mentioned in the lines: “homemade brew, dug up fresh, tastes like/ molasses. We had some. Some good.” Clarke captures the black speaking rhythms with a terse simplicity and an authentic ring.

In “Childhood I,” the details leading up to Rue’s murder of his father are featured in poetry as ugly in its visceral detail as it is beautiful as a tapestry of words. Geo remarks, “Pops smashed Ma like she was Joe Louis” and with “a razor to her throat” “struck her down,/ pelted soft flesh with fists and bricks.” In response, in these contrapuntal verses, Rue describes his own crime:

I swung a two-by-four and bust Pop’s face open.
Kicked the iron bone that was his skull:
Bleeding was so bad I knelt by the stove like I was praying.
I wanted to be God. I wanted him dead. (16)

A few deft lines paint a clear picture of the action, and sacred and profane images play against and intensify each other. Rue kneeling by the stove as if he is “praying” carries the suggestion of regret modified by irony and a new truth in the lines “I wanted to be God.” and “I wanted him dead.” No real regrets after what has preceded his crime.

The miscellaneous list of crimes that Rue witnessed as a boy carries a rap rhythm in the following lines from “Childhood II” (17): “A boy’s right arm stuck to a desk with scissors; a father knifed in the gut / while shaking hands with a buddy; two Christians splashed with gasoline / and set ablaze in a church,” the last item suggesting that crime exists on both sides of society. The mixing of the base and the elevated comes across in the ironical allusion to The Tempest: “Ain’t we such stuff as humus is made of?” (21)

Clarke’s love of language, its interweaving of association and sound, is evident in “Love Wars.” With a network of internal and end rhyme (slant, sight and full rhyme), using one repeated rhyme at the end and within lines creates a bawdy, rollicking rhythm: “We would stink of dying horse and worse – /Sometimes of whores, and get off a horse/ And go into whores, and come out the worse/ Than when we’d gone in: our throats gone hoarse (26).” Derrida suggests that every word plants its association in our mind to give rise to meaning and to modify existing meaning, and so even a word or image out of context subconsciously retains its full range of application and association. The punning and wordplay recommence in the next stanza with
such soundalikes as “hors service” and “Whores’ Service,” or the riff “My good sexistentialism read as a telegram” (26), or the following lines that read like a blues song: “I ain’t got a dollar, but I ain’t got no dolour. / Drench me down with rum and Coca Cola” (28).

What is most striking about *Execution Poems* and what makes them so dynamic a read is Clarke’s decision to present the story from opposite points of view, including George’s and Rue’s firsthand accounts as well as the Prosecutor’s words and those of an “anomamus” citizen. According to the not evil but hidebound view of the prosecutor, George and Rue are simply base men who have committed a heinous double crime: “Your faces are ochre;/ your thoughts mediocre.” (39)

“Unanimously/ pusillanimous,” the brothers have “abolished a father” and “annihilated a husband” so that the “majuscule” “H” of their name should be associated with the hanging post to which they have been sentenced.

Similarly, in the letter to Viscount Alexander of Tunis, governor-general of Canada, “Anomamus” writes with truth and fiction as rumour and slander, that the brothers needed “argent” to pay their wife’s doctor bill but instead chose to “splash” the money on “women” and “rum” and “eatables” (42). “Anomamus” goes on to write that

... I have
been told that George Hamilton was thrown out the Army
with a dishonorably discharge he have a black record as a
thief and will not work his brother have done a turk
in dorchuster fore robbery and assault he claims he have turned a
Chrisschun now this I do not beleave... (43)

And so the semi-literate speaker reveals his secondhand knowledge and regurgitated opinions based on hearsay.

The last pages of *Execution Poems* include snapshots of the double hangings, obituaries and a poem written by “S Hamilton,” perhaps Geo’s wife or mother, and absurdf parallel of articles entitled “criminal error” and “literary error” (in the latter, an editor’s apology for having credited W.B. Yeats for the book *Cane*, written by the African-American writer Jean Toomer). For such a slender collection, there is a bundle of information on this historic pair of criminals, told with truth and irony and a sheer love of words and the music they make.
Gillian Harding-Russell lives, reviews, edits, teaches and writes in Regina. Her latest collection of poetry is *I forgot to tell you* (Thistledown Press, 2007).

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