

Clarke, George Elliott; Olos, Ana; Bud, Crina

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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2014, vol. 9, iss. [1], pp. 5-15

ISBN 978-80-210-7732-4

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/134376>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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A Long-Distance Talk with George Elliott Clarke Interviewed by Ana Olos and Crina Bud

Un appel téléphonique avec George Elliott Clarke
Ana Olos et Crina Bud

AO&CB We were honoured to have you as our keynote speaker at the 5th International Unconventional Conference of Young Canadianists, in Baia Mare, Romania. You are a professor at the University of Toronto, presently visiting professor at Harvard, and Toronto's Poet Laureate (2012-15), member of the Canadian Writers' Union, winner of important literary prizes and awards (among them the Canadian Governor General's Award for your Execution Poems), appreciated by critics, with MA and PhD theses addressing your work, and still you agreed to travel thousands of miles to be here with us just for a day. What made you accept our invitation?

GEC I must be very brief – unfortunately and dismally brief, for I am leaving today for Stockholm, Sweden, and will return just before the deadline for the delivery of my responses. Please do forgive my brevity. I assure you that it is necessary. That said, I accepted the invitation to return to Romania because I am thankful for the interest that Romanians have shown in my poetry: Flavia Cosma translated my poetry into a Romanian book; Ioan Tepelea published it; *Poesis* magazine awarded me a prize; Diana Manole and (you) Ana Olos have again prepared and published translations just this past year; and, you, Ana, have published several essays on my works. So, the least I could do was reciprocate by showing you my appreciation for the steady, Romanian consideration of my poetry and scholarship. And I like Zuica!

AO&CB In March 2007, when you came to launch a selection of your poems the Romanian-Canadian Flavia Cosma had translated, you lectured to our students about the faces of Canadian democracy. This time around, your topic was “The Originality of African-Canadian Thought.” Can you comment on the importance of social discourse, especially in the context of a Canadian Studies conference?

GEC Given their concern for the various traumas and challenges of transatlantic black history as well as their sometimes Romantic adoration of (Diasporic) African



styles and cultures, African-Canadian writers tend to accent history, sociology, political philosophy, psychology, economics, theology, and other humanist and social-science disciplines. Indeed, it is one of the most attractive and exciting facts about African-Canadian literature: To read it is to be plunged into negotiating Christianity, Islam, Marx, Sade, Rousseau, Sappho, Montesquieu, Fanon, Locke, De Beauvoir, Plato, and notions of aesthetics – primitivism, for instance, and modernism. You get Freud mashed up with Malcolm X. In other words, a social discourse is unavoidable in considering African-Canadian writers and texts.

AO&CB As co-recipient of the William P. Hubbard Award for Race Relations from the city of Toronto (2008) you also contributed to re-defining the concept of culture. Would you clarify your standpoint for our readers?

GEC My answer here echoes my previous answer: Aesthetics – poetics – is inseparable from the historical and the socio-political. A black intellectual (and all writers are intellectuals) must respond to society as much as he or she answers to the impulses of the creative imagination.

AO&CB T.S. Eliot and many others have commented on poets having multiple voices. Would you tell us how many voices do you use as a writer and which of these voices represents you best?

GEC Maybe all writers are polyphonous? Certainly, most black writers must be. We tend to inherit at least two “voices”: the Eurocentric styles of the classroom and the Academy; the down-to-earth – salty, frank, gutsy, rootsy, playful, punning, consonantal, preaching – manner of the street or the “ghetto” or the “hood” or the veldt or Black Belt rurality.... I know that I have both: An Anglo-learned voice and an Afro-ludic voice. I’m part-prof and part-preacher and – I hope – all poet!

AO&CB In your case, is there a difference between the person who writes in silence and the one who appears on the rostrum?

GEC There does not need to be a difference between the writer writing and the writer speaking. However, the public-performative writer is likely trying to move the audience directly to think a certain way or move in a certain direction; perhaps, then, the writing is pronouncedly rhetorical, though not, in any way, “false.” The writer who is read silently may be just as rhetorical, so to speak (pun intended), as the public speaker, but must aim for a long-distance effect as opposed to a reaction that is up-close and personal.



AO&CB In a certain context you defined yourself as a “warrior poet.” What is the driving force behind this stance? Which are your “war measures” and how far would you go in this “war”?

GEC As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the African-American literary critic, has pointed out, the black writer is locked – even “trapped” – into a discourse with all the white writers who precede us, whether we like it or not, and whether or not the white writers view black people positively or not. The result is that one must be combative in sallying forth against stereotype or in asserting one’s own dignity. We are all Caliban tilting against Prospero – or Aaron against Saturninus – and we mean to “win” – finally. My models are warrior-intellectuals like Mao, Pound, Pierre Elliott Trudeau. How far would I go? As Trudeau said (in)famously during Canada’s 1970 October Crisis, when he ordered soldiers onto the streets, “Just watch me!” (Smile.)

AO&CB The title of a volume of poems published after J.F. Kennedy’s assassination is *Poetry and Power*. Do you think poetry can be a weapon strong enough in the contemporary world? Is poetry still “dangerous” for those in power?

GEC Poetry is dangerous when it projects scriptural forms of truth in metaphors that are directly graspable. When the former Czechoslovakia, attempting to liberalize Soviet Communism in the “Prague Spring” of 1968, adopted the slogan, “Socialism with a human face,” it was a potent, poetic formulation of what they wanted to achieve, and it eventually summoned Soviet tanks to stop – temporarily – the pacific, humanitarian revolt. Similarly, when the hijacker-terrorists of anti-American “jihad” crashed their hostage-laden aircraft into various U.S. targets on September 11, 2001, people reached automatically for Auden’s “September 1, 1939” – a love poem written at the dawn of World War II: they knew that they (we) were entering into another era of world-wide war, based on sneak attacks (terrorism) as well as state-sponsored invasion (the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali, etc.). Poetry remains relevant – always – because it is “truth” expressed passionately, pithily, and memorably.

AO&CB Poets and artists had no place in Plato’s Republic. In totalitarian societies, if they had not been driven out or chose a voluntary exile, they had to choose between either being used to serve the dominant ideology, or protect themselves with the shield of aesthetic evasion, learn “double talk.” What do you think about the poet’s social responsibility?

GEC I’m a liberal in art: the poet/artist must be free to pursue his or her notion of truth, no matter how imaginary or illusory it may be. Yet the artist also lives in a specific society, with its internal dynamics and contradictions, and he or she may feel drawn to comment on or address those problematics. The crucial point is that



he or she does so honestly – not as a result of compulsion. Picasso was a painter of personal, somewhat “macho” sexuality; but he was also a Spaniard, hating the Fascist onslaught against Spanish democracy in the Civil War, and out of that sense of “social responsibility,” he gave us *Guernica*. I’d like to think that a large-minded, big-hearted artist/poet accepts the inspiration of both the personal and the political.

AO&CB Following Dionne Brand (who had immigrated from Trinidad and Tobago), you are Toronto’s fourth Poet Laureate. For those of us who lived under totalitarian regimes, this might sound somehow suspect. Does the acceptance of this honour cover a peaceful compromise with the official cultural policy?

GEC The official positions of “Poet Laureate” or “Artist-in-Residence” are essentially intellectual ombudsperson offices. In other words, ideally, the occupants of such positions are permitted to be “Wise Fools” – to speak artistic or poetic Truth back to “Officialdom.” The Poet Laureate is King Lear’s Fool; that is to say, he or she is wiser than Lear and should say, invent, poems that reveal the realities of life and statecraft that the King cannot afford to hear from anyone else. But he or she is also a representative of the creativity of the people. Ideally, the Poet Laureate is a philosopher of the heart, bringing its fertile sensibilities into the statistic-cacti’d desert that is the political realm.

AO&CB You are proud of being a seventh generation Canadian, born in Nova Scotia. Your first volume of poetry *Salt Water Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (1983), as the title suggests, was a synthesis of the religious and profane voices coming from the very heart of your “Africadia” (Africa+Acadia), with rhythms of blues, gospel, soul, jazz and insertions of the black community’s vernacular. How much did the local folklore and black music in general influence your poetry?

GEC *Saltwater Spirituals* was my first book, and I was more enthralled by T.S. Eliot and John Milton than I was by folklore or black music. I aimed consciously to overthrow Eliot and Milton and bring in blues and spirituals – conscientiously – in my second book, *Whylah Falls* (1990). When *Saltwater Spirituals* appeared I was still an undergraduate, willing to parade my absorption of the British canon. *Whylah Falls* came about after I was submerged deep in Africadian community again.

AO&CB *Whylah Falls* (1990) marks another stage in your creation on the background of the history of your native province. This time, on the canvas of a dramatic narrative about love and its pain, you combine varieties of tones, verse and prose species, with the infringement of literary barriers. The book was illustrated with photographs from family archives to elicit a synergistic reaction on the part of the reader. Moreover, in 1999,



Whylah Falls was published in the form of a play. This happens with other books as well. *Execution Poems. The Black Acadian Tragedy of George and Rue* (2001), a condemnation of racism in Canada, becomes a novel – *George and Rue* – in 2005. *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), a play about the (officially) unrecognized slavery in Canada is rewritten as an opera libretto. Is this process of hybridization just because the “rules” have become obsolete, or have you other reasons to experiment with the forms of your matter?

GEC I’m running out of time, so your long, rich question must receive a paltry response: the hybridization has really been accidental. *Whylah Falls*, *Beatrice Chancy*, and the story about my killer cousins, George and Rufus Hamilton, took different forms generally because other people wanted them in those ways: a theatre company wanted to stage *Whylah Falls*; a composer wanted an opera libretto (*Beatrice Chancy*), and a publisher wanted poems that I’d originally intended for the novel (*George & Rue*).

AO&CB When, at forty, you published the tenth anniversary volume of *Whylah Falls*, your introductory “ars poetica” invoked many names of literary theorists. Was it the voice of the professor who wanted to show his students that in order to break the rules you have first to know and master them?

GEC That essay was first written in 1991 – the first year of my doctoral candidacy at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. I was exhibiting my very own “Anxiety of Influence”!

AO&CB You are the great nephew of the famous Canadian black concert singer Portia White. So there is no surprise you have written three opera libretti. The above mentioned *Beatrice Chancy* was followed by *Québécoisité*, an illustration of multiculturalism, and *Trudeau*, about the artisan of the policy of multiculturalism, whom you present as a traveller on the global stage of politics, one able to exchange opinions with the young Kennedy (not yet President), Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, and Nelson Mandela. The staging of these libretti has put you in the position of collaborating with composers, stage director, singers etc. What did the poet gain and what did he lose during this experience? Did the impulse of publishing / republishing the libretti as poetic dramas come from a certain frustration of the writer and the intention to make the reader actually perceive all the subtle and various cultural references that only your verse and its echoes could suggest?

GEC Your formidable question already inscribes the response: yes! Feeling frustrated at having to omit so many ludic elements from the libretti, I had to flesh out the ‘play’ versions. But *Beatrice Chancy* the play is most radically distinct from *Beatrice Chancy* the opera. My other libretti and ‘play’ versions run closer in length and style and characters.



AO&CB When speaking of yourself as a “tyro poet,” you mentioned a “suspect septet” of personalities who had influenced you: avant-garde reactionary Ezra Pound, dictator-philosopher Mao Zedong, free-speech poet Irving Layton, jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, pop bard Bob Dylan, orator Malcolm X, and the Right Honourable Pierre Elliott Trudeau. How does the mature writer see them, now?

GEC They are still guiding lights! However, I do hold reservations about them all, but especially Mao and Pound. Mao was a bloody, maniacal dictator and Pound’s anti-Semitism and racism mar his work indelibly. But I like the image of the intellectual/artist in combat – though I prefer humanitarian pacifism to any actual shooting and bombing and stabbing or poisoning....

AO&CB One of your articles refers to a subject very much discussed by Romanian and other Central European intellectuals: the treason of intellectuals. What exactly made you write about such a treason?

GEC Julien Benda, the French Jewish intellectual and writer, published, in 1927, a scathing denunciation of European intellectuals enraptured with Mussolini in particular and with fascism in general: he saw (rightly) the trumpeting of ethnic nationalism as a denial of intellectual freedom. Pierre Elliott Trudeau dusted off Benda and gave his book a French Canadian/Quebécois ‘twist’ by denouncing Québécois nationalists as, again, anti-intellectual heathens, more-or-less. I took up these predecessors’ arguments in trying to think through the attractions of Pan-Africanism and Black nationalism for African-Canadian intellectuals. I wanted us to realize that it’s difficult to follow Malcolm X when your Head of State is Elizabeth II!

AO&CB Your academic book entitled *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* was published in the same year (2002) as Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdes, also professors at the University of Toronto, published a collection of standpoints referring to the theoretical aspects of “rethinking literary history.” Could your book be viewed as a contribution to this discussion initiated by the International Association of Comparative Literature, or should it be set in a different context as intention and impact in and outside Canada?

GEC I don’t think there’s a conscious connection. But it’s impossible to be at the University of Toronto and NOT be influenced by Linda Hutcheon!

AO&CB There are discussions about the possible similitudes between post-colonialism and post- communism. Paraphrasing Leonard Cohen’s poem title, could we compare mythologies?



GEC Yes, the two stances may be compared: some post-colonialism was (democratic) socialist in orientation; some post-communism was anti-Soviet-colonialism in inspiration. However, the two stances differ in that post-colonialism was anti-Western in conception (see Fanon), while post-communism has been pro-Western (so Poland, for instance, decamped to Iraq as part of the “Coalition of the Willing”). Even so, the two intellectual positions do share a similar analysis in terms of describing the persistence of corruption, while also finding themselves disarmed before the forces of “globalization.” Both post-colonialism and post-communism ask the exact same question: what is the provenance of the (nation) State in an era when “imperialism” is “economical,” liquid, fluid capital/ism, able to go anywhere and do anything, to enrich some (a few) and beggar (many) others, beyond national borders, with the pressing of a few electronic keyboard keys? No longer can armies “protect” nations against market forces. What do “national” independence and prosperity mean when international markets determine the value of your GDP and your national “cost-of-living” – and arm your military, train your police, and spy on your communications?

AO&CB You received a prize at the festival of the Romanian poetry magazine *Poesis* in 2006. Besides the volume *Poeme incendiare* (Cogito: Oradea, 2006), a number of your poems were published in translation also in other literary periodicals: *Luceafărul*, *Nord Literar*, *Viata românească*. Do you think – in comparison with your experience in other countries – that the Romanian readers and those present at your public readings here are more receptive?

GEC Yes! Heartily, I answer, “Yes!” I did have a book published in Italian last year, and I have enjoyed a good reception from Italian audiences. So, maybe my work appeals most to the spirit of the old Roman Empire!

AO&CB On the closing evening of the Baia Mare conference you performed a poetry reading on the stage of the Puppet Theatre – a performance that also included classical folk, jazz and the Iza group’s “aboriginal” music. During your reciting and marking the rhythms of your poems in a kind of dance, the musicians couldn’t help but accompany you. Did your collaborations with composer D. D. Jackson, who wrote the music for your jazz opera libretti, change the way you read your poems? Or was there just a spontaneous meeting of ancient rhythms?

GEC I learned, about 30 years ago, that poetry is also song. (It is a Black aesthetic?) How wonderful that the Romanian musicians and singers also have Soul! Demonstrably!



AO&CB Your opera libretti (later published as independent books) seem to become “all inclusive,” joining the sounds and words of high culture with echoes and suggestions of contemporary pop culture. In your Shavian stage directions, there are also references to films, fashion, TV series, cartoons, etc. Do you think your European readers could detect and respond to all these cultural citations, allusions, parodies?

GEC I should like to think so. Then again, in this age of Google, the only mysteries remaining to us are either theological or scientific!

AO&CB Entering your works, readers experience a Borgesian “garden of forking paths,” a garden with centrifugal effect, sending them out, projecting them on the information highway to look for the hypertext. Nevertheless, at the same time, they find a lot of “wrapping” stuff, which could be called perimeta-texts: epigraphs, introductions, pre- and postfaces, footnotes, bibliographies, various lists, and so on. Do you suffer the “anxiety of influence” syndrome or are there other reasons? What is your game? A kind of hide-and-seek with the readers?

GEC Jouissance! I like to think of the book as a version of the Bible: something for everyone, and all of it is (potentially) meaningful.

AO&CB Your latest book of poetry, *Illicit Sonnets*, reminds one of the eroticism of many of your earlier poems. But there is also a lot of versified violence in your books. Are these meant to challenge, undermine and subvert social prejudices? Isn't it dangerous from a moral standpoint – even if it's not your own voice and the poet speaks on behalf of a character – isn't it dangerous to put beautiful poetry in the mouth of a murderer or a rapist?

GEC Perhaps! But Shakespeare and Ovid and Dante do so! Maybe Sappho too? One follows these role-models!

AO&CB If one starts to enumerate the titles of your books of poetry, there is a series whose label-titles are colours: *Gold Indigoes* (2000), *Blue* (2001), *Black* (2006), *Red* (2011), and you say the following will be *Gold*. Does the colour in the title express the mood of the poems inside the book or is your intention different?

GEC As an intellectual “of colour,” I've come to appreciate – playfully – the metaphorical nuances of various tints. For instance, in English, “blue” can refer to both sorrow (blues) or repression (blue pencil) or lasciviousness (blue movie) or intellectuality (blue-stocking); similarly, “black” can refer to hurt (black eye), evil (black heart), profits (black ink), etc. I do like playing with the various moods and notions that the associations of a particular colour present. So, I like to call *Blue*, *Black*, and *Red* my “colouring books.” These “labels” do permit me to range all over concepts-like a kid with crayons!



AO&CB You have a wide knowledge and subtle understanding of the great poetry throughout centuries and from all over the world. Does your list include any Romanian poet?

GEC Ovid! Or should I say, “Ovid”?!! I do look forward to reading more Romanian poetry and poets. I did have the fine experience of meeting Nina Cassian – and reading alongside her – at the World Poetry Festival in Toronto, Canada, in 1993; and I’ve enjoyed reading my Romanian-Canadian friends, Flavia Cosma and Diana Malone. I’ve also read Herta Müller, of course. What strikes me – generally – about Romanian poetry is the fervent, florid imagination, always positing tales that could be fairy tales, except that they are intensely, painfully human.

AO&CB (bonus question – within hours of the above interview, Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize in Literature; hence the final, unplanned question): What were your expectations before the 2013 Nobel Prize winner was announced, and what were your feelings afterwards?

GEC I did not follow at all the media musings about potential 2013 recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature, but the international reputations of Atwood, Munro, and Ondaatje marked them all as considerable contenders. Given the role that this trio has played in raising the profile of (English) Canadian literature globally, it would make sense that, if the Nobel Committee were to recognize an explicit (!) Canadian for the Literature Prize (I’m excepting the native-born Canadian – but American-identified – Literature Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow), it would be one of this group. I could not be surprised that one would be so honoured. That said, it would seem to me that Atwood has crafted the most fully accomplished oeuvre, given her mastery of lyric poetry, prose fiction (short and long), non-fiction (essays, memoir, literary criticism), and an opera libretto. Not only that, but she has been the preeminent literary ‘face’ of English Canada since the 1960s – with charity, TV, magazine cover, and newspaper-guest appearances. Ondaatje’s achievements are also formidable and worthy of global admiration and award, and he is also accomplished in poetry and fiction and anthology editing (which Atwood has also undertaken). Too, he has been a public face of Canadian literature internationally, as well as domestically. I must stress my disadvantage in any discussion of the merits of Alice Munro, for I have little knowledge of her work, and what I did read was read decades ago. However, I can say that I have not been as impressed by her style as much as I have been wowed by Ondaatje’s and provoked by Atwood’s. Nor is her profile as commensurately larger-than-life as has been the case for her peers. I am aware that she has had dedicated (legions of) fans in both the U.S. and Canada. But I wonder if this is because she is essentially writing about small-town and bourgeois life – in the appealing manner of, say, Stephen Leacock, or even Jane Austen, though Munro’s subject matter is later 20th century and so commensurately



“bleaker” than is the case for the Red Tory humourist Leacock and the Neo-Platonist humourist Austen. On the American side, I would again set Munro in the context of John Updike, John Cheever, and other blandly comic wits explicating the foibles of middle-brow, middle-class households in bourgeois suburbs or rural hinterlands. Even so, Austen has more “bite,” and Leacock has more ideology. If I return to a comparison with Atwood, she, too, has more of a public presence – or sense of mission – re: environmentalism, feminism, anti-neoconservatism, and many of these themes inform her works. (Ondaatje tends to be stridently apolitical – except for issues of the autonomy of the artist, an experimentalist aesthetic, and generic freedom of speech.) I don’t mean to suggest that Munro MUST – or should have – engaged social “issues” – besides the personal traumas of disease and deaths of loved ones – not at all. But I’m trying to understand why her work could – should – appeal to those who prefer to think of tragedy as being a bus crash as opposed to the waging of war or the mass murder of Aboriginal women. Of course, the domestic tragedy is just as rich a ground for serious literature as is the narrative of the ‘cause celebre.’ I will presume – granted the Nobel Prize and hundreds of reviewers and thousands of bookbuyers’ opinions – that Munro has written at precisely this calibre about her subjects. One must say “Kudos.” However, I admit that I am happier – personally – with either gaudier prose (such as that of Ondaatje) or thornier prose (such as that of Atwood).

Yet, one other Canadian writer who could have – should have – earned Nobel consideration is Mavis Gallant. I have read her work – in bulk, and while I do term it occasionally racist and almost always classist, it is also always consistently interesting, if merely to make me want to argue with her precepts and depictions. Like Munro, Gallant does not propose a direct feminism. Hers is instead complicated by class dynamics and ethnic or religious conflict. But her short stories are more like Katherine Mansfield’s – exuding the splendour of irresolvable, psychological conflict: not pleasant stuff. Yet, she, like Munro, has found a ready American audience, perhaps among the Manhattanites with summer digs in Paris or Venice or Nova Scotia (for that matter). Even so, I do think that Gallant is deeper – if also more problematic (check out her protagonists’ uses of race and ethnic stereotypes) – but she is also, perhaps fatally (in terms of her Nobel chances), much less representative of stay-at-home Canadianness (provincialism?) than is Munro. As a Canadian, however, I must and do celebrate Munro’s receipt of the Nobel.

One last note. On the day that the award was announced, I happened to be en route to Stockholm, from Boston, via Toronto and Frankfurt. On the Frankfurt-Stockholm flight, I saw a woman reading an Alice Munro paperback: that’s how I knew that my compatriot Munro had won.



Editor's note: This interview was conducted a few months before Mavis Gallant's death at the age of 91. In memory of Gallant, I hope all CEACS members will re-visit her fine stories.

ANA OLOS / born in Timișoara, educated in her native town and at the university of Cluj, is an independent scholar, translator, and writer. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature (1978) and an MA in Human Rights (2000). Before retiring, she taught English and Canadian Literature at the Faculty of Arts, North University of Baia Mare, where she founded the Canadian Studies Centre (1998). Among her books are a variety of translations to or from Romanian into or from English, as well as *Twas Nice to Meet Findley Angry* (2004) and *The Transdisciplinary Teaching of Canadian Studies* (2007). In 2014 she published the bilingual poetry collection *Circumstantial Poems, Plagiaries and Versifications*.

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