

Introduction to Philip Nanton's *Canouan Suite and Other Pieces* by Mike Kirkwood

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When the fireflies are out something extraordinary may happen. The Cuban writer Antonio Benitez-Rojo writes about a certain Caribbean way of walking, in which

‘a person might feel that he wants to walk not with his feet alone, and to this end he imbues the muscles of his neck, back, abdomen, arms, in short all his muscles, with their own rhythm, different from the rhythm of his footsteps, which no longer dominate . . . What has happened is that the centre of the rhythmic ensemble formed by the footsteps has been displaced and now it runs from muscle to muscle, stopping here and there and illuminating in intermittent succession, *like a firefly*, each rhythmic focus of the body.’

I shall try to list elements of rhythm in Philip’s stand-up, or rather jump-up, way of talking . . . the rhythmic focal points that his fireflies have to zip up . . .

The first rhythm element: the usual biographical bare bones of a life – but bear in mind these are St Vincent bones, so don’t expect them to behave themselves . . .

The second rhythm element: People in the public life of the island who have won his respect – let’s say, from the Thunderer to Tan-Tan – and let’s also say that when he says the Fourth Estate he don’t mean plantation, but he don’t mean just the media, either, bear in mind that in this island the main medium of public communication is

the passenger van, which tells you all you need to know as you move from A to B or from Sea to Zee (I knew something was going wrong when I heard the first person talking to he/she phone saying ‘I on a van’, as if the other person can’ hear where we is?)

Third rhythm element is the literal one, the thematic presence of music and dance in the poems –

Her body swinging to the left/Her arms swinging to the right . . .

Or check out Kitchen Combo, a beautiful domestication of dance music in the kitchen – by discovering that it’s already there in the lives of kitchen implements . . .

I put this one in the middle because we haffa come back to it – both the middle and the horizon, the skin on the drum . . .

Rhythm element number four

Graphic arts – seems that this poet has a pull towards paintings, photographs, visual cues, he kicks off on these things, obvious enough all through his book, but we can’t say anything about this without moving to

Rhythm element number five

You will notice that this poet has an unusual familiarity with the natural world. What he displays, I hasten to add, has nothing to do with loving nature, feeling empowered by a transcendental oneness with all around us, or anything as indiscreet as that. But, well, he gets into conversation with some recently harvested sugar cane that makes an ominous parting threat to him about rhizomes . . .

And there's a butter fish in the market, its mouth opening and closing, that whispers sweet nothings you may not wish to hear, either . . .

And he's well aware that we live in a world where much of nature has journeyed into a technological future where even yesterday's technology fills us with a cloying nostalgia. Those aerogrammes that once held the Empire together, and more especially the 'intimate precision' of those old typewriters that dredged their way across the filmy blue paper . . .

Moves like these around the visible environment tell you something about how rhythm element number five connects with rhythm element number four, the graphic arts . . .

Rhythm element number six

Maybe, introducing a poet, we should have started with this one. Diction, the words a poet uses, the style of words, the typical effects, the way of speaking considered appropriate in poetry. Diction changes, of course. The Romantic Poets made a deliberate attempt to throw out the so-called poetic diction of their eighteenth-century

predecessors. Wordsworth spoke of replacing 'poetic' words with the natural words used in everyday speech. The modern Anglo-Irish poet Yeats, critiquing some (by no means all) of Wordsworth's output, added the rider: not just the natural words, but the natural words in the natural order . . .

As you read through this collection you have a sense of an opening up of diction that accompanies a growing range of observation. More and more, the public speech of the island, Vincy-speak, has its say in a variety of registers. More and more we hear the voice of Philip Nanton's great antecedent, Shake Keane, resonating in his lines. None of this is a simple matter.

The matter of influence, of an emerging Vincy tradition of poetry, is not a simple matter. Where this tradition might stand in relation to a tradition that St Lucia's Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott represents, whether Shake Keane and Walcott can actually be compared, is not a simple matter. Most of all, what to say about this process of interaction between a universal diction of contemporary poetry in English (if there be such a thing) and the speech of this very vital, very voluble island . . . is not a simple matter!

A simple matter is the mango tree outside my window and the eine grossche nacht musiek that the mountains and Vermont's many townships – emphatically plural – play on the mango tree every night . . . with wind, with rain, with rumble, with godspare lightning and earthquake and please not volcano, with jump-up and drumming and gunshot and flashlight looking for manicou

. . . A simple matter is how the treefrogs and the cicadas and the crickets and the midnight rooster and donkey choose to sort out their polyrhythmic moves . . .

Over the last week I have been kept awake by Nanton's book. The mango tree was in good company, as I'm sure you're about to agree . . .