

George Elliott Clarke's *TRUDEAU*

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Abstract

Part of an extensive study of cultural polyphony in G.E. Clarke's work, researched on a grant generously offered by the John F. Kennedy Institute Library in Berlin, Germany, and a sequel to my discussion of Clarke's *Québécois* (Olos 2012), the present article is a non-Canadian's analytical approach to the 2007 Gaspereau edition of Clarke's *Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path*. Considered together, the book's explanatory texts and the verse drama / libretto de(re)construct convincingly the Canadian parliamentary premier's personality and his rise-and-fall in a world-wide historical, political, and cultural context, viewed from different vantage points. Though this new libretto for a jazz opera in collaboration with composer D.D. Jackson bears the "mask" of a classical, five-act verse drama, it is actually a hybrid, transgressing the border of genres and corresponding to Linda Hutcheon's theorization of the mode of historiographic metafiction.

Keywords: Trudeau, jazz opera, dramatic poetry, historiographic metafiction, hybridity, in-betweenness, (cultural)revolution, postcolonialism, interculturalism

T. S. Eliot observes, "[we] can never emulate music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be the annihilation of poetry, and especially of dramatic poetry"; and it is typical Eliotic criticism, seemingly straightforward. But he continues: "[ne]vertheless, I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human actions and words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and musical order" (146). In reading Clarke's *Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path* (2007), I had really the impression of witnessing such a kind of mirage. Though the reader is deprived of the sensorial experience and impact of the jazz opera's performance, the libretto's effusively allusive poetry offers another kind of experience, one that is extremely stimulating intellectually. For those who are already acquainted with George Elliott Clarke's work, this reaction is no novelty. Whether you subscribe to his ideas or not (though his power of conviction is seductive!), his poetry, crossing the borders of genres and species, is spellbinding. His published work proves his readiness to rewrite and remodel his previous poetry using another formal (dis)guise, thus forming a more and more complex criss-crossing of meanings for the reader to decipher. Between his second libretto, *Québécois. A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos*, tackling the theme of Canadian multiculturalism, and this third libretto, about the politician who had legalized the politics of

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multiculturalism in Canada, Clarke published another two volumes of poems: *Illuminated Verses* (2005) and *Black* (2006), plus a poem-in-prose novel, *George and Rue* (2005), a rewriting of his *Execution Poems* (2001). If the ideatic continuity between *Québécoisité* and *Trudeau* is obvious, the difference between writing a “jazz fantasia” and a libretto about a well-known Canadian personality, who died just a few years earlier, is no less evident.

One biographer saw Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919-2000) as “an exceptional man [...] tragic in the mode of heroes from the literature of classical antiquity”(Christiano 13). But since George Bernard Shaw had already put an end to hero-worship a century ago, who would expect a postmodern writer to use the “tragic mode”? The publishers' back-cover text alerts the reader that Clarke's dramatic poem “drafts an irreverent, jubilant portrait of the life and politics of one of Canada's most controversial political heroes”. The “*Long March*” from the subtitle may suggest Mao Zedong's “Long March” leading him to power, while “Shining Path”—a phrase taken from Mao's writings—is also the name of the guerilla-movement-based, Maoist Communist Party of Peru (Sendero Luminoso). These associations sound the first “bell” to warn the reader that Clarke's manner of representing *his* Trudeau will deviate significantly from historians' biographies.

Various texts precede and follow Clarke's ostensible bio-libretto. In the first of these, entitled “Attention!” and bearing an epigraph from Ezra Pound's *Canto LXXIV*, Clarke tells his readers explicitly about the character of his verse drama:

This literary work offers an interpretation of the lives of several historical personages, all rendered fictitiously. The author has distorted known facts, altered dates, imagined dialogues, and invented situations. His characters should be not confused with actual individuals, either living or dead. This dramatic poem is purely a theatre of imagination. (15)

The above quotation made me think of what Mufti Mudasir suggests in his attempt to formulate a poetics of postmodern drama. He argues persuasively that Linda Hutcheon's theoretical model of historiographic metafiction can be applied to the postmodern drama as well. And this is because Hutcheon's model privileges texts that are self-reflexive and historically grounded, while retaining the political dimension, freely mixing the historical and the fictitious, blurring the traditional distinction between reality and its representation, fact and fiction. (Mudasir 3). In the section entitled “Hansard”, Clarke lists a great number of sources contributing to the writing of his *Trudeau*, starting

from his own volumes of poetry. His inclusion of Timothy Findley's *Famous Last Words*, so often quoted by Linda Hutcheon among her exemplifications of historiographic metafiction, would be also an argument in favour of the idea.

The longest of the explanatory texts preceding the libretto is VRAI: UN ESSAI. Clarke recalls, as a crucial moment of his life, seeing Trudeau during a school trip. Later, as a tyro poet, he set Trudeau among his “idols”: “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” (19).

To “write up Trudeau” means for Clarke “to actually put my words in his mouth”, though there are significant differences between them. “I am neither a Liberal nor a liberal. (I am quixotically, a 'Baptist Marxist')”, he declares. Another difference is his “official identity” as “a 'visible minority'” in white-majority Canada”.

In the first of a series of portraits (in Clarke's words), Trudeau is: “a wealthy, European male; one canonized—and demonized—by hordes of Canuck lawyers and social scientists, but also by poets, artists, journalists, and historians (20).” Clarke underlines that Trudeau was “a cult figure for many Canadians *de couleur*”, including many “Anglo-Afro-Cano” writers in their work. But he thinks there are reasons to “enhance” the current vision of Trudeau, for “he really was *un citoyen du monde*” and “a *pur-et-dur* Internationalist” (21). As Trudeau belongs to all Canadians, the writer appeals directly to his countrymen's memory:

Recall that Trudeau was the only Liberal Party leadership candidate to mention the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. [...], in April 5, 1968 address to delegates. (His campaign poster—a groovy silhouette—mirrored iconic images of the just-slain, Latin American guerilla leader Che Guevara.) His writings—see *Deux innocents en Chine Rouge* (1961)—display familiarity with classical Chinese philosophy and contemporary Chinese politics.[...] Trudeau met Mao Zedong twice—in 1960 and in 1973—and his signal campaign promise in 1968 was to restore diplomatic relations with China (accomplished in 1970). In 1976, he riled some Canadians by touring Cuba and shouting 'Viva Castro!' Eventually, Trudeau visited liberated South Africa and hoisted a 'shebeen'. He loved donning the garb of other cultures: a turban here, a robe there. No Canadian prime minister before or since has associated so closely with the Third World—or even with Canadians 'of colour'.” (21)

As this may sound too laudatory, he is quick to add that his libretto “crafts no elegy”, and reminds us of Trudeau's flirting in his youth “with fascistic nativism, even dreaming of leading an army to create an independent state—one French, Catholic and homogenous (21).” In Clarke's eyes, his libretto's hero “was like many other artists and intellectuals who craved power—or who wielded it: Mao, Marinetti, Mussolini, Mishima (21).” [Though the reader may beg to differ...] Clarke insists on the importance of the fact that Trudeau became Canada's prime minister in the crucial year 1968, which he calls in a footnote “the 1848 of the 20th century: a year of failed, libertarian revolt”(23). The explanatory footnotes offer the reader other important pieces of information concerning Trudeau as a politician. For instance, note 7 synthesizes the premier's attitude towards external policy:

Trudeau's political life negotiated the two defining discourses of the post-WW II era: the Cold War (or East-West rivalry) and decolonization (or North-South conflict). In terms of the Cold War, Trudeau was a peacenik, presiding over the re-orientation of the Canadian Army from 'defence' to 'peacekeeping' and, despite his animus for brutally enforced communist conformity, reaching out to Soviet bloc states and China. He continued his usual contradictions, however, right to the end of his premiership, touring the globe in 1983 to protest a renewed U.S. and U.S.S.R. arms build-up, yet also approving U.S. testing of cruise missiles in Canada.” (22)

The same note 7 is a concise and lucid formulation of the problems Trudeau had to deal with at home. After praising him, Clarke does not forget to mention Trudeau's “*faux pas*”, his government's plan, in 1970, to assimilate First Nations people (23). The author finds in Frantz Fanon (the revolutionary theorist of postcolonialism, and supporter—as author of *The Wretched of the Earth*—of violence in the fight against it) a model for Trudeau's antagonist. Seen as if by Fanon, Clarke allows that Trudeau could be classed as “just another *comprador*, one of those bourgeois leaders”, “reformist in their attitudes” (Clarke 22 & Fanon 59).

Referring to the “carnival of ‘Trudeaumania’” during the 1968 Federal election in Canada (and naming his country, with a mordant irony, “this Yankee monarchy”(22)), Clarke gives another vivid representation of his Trudeau: “an 'ironman' but one with a flower in its lapel and a girl on each arm” (23). But Trudeau's political success is not attributed only to his personal charisma. Canadians saw him as the embodiment of the leader Canada was “yearning for”: “a John F. Kennedy all its own, a 'star' who combines intellectual sparkle, physical vigour, elite privilege, and 'sex appeal', and looks

terrific on television”(23).

The writer feels the need to synthesize for the reader the theme of his libretto and sketch a black-and-white portrait of the drama's contradictory hero:

...[T]his libretto avoids definitive realism. It is a paean to the liberationist mood of 1968: Prague's 'Spring', Paris's 'May' and Canada's 'Tory' version—namely 'Trudeaumania'. Yet, my Trudeau is not the now-deceased immortal, but rather the Warhol silkscreen; not surreal, but sidereal: an insubordinate reality, half-Plato, half-Chaplin. My Trudeau is *the* slapstick contrarian—with Pound's *brio*, Mao's ascetic aesthetic, Layton's macho assertiveness, Davis's sunglasses, X's sass, and Dylan's alluring mystery.”(24)

The list of Dramatis Personae “ranked in order of appearance” does not come as a surprise. First enters **Mao Zedong**, then **Pierre Elliott Trudeau**, who are joined by **Yu Xuanji**, “A Chinese Poetess”, an invented character, the namesake of a Late Tang dynasty poet. **John F. Kennedy** appears only as Senator of Massachusetts. **Fidel Castro's** “Afro-Cuban aide” is **Lt. Neruda**, whose name recalls the *nom de plume* of the famous Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. **Simone Cixous** is a Québécoise journalist, whose name may suggest a combination between Simone de Beauvoir (well-known for her and Jean-Paul Sartre's pro-Cuba and pro-China sympathies), and Hélène Cixous, the radical French feminist. **Roscoe Robertson** is an African-Canadian jazz pianist, drafted after Oscar Peterson. **Margaret**, “A Liberal and a liberal”, is Clarke's version of Margaret Sinclair, Trudeau's First Lady. But being just “Margaret”, she is “indeterminate”. **Jacques Fanon** is evidently related to Frantz Fanon. His first name may evoke Jaques, Shakespeare's melancholic character from *As You Like It*. Last but not least appears **Nelson Mandela**. This multinational and multiracial group of personae's hybridity is underlined and enhanced in Clarke's didascalia. The various “Vistas” in the drama—Revolutionary China, Revolutionary Cuba, French-Colonial Tahiti, Democratic South Africa, Quiet Revolution Québec, and 'Cool' and 'Mod' Canada—foreshadow Trudeau's representation as a “*citoyen du monde*”, that is the “three worlds” of the second half of the 20th century, as Act I begins in 1949 and Act V ends in 2000.

Act I begins on the sound of machine-guns and explosions. “Civil war!” runs the stage direction heralding Mao Zedong's entrance. Detached from this turmoil, but carrying a pistol, the leader of the People's Liberation Army sits on a rock and begins to write poetry. His “ballad” is sheer violence, blood, and rhetoric: “Up soldiers! Kill! Scatter foes like colts! / Slay with the shock of thunderbolts! // Political power flows and runs / Out of the barrels of the people's guns”(I, 1, 32).

Though he justifies the need of violence: “Starving babes howl: that’s why we war: / Meat’s more filling than metaphor. / Bread tastes sweeter than honeyed gold!” Trudeau, only 29, comes out of the mist and asks with innocence: “How can men fire guns at others? / In such fog, aren’t all men brothers? / Who is fighting whom? Why? What for? / In history’s fog and fog of war?” The word “war” provokes his feeling of guilt: “During Hitler’s war, I did what I liked—/ Loafed in Quebec and motorbiked, / So proud, with a Prussian helmet on, / A preppy lad, crying ‘*Revolution!*’”, and, as anticipated in the introductory essay, he continues: “I felt embarrassed, damned, and lost / To spy the X-rays of Holocaust—/ The ovens and bones of Auschwitz—/ while I lounged in swank ski chalets”. The following lines hint at the subtitle of the play: “Now in China, I shadow Mao—/ His Long March through civil war. / Crossing river and mountain pass, / I slip my race, eclipse my class” (Act I, scene i, 33). Ironically, the author makes Trudeau continue his monologue remembering (like Hamlet) his father’s loss, in Canada’s both official languages. In their introductory dialogue, Trudeau answers Mao’s questions ambiguously: “MAO: Are you capitalist or Communist? / TRUDEAU: [Shrugging.] Truthfully, I’m just a canoeist./ MAO: Whose side are you on? / TRUDEAU: This mountain’s side we’re on. / MAO: What are you doing in Nanjing? / TRUDEAU: To witness your triumph, Mao Zedong, / And eye the future, while it’s young—/ China’s slippage from Europe’s gang”. May the reader attribute Mao’s exhortation about Canadians to the non-English minority of the Francophone province?: “English-snarling thugs with big bucks / Mash up all you pea-soup Canucks. / Quebec plays Canada’s Hong Kong.” (Act I, scene 1, 35). No different is the characterization of liberalism, in Mao’s words: “Liberalism touts claptrap / And quibbles and shoptalk and crap—/ Slack in work and slack in study, / It yells, ‘Free Speech,’ with its jaws all bloody” (36).

In the same manner, the scenes and acts follow rapidly, bridging distances in time and space. Each of the characters sees Trudeau from another vantage point. Clarke is a master in showing gradually how the premier’s image flourishes and deteriorates in his supporters’ eyes.

Castro’s speech also urges violence “In Harlem, I met Malcolm X, / That Black Islamic intellect: We agreed we poor need atom bombs all our own, / So profiteers and parasites get overthrown” (Act II, scene i, 49). The Cuban leader and Lt. Neruda intend to convince Trudeau that the U.S. army is a menace to Canada, just as it “confronts” Korea, and there are hints to the U.S. attacking the Bay of Pigs. But the Cuban’s anti-U.S. rhetoric as conveyed in Clarke’s verses degenerates sometimes to vulgarity (not that it would be unrealistic!), and Castro’s slogans are not much different from Mao’s: “Let peaceniks puff of beatnick love—/ I trust in my Kalashnikov!” (50) or the same as Mao’s: “All

power from the barrel of a gun!" (51) But Trudeau is still the "innocent" peacenik, repeating his rhetoric questions: "Who is shooting whom? Why? What for? / In history's fog and ice-cold war?" (Act II, scene, scene i, 51)

Though having the function of the "accompanist", Robertson, the black pianist, seems to be one of the best painters of "musical" portraits. For him "Pierre" is "a Montrealer—as / Unpredictable as free jazz. // From *Native Son* to *Invisible Man*, / He shifts like ectoplasm—or Peter Pan. // His life is his art; a canvas / Shimmering black-and-white contrasts.(52) Robertson's lines have a special beat, suggesting hip hop: "Pierre's a macho aristocrat, / A dialectic acrobat, / No politician—a Ph. D., / A jet-setting, Rat Pack dandy, / As cold-as-dry-ice rationalist, / A photogenic Platonist, / A boxer who quotes poetry—/ Chic as Cassius Clay 'Ali'—/ A go-go, day-glo cavalier, / A ritzy, glitzy, Warhol superstar" (52). From American pop art, Robertson's lines subtly move to politics " A Sphinx-like Statue of Liberty—/ Napoleon as Castiglione—/ And he's got the gall of Charles de Gaulle: / He's J.F.K. of Montreal". But, like the way the writer, while a child , was zapping from one TV channel to another, the pianist changes the perspective: "A *Playboy* swinger, / A 3-D thinker, / A white Negro clone: / He's a rolling stone!" (52-53). Robertson's brilliant "solo" is teeming with figures of speech, cultural allusions, and, as promised in Clarke's essay, reminders of Warhol and the American pop-artist's differently coloured, some of them in "day-glo" paint, series of celebrity portraits. Clarke has an unsurpassed ability to include a variety of language registers (from formal to informal and slang). Cixous's lines also bridge ages-wide cultural allusions: "Adonis—or Don Quixote? / Don Juan—or Wile E. Coyote" (Act II, scene ii, 53), linking classical Greek and European Renaissance cultural symbols with American popular culture figures, including cartoons and animation film characters, such as Wile E. Coyote—a super-genius-villain who usually ends up falling down a canyon.

Thus, in Clarke's original way, along the five acts of the drama, history and fiction, love and politics, high and popular culture, are mingled and blended into a rich potpourri of voices, characters, and situations, in a multi-dimensional, kaleidoscopic, highly referential but also self-referential text that thrives without needing the support of another music than that of its echoing words. Clarke makes his Trudeau voice the tensions of the moment but also his ideal of a "Just Society" and delineates clearly his contradictory nature, the imbalance between his "New Age" and "red" reveries and the "legal" mind's awareness of the need for constitutional reform, and mocks his political rhetoric meant to get the total approval of those who voted for him: "Come, dally with me, / Ally with me, / Rally with me! / O, rally!" (Act III, Scene iii, 73).

Act III, Scene v (Montreal, Québec, 24 June 1968), is already the beginning of turbulence. Quebecers' discontent is violently voiced by Fanon: "*Trudeau au poteau! Pierre to the gallows!* (76)", for he considers him a traitor. After he had unsuccessfully attempted to parody Antony's diplomatic funeral speech from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Trudeau retorts with the same violence. His "tirade" is perceived in Cixous's aside as the voice of tyranny, but in Robertson's vision it is "Participatory Democracy!". There is another opportunity for Clarke to recapitulate, in Trudeau's speech, the historical moments of 1968: "Vietnam had its Têt turbulence, / France had its May disturbance, / Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring is / Encircled by the Soviets," (78), to which he opposes the image of Canada under his government: "But in Canada we enjoy / Prospects of a Just Society" (79). To Fanon's continuing insults, Trudeau's response is just titles quoted from the Liberal Party's programme. Trudeau's ironic apotheosis is his arrival at the Parliament clad in a "Roman toga", as if impersonating Caesar, but this would also foreshadow the end of his glory.

The beginning of Act IV (April 1969) allows Trudeau a respite in a lovers' duo with Margaret, in a Monte Carlo café. To set the atmosphere, Clarke's didascalia gives the titles of two songs from films of the period: Bruno Nicolai's *Autostrada per Los Angeles* (1969) and Piero Piccioni's *Camille 2000* (1970). With cinematographic speed, the scene moves to the lobby of the House of Commons in Ottawa, a year later (April 1970). Trudeau's image has already eroded, even in the eyes of his former supporter. "ROBERTSON: [Aside] An empty mirror, / A naked emp'or, / A hackneyed athlete, / An acn'ed aesthete, / An old news story, / He's rusted glory: A yesterday craze / In a purple haze!" (Act IV, Scene ii, 88-89). The prime minister is discontented with a Parliament become the "House of Comics", "*un bordel*" populated with all species of animals. Cixous needles the premier with unpleasant questions: "What is your riposte to René Lévesque" [...] "To air the Aboriginal Question, / Seek you to 'bleach' each "Indian'?" [...] "*Maintenant, on discuter* bilingualism: / Is your programme social Romanticism'?" (Act IV, Scene ii, 90) But when Trudeau evades straight answers, Cixous utters indignantly her changed opinion of him: "manipulative as an octopus, / But, like a tarantula, tenacious—/ This chameleon / Masks a stealthy scorpion". The scene ends circularly, with Robertson launching another angry tirade: "A two-faced speaker, / A sideways leader, / A funky Nero, / A black-hole zero, / A kamikaze / For paparazzi, / His politic craft / Plies superbly / Shaft" (Act IV, Scene ii, 92) . In Fanon's words: "As draconian as Dracula, / Trudeau's a tyrant tarantula", a traitor (Scene iii, 95). With the scene moving to Cuba, Fanon and Lt. Neruda compete in "blackening" Trudeau's portrait. Thus for Neruda he is "A polite mortician.../ A Caesar of party machines, / Like a show-horse, he sulks

and preens. / He's bilingual with double-talk—/ This snazzy-jazzy Jabberwock” (Act IV, scene iii, 93).

In Act V— traditionally the denouement of the drama—time runs even faster. Scene i, May 1979, with Margaret dancing in a New York bar, telling *herstory*, the author hinting at the real Margaret's involvement with the Rolling Stones. Scene ii, in Gatineau Québec, presents Trudeau at 60, proud of his achievements: “I announce the 1980s—/ A new Canada, a new Canaan, / A gilt, sparkling constitution, / Sunning a Just society, / A rainbow of minorities—/ Multicultural, bilingual, at peace.” This idealized vision of Canada's future is for Cixous just a “rainbow prism / To blinker or splinter Québec's nationalism”. Trudeau's concise formulation of multiculturalism: “There's no cultural purity. / Truth is there never was. / What we call humanity / Is a beautiful mess” (104), provides another opportunity for Clarke to hint at Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity. Four years later, Robertson, overviewing the premier's career, concludes that despite Multiculturalism and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Trudeau has failed, an idea that appears quite often in Canadians' comments on their multiculturalism and in Québec's opposing to it its “interculturalism” (see articles in Yankova).

In scene iv (11 years later) in Soweto, Mandela “first president of a truly democratic South Africa” is congratulated by Trudeau and Castro. Mandela is grateful to Castro for the Cuban help in the South Africa's liberation. Castro criticizes revisionism, but his slogan is still the same: “Political power flows and runs / Out of the barrel of our guns”. Trudeau, who had appropriated the slogan during the October Crisis (a reference to the premier's proclamation of the War Measures Act), has forgotten about it. Now he sees Castro as a dictator and, reverting to his pacifist stand, he exclaims: “How can men fire guns at others? / In cloud-fog, aren't all men brothers?” (Act V, scene iv, 110) The final scene of the verse drama (October 2000) is set in the wooden chapel of Notre Dame Cathedral in Vieux Montréal, with Trudeau's canoe (Charon's ferry) resting near a pew. Margaret enters, wearing a black veil and in a Mao suit to utter a final reproach. After her exit, Trudeau addresses a long prayer to God, followed by a kind of table, reviewing, like Shakespeare's Jaques, the seven stages of his life: “At 20, I wanted revolution. / At 30, I wanted a doctorate. / At 40, I wanted attention. At 50, I wanted love / At 60, I wanted power. / At 70 I wanted influence. / At 80, I would like forgiveness.” His “finale” is a synthesis echoing the subtitle of the libretto: “My life has been a long, shining path, / A Long March down a shining path, / From birth and breath to aftermath”(Act V, Scene v, 113) The performance is supposed to end with Trudeau paddling under a spotlight on a golden path into a blackout.

A comparison between the introductory essay and the verse drama's text reveals the virtues and advantages of Clarke's richly allusive, radiant poetic diction to recreate an age and create

memorable characters, with a kind of stroboscopic effect on the reader. Nevertheless, in order to have a complete image of *Clarke's* Trudeau, all what is contained in the 2007 Gaspereau edition, whether verse, prose, drama, dedications, epigraphs, list of sources etc.—but with the dramatic text getting precedence—, should be considered as an organic whole, comparable to historiographic metafiction. To all these, the readers may add as a counterpart their memories of the second half of the 20th century and, moreover, may feel the urge to extend their knowledge of the history, arts, and politics of this period.[†]

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