SARGASSO Interview


SPECIAL SECTION
(Puerto Rico)

Josemilio González and James Collins have been professors of literature for many years at the University of Puerto Rico. Both have decided to retire from teaching this year. Both have dedicated themselves throughout the years to the writing of poetry.

In this special issue of SARGASSO we dedicate this section to these poets/professors and include an interview with each one followed by a selection of their most recent poems. In the interview they speak about their concept of poetry, their work as poets, Caribbean poetry, and their role as poets in this region.
I deliberately chose to write what is called literary criticism because it was almost imposed on me by social circumstances. But ever since I've been aware of myself, I have seen myself as a poet. I regard literary criticism as a job I must get done and not as a vocation. I conceive poetry as something essentially revolutionary because it adds new dimensions and perspectives to the world we have inherited. In that sense, poetry is revolutionary. In regard to specific commitments, I believe that a commitment is something acquired voluntarily, something which can not be imposed. A commitment is an effect of the socio-political and economic circumstances experienced by the poet. Accepting a commitment without feeling for it becomes an act of hypocrisy, and from this point of view, it becomes an anti-poetic act.

When I talk about the Caribbean I mean the basin, the countries whose immediate limits are the Caribbean Sea. I am not talking about those regions which are a little further away although culturally they might have affinities to some Caribbean countries. I studied the poetry of Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, and
Mexico as well as Cuba and the Dominican Republic. I used to study literature as an art of the Latin American world, and Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico as specifically Antillean countries. The critical issues that made me more aware of the Caribbean as a geographical and cultural entity was the Cuban Revolution. I became more interested in countries such as Jamaica and Haiti and St. Croix. My readings of the literature of this region had been limited because the literature of these countries is not very accessible. When I went to Cuba to be part of the jury of Casa de Las Américas, I spent a few days in Jamaica. There I came in contact with some Jamaican writers and started discovering Jamaica's culture. I was very interested and tried to have a more complete knowledge of their literature by reading on my own. It must be pointed out that Cuba's Casa de Las Américas has done an enormous job of disseminating Caribbean literature. It has granted awards to poets from these islands and published their works. Many times it has published Spanish translations. In the case of Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad, many of their books are published in London and don't circulate in the rest of the Caribbean. Our
main book distributor is the United States so a large number of books published in the West Indies never reaches Puerto Rico. I have some of these works because I have befriended their authors and they have sent them to me directly.

As for Haiti, I had the privilege of meeting René Depestre in Cuba. I also have become acquainted with Haiti through Jean-Claude Bayeaux, and he has lent me some books about his country. When I visited Haiti around 1971, it was very difficult to get Haitian books. When I went in the summer of '86, I could hardly get any. You have to be aware that this was the time when Haiti's situation was very unstable. One could hear shots and see soldiers riding the streets in armored cars.

There are things in the Caribbean that bring us together and things that keep us apart. I would say that what brings us together are the common social and political problems. Of course, to a great extent our problems are different, especially among the Spanish-speaking world. So we have in common the awareness of having to rescue the oppressed groups, the oppressed populations of these Caribbean islands. We have to face
the political and social problems of these countries, but the way of expressing it will naturally vary depending on the circumstances.

The experience of exile, as well as the experience of travelling, is one of the concerns common to all the Caribbean. We have many things in common, but basically we need to rescue the oppressed, the historically oppressed. I understand that the same thing is happening in Martinique and Guadaloupe, but I haven't had the opportunity to visit these islands. I have travelled to countries willing to make contact with their writers, poets and artists. I frequently find it very difficult to communicate because we have been brought up in an individualistic culture where mistrust is one of the factors which affects communication.

I believe that in all Caribbean countries there is a growing tendency towards unity. Not one of those macabre, boring unities, but one of dynamic exchange--of exchanging ideas and feelings...the true unity. In this sense I believe universities, government departments and institutes of culture can play a very important role.

There are two ways of being a Caribbean writer:
someone who expresses some Caribbean reality even if he is not aware of it. For instance, an alienated poet who shows that alienation. He may consciously reject the Caribbean and in this way betray himself. There is also the poet who is concerned about the Caribbean and tries to express these concerns in some way. There are some Caribbean poets who play the flute by chance, and there are others who choose to play. For me the element of awareness is indispensable to human sensitivity; it can not be a purely aesthetic or artistic consideration.

I went to Haiti in the summer of 1986 when Baby Doc had fled. I saw terrible things: hunger, poverty, deception. The people went about wearing t-shirts with Haiti Liberé printed on them precisely when Haiti had not been freed. You could see the ton-ton Macoutes and the militia everywhere. When I came back I talked to Peri Coss the director of Diálogo, and he asked me to write something about Haiti. I wrote a short article which appeared in Diálogo entitled "Haiti: A Powerful Nation" because the Haitian people awakened enthusiasm in me for their great creativity. Upon writing this article, the first song (poem) sprang forth and I continued writing
and all the others flowed. I thought about the children I saw suffering there. Some of the images are real, taken from all the places I visited. I would go out and walk about those terrible slums; I saw those children dying from hunger, with bellies full of parasites, women bathing in the brackish water of the gutters, and then drinking the same water. All of it makes Haiti a marvelous and terrible country at the same time. This is the experience I wrote about.

Josemilio González

(Translated by Aileen Alvarez)