

# THE POETIC VOICE

in George Elliott Clarke's "Blank Sonnet"

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Invented in Italy in the fourteenth century, sonnets in English first appeared with the early sixteenth century efforts of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Though the sonnet's popularity may have peaked with the renowned sequences of Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare, variations of its form have since been used to memorable effect by poets from Wordsworth to Barrett Browning to Yeats. More recently, Canadian poet and Dalhousie alumnus George Elliott Clarke offered another memorable take on a very old form. In the following essay on poetic voice in "Blank Sonnet," Adam Cameron brings to light many of the ways Clarke's pointedly unrhymed poem attests to its author's resistance to the tradition the sonnet represents. In the process of inflecting that tradition, however, the poet cannot escape the "white voice" that contrasts and conflicts with the "speaker's blackness." In a reading of form and content admirable for its depth, breadth, and rigour, the essay makes clear that "every dark corner" of Clarke's inscrutable work yet "gleams with the speaker's struggle." Writing within while longing to escape the constraints of what may be that tradition's most representative form, the poet reminds us that users of language are also - and inevitably - shaped by the ideologies that give it form.

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## THE POETIC VOICE IN “BLANK SONNET”

George Elliott Clarke’s “Blank Sonnet” is principally concerned with the struggle of its speaker to find a unique poetic voice in a medium that is tightly bound within the standards of the poetic tradition and a predominantly white poetic heritage. To express this concern, the poem first uses diction, syntax, and traditional poetic imagery to create a dichotomy between the speaker’s mixed admiration and contempt for the poetic tradition. It then uses the classical figure of Icarus, as well as imagery imbued with whiteness, to convey the conflict between the speaker’s blackness and the whiteness that pervades the poetic tradition, overwhelming the speaker’s efforts at poetic creativity. In both instances, the conflicting subjects coexist in the form, structure, and content of the poem, but they are never reconciled; it is by their unremitting struggle that the world, as it is perceived by the speaker, is realized on the page, and the birth of the speaker’s poetic voice is made possible.

### I. THE SOUND AND STRUCTURE OF “SHELLEY”

The first manner in which “Blank Sonnet” expresses the dichotomy between the speaker’s admiration and contempt for the poetic tradition is through the sound and

structure of the lines that refer to “Lovely Shelley” (Clarke 8) – denoting the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. In terms of sound, the parallel alliteration between “collapse of language” (7) and “Lovely Shelley” (8) in adjacent lines indicates a correspondence between the two subjects. Accordingly, it acts not only as a snapping remark at Shelley’s cadenced verse, as though Shelley embodies the collapse of language, but also as an apology to Shelley for not meeting what the speaker perceives to be his standards of composition, as though the speaker’s poetry embodies the collapse of language. In terms of structure, while “Lovely Shelley” (8) is a commendation, the fact that “Shelley” forms both the end of a line and the end of the octave, corresponding with a change in the poem’s tone, signifies the speaker’s break from the poet Shelley as well as the poetic tradition Shelley represents. The final lines of the sentence continue this disjunctive trend: the speaker claims to “have no use for measured, cadenced verse” (9), and thus no use for Shelley, before he completes this thought in the following line with “if you won’t read” (10), which is an assertion that poetry is not worth writing if it will never be admired by Shelley. Hence, through parallel structure and alliteration, in a single sentence the speaker expresses love and hate, admiration and disrespect,

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disillusionment and indifference toward the “Lovely Shelley.” The result of overlapping such dichotomous emotional responses to Shelley is that the reader cannot choose between emotions, but is forced to see both simultaneously, as the speaker perceives him. By allowing the reader to perceive Shelley through the speaker’s eyes, the speaker’s poetic voice is manufactured on the page.

### II. THE IMAGERY AND DICTION OF “FLOWER”

The second manner in which the speaker voices his conflicting sentiments toward the poetic tradition is through the image of the flower snapping and curling. From the roots of diction, through the sturdy stalk of syntax, out to the burgeoning buds of historical connotation, the poem’s presentation of the flower carries the conflict between the speaker’s respect and disdain for the poetic tradition – the very conflict that plucks and prunes the image for the reader.

In the third line of “Blank Sonnet,” the speaker describes the body (presumably the speaker’s own) as snapping and curling like a flower (Clarke 3-4). Putting aside, for the moment, the incongruous imagery of a flower snapping and curling, the word “snap” conveys feelings of both respect and disdain. In the negative sense, “snap” may

refer either to “cutting words or remarks,” or to “a quick or sudden bite at something” (“Snap,” def. v. 1a, 2a). In the context of the poem, the former sense of “snap” denotes a denunciation of the poetic tradition, while the latter sense signifies a carnivorous feeding on prey, which implies that the speaker’s poetry is nourished by the poetry of the past – but also that it malevolently consumes the poetry of the past. The latter meaning is further complicated by the second verb describing the action of the body, “curl,” which means to “shrink or writhe with . . . shame” (“Curl,” def. v. 5e). Given this definition, the carnivorous sense of “snap” acts as a sort of lamentation, expressing the speaker’s regret that the poetic tradition is being sacrificed to create the speaker’s art. This notion is reinforced by a third, more positive, meaning of “snap,” “to make a quick or eager catch, at a thing” (“Snap,” def. v. 3b), signifying an attempt to rise to the standard set by conventional poets. Hence, within the scope of two words, the speaker in “Blank Sonnet” derides the poetic tradition, tries eagerly to catch and feed upon it, and feels ashamed for doing so. Finally, both “curl” and “snap” lack direct objects, making their possible targets the poetic tradition, the speaker’s own body of work, and nothing at all.

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When compared to the usual treatment of flowers in the poetic tradition, this “snapping” and “curling” flower is sharply incongruent. Flowers have traditionally assumed the role of passive recipients of the poet’s praise, or they are objects of comparison to the stock cheeks of some Laura or Celia. If they move at all, they flutter and dance (Wordsworth 6) and, if they feel anything, it is “tenderness and mirth” (Keats 14). Yet, in this sonnet, the flower is active, conscious, willful, and animalistic – snatching and cutting, shrinking and writhing. Understanding the flower as a symbol for the poetic tradition makes this incongruous imagery comprehensible, and makes the flower’s actions a reflection of the speaker’s feelings toward this symbol: the poetic tradition stifles the speaker’s creativity, burying the speaker in images that have been anaesthetized by the persistent repetition and imitation of their conventional meanings.

However, in the same space that this contentious relationship with the flower appears, the speaker’s dependence on, and admiration for, the flower is made equally manifest. In sight, smell, and alliterative sound (“birth of blossoms,” [Clarke 2]), flower imagery forms the foundation of the poem’s first lines. Thus, the image of the flower in “Blank Sonnet” balances unsteadily between the

role of the poetic muse and the predator of creativity. The result of imbuing the image of the flower with such unfamiliar, divergent meanings is the dismemberment of the traditional image of the flower, and its re-creation according to the speaker's perception. It is through this newly formed image that the poem is embedded with the speaker's unique poetic voice.

### III. THE ALLUSION TO AND WHITENESS OF ICARUS

Thus far, this paper has dealt with "Blank Sonnet" as documenting a poet's struggle to find his voice in a medium dominated by the models and conventions of the poetic tradition. However, the full depth of the poem and its structure may only be understood with the knowledge that it was written by a black poet struggling to find a voice within a tradition dominated by white men. In "Blank Sonnet," the full scope of the struggle between the speaker's mixed admiration and disdain for the poetic tradition is made clear through the allusion to Icarus.

In classical mythology, Icarus's father, Daedalus, builds wings of wax so the two can escape imprisonment. Daedalus warns against flying too high, but, when Icarus ignores his warning, the sun melts the wax of his wings, and he falls to his death.

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Given Clarke’s position as a black poet, freedom from imprisonment could symbolize the literacy, and particularly knowledge of classical literature, that was, for so long, withheld from black men and women in North America. The caution against flying too high would then symbolize the limits that, historically, society has placed on the intellectual and creative capacity of black men and women. And Icarus’s fall to his death after flying too high would indicate the speaker’s own fear that aspiring to establish a unique poetic voice in the poetic tradition – to equal or outdo Shelley – is too lofty an ambition.

And yet the speaker is neither compared to Icarus imprisoned nor to Icarus flying, but rather to Icarus falling. The speaker imagines falling before having secured wings and attempted to fly – failing at poetry before having put pen to paper. For the speaker, whiteness pervades the language of the poetic tradition: the stars the poet has traditionally gazed upon for inspiration are “white stars” (Clarke 5); the sea is a “white sea” (12)<sup>1</sup>; and the body is “like flower” (4), rather than like *the* flower, so the reader hears its homonym, “flour,” and sees its whiteness.

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<sup>1</sup> Poets uphold a tradition of white seas from “sharp seas in winter nights” (Wyatt 2) to the “Sea of Faith” (Arnold 21) and the “Sea of Time” (Whitman 1).



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Accordingly, the speaker's voice is drowned out not only by the overwhelming presence of poets such as Shelley, but also by the overwhelming white voice that pervades the poetic tradition. In one sense, the allusion to Icarus expresses the predominance of the white voice in the poetic tradition as it "cancels the blackness" (14) before it is ever allowed to develop.

Although the speaker falls into the white sea to drown, his blackness tumbles across the "white . . . That closes every poem" (12-13); that is, the speaker's death results in blackness being imprinted on the page. His fall creates his art. Thus, creativity for the speaker is neither whiteness nor absolute blackness; it is, rather, the endless clash between them, as between the pen and the white page. The speaker creates his voice not by destroying the whiteness, but rather through the struggle between the white voice and the speaker's blackness.

## IV. CONCLUSION

For many poets, the poetic tradition is like the Oedipal father that one both wants to emulate and needs to destroy; the speaker in this poem, however, is like the disinherited son who, above all, desires not to be labeled an orphan. Every dark corner of "Blank Sonnet" gleams with the

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speaker's struggle with aspects of the poetic tradition that fail to encompass his own perceptions. As part of a white tradition, these aspects refuse to provide the ground upon which the speaker may build his poetic voice. Formative figures of the poetic tradition are both admired and scorned; traditionally static or benevolent images are modified by malevolent verbs but embraced in the poem's content; and a classical allusion is infused with racial inflections. Yet the poem is not about the speaker's ultimate exclusion from the poetic tradition. Through the struggle for expression within a predominantly white tradition, the white figures and forms of the poetic tradition are, at once, scorched black, molded, and laid out like clay brick as the foundation for the speaker's poetic voice, as it plants its feet and stands upright - as tall as Shelley, as prominent as the flower, and as soaring and bright as Icarus.

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