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Bertelus Myrbel: Working in the Space Between History and Dream

"If I didn't know him I would think for sure he was on something. But I know him well, so I don't know where he comes up with these astonishing paintings." So spoke a neighbor, an expatriate from North America.

Bertelus Myrbel is "on something": it is in the air and the water and the conversations and habits of everyone he knows. What is out of the ordinary is that he is unusually attentive to all the information coming to him from today and all the yesterdays that have taken place among the people of the northern shores and plains and mountains. Their stories and music and awareness of the forces of nature are older than anyone living can remember, older even than the great-grandparents now invisible but still present. A Cuban writer who sojourned in that place among Myrbel's great-grandparents observed everyone going about their ordinary routines of working, getting water, going to market, observing Sundays and the special times. One of the special times was Holy Week. The writer, Alejo Carpentier, knew well those Holy Week days before the high feast of Easter; but the Haitian Rara bands with their multicolored costumes and the plangent sound of tin horns , bamboo bassoons, rasping scrapers, and insistent drums were exotic. He saw the pilgrimage up the mountain to the Citadel on Holy Thursday, and in his novel connected the pilgrimage to Haiti's old and continuing kingdom of this world. Carpentier was not on anything; just preternaturally observant –like Bertelus Myrbel.

Myrbel grew up in Milot, the village at the gates of King Henry Christophe's Palais Sans Souci. Above, dramatically visible from the village is King Henry's Citadelle, it's front tower connecting Milot, Sans Souci and fortress to heaven. From the ramparts Henry could scan the northern shore from La Tortue to Fort Liberté for any invading French ship. Down in the village Myrbel knew about the Kingdom of King Henry and about the artists working in the atelier of the great Philomé Obin. Obin's mission was to paint the history of Haiti from the time of Christophe forward and to train others into that educational effort. Myrbel wanted to paint like the artists in the Obin atelier, but internationally recognized Obin already had more students than there was space. Young Bertelus went over to the subsidiary studio of Arc en Ciel where followers of Obin were working and teaching. The public school he attended taught him history, but he was more excited by the lessons in the studio.

He tells of "working hard to study architecture, anatomy, and perspective". He explained in one of our conversations in Cap Haïtien that studying architecture meant learning all about what they called "the colonial" appearance of the city when it was Cap Henry, Christophe's royal city. Anatomy he described as learning what human figures look like standing or running or sitting, and, "...you know, running out of fear looks different from running home for food." The notion of perspective, though roughly based on projections to vanishing points, became for Myrbel a metaphoric concern: "Each district in the city has its own perspective," he told me. "All the people in that block have a certain outlook. They make different carnival banners. They may vote different in elections, so they have a different perspective. See, in this painting I show they each have a different perspective." He depicted a Capoise celebration of International Women's Day with three different parade groups and three different vanishing points; but in another work showing Jesus Christ on Judgment Day he converged everything top center in the glowing figure of Christ. He paints a young boy who is bathing in a sacred pool in order to be well and strong. Palm trees surround the pool where a cascade pours its healing waters toward the young man. There was a buyer for that work. She knew little of Haiti, but commented, "There is some magic force in this little painting, isn't there? I want my husband to have this." Myrbel understands perspective as a centering force.

Philomé Obin laid great store by the depiction of Haitian history as an obligation. "Where so many cannot read, the pictures will tell our history. It is important for everyone to know our history." All the artists of the north took his instruction to heart, Myrbel among them. Like all the Obinist "History School of the North" he presents Toussaint, Dessalines, Capois LeMort, Christophe –the heroes of the Revolution. Obin taught how to represent. Myrbel goes further. Like any Capoise, he sets high value on the revolutionary events from Makandal's proto-uprising, the Bois Caiman oath, and the culminating victory at Vertiéres. He goes beyond representation to fashion a presentation, setting the drama of liberation in a mise en scene with the Taino remnant who aided them. A skeletal phoenix rises from the ashes of burned cities; cane field workers cast away their chains; there are passages from the Bible; doves and angels in clouds of glory, and illuminations emanating from infinity. His vision of Haitian history attaches his school book learning to a mythos that elicited that question, "Where does he get all this stuff?" His setting copiously embraces the times before Columbus through the revolution an on to the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment, thus situating the deeds of the heroes into Eternal Time. This is in accord with his eclectic, ecumenical understanding of religion. His is in no wise a syncretism, but a collimation of distinct rays of enlightenment. "All this stuff" is the moral perspicacity and its symbols gleaned from of each of the religions present in the north of Haiti, gathered together with acts of history remembered, repeated, made into the legends in the school books. It is the mythos of the farmers, fishers, seamstresses, cooks, carpenters, each of of them the descendants of ancestors from Africa, Kiskeya-Ayiti, Europe or even Asia, each of them telling over and again the stories, each of them conscious in daytime and in dreams of who the great-great-great grandparents were. Capoise people shunt little into the obscurity of forgetfulness. They do not relegate their ancestors and their deeds to a past that is understood as over and done with. The past is active. The zanzet –the ancestors –are present. It is after all, in their city, the villages and the northern plain that they fought most of the battles that would win freedom from domination. The first oppression of the native Ayiti Taino had been by the Spaniards, notably Christopher Columbus, who claimed the

territory for the Christian God and for Queen Isabella of Spain in December of 1492. Subsequently, in 1699, far across the ocean from Ayiti, Spain handed over the brutal regime of Hispaniola to French plantation enslavement of Saint-Domingue.

Myrbel's response and responsibility as an artist is to make the oft-told tales visible as well as told and sung. One of his works presents a dreamed image of Queen Isabella returning to the island (see Figure 1). She begs forgiveness from Queen Anacoana, bringing a peace offering. The painting presents an admission of guilt, and a plea for reconciliation. Artists of Haiti are aware of world events, and it would be quite surprising if Myrbel and all his companions were uninformed of Nelson Mandela's and Bishop Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation efforts. This work, done well after the efforts in South Africa were internationally noteworthy, is the perceptive Myrbel's foreshadowing of a hope for the future of Haiti. Among Capoise, the story of Anacoanda's betrayal, Spanish violence, French plantation horrors, the reparations to France that permanently impoverished the new nation, the long and often vicious US Occupation are, if not everyday street conversation, at least well-circulated, oft repeated tales, with contemporary political rhetoric frequently drawing upon tropes derived from this history. In personality, Bertelus Myrbel has a vigorous but gentle commitment to harmony, healing of divisions, saving grace from whatsoever ritual and code of behavior. It is what he dreams of not only nan domi –in sleep, but also in and for the practical everyday world.

He sets aside the ugly days and brutal minutes and hours of bondage and murderous warfare to present the culminating victory of the slave revolution in his Battle of Vertiers. Hero General Capois LeMort stands forth from his fallen horse, sword thrust forward into the fray (see Figure 2). LeMort is no whining king screaming "My kingdom for a horse" but an embodied spirit of insurrection shouting "Forward into battle, we will not surrender." The French, who will concede Saint-Domingue on the morrow, line up in their bright uniforms to conquer. But in the dark forest behind hero Capois are the Africans, Tainos, and Creoles who will own a new nation within a day's time. This is one of Myrbel's more representational works, but the dream he had prior to beginning to paint the work informs both composition and content.

In another of his history dramatizations arising from his dream work he shows the hero-generals returning to the northern shore in their eighteenth century ships to visit the graves of the fallen, to pour libations of blessed water and cornmeal. In yet another, General Jean-Jacques Dessalines is the oungan-priest presiding over a Vodou ceremony to exorcise all the evil persons and spirits of the time of enslavement. Philomé Obin rigorously avoided any stroke of paint that would refer to Vodou, preferring to show the emblems of Freemasonry that also had played a significant role in the Haitian Revolution. Myrbel, immersed in a social atmosphere where Vodou, Freemasonry, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant beliefs are all intensely active, brings all of them into his paintings. He knows the stories of Dessalines whose guiding spirit was the warrior lwa, Senjak Majeur/Ogun. He knows the story of the solemn battle oaths taken at Bois Caiman that marked the beginning of the slave revolt. For this artist, the struggle for liberty, equality and justice, begun by the zanzet (the ancestors) and still continuing, has the benefit of the encompassing Will of Bondye (Bon Dieu-God). Thus, he explained to me, all the people who try to live in brotherly love are doing the will of Bondye in the Pentecostal, Baptist, Catholic churches and in the Vodou ounfo (temple). A devout Roman Catholic, he also attends Pentecostal prayer services, Baptist immersion baptisms, and Vodou ceremonies in several nearby ounfo. In each religious locality he discovers actions of saving grace. His depiction of the boy in the healing waters of a sacred cascade is the sib of his "Baptism of Bob", with Bob being washed clean of sin by immersion in living waters while the pastor reads from the Bible. A close look at his paintings yields subtle signs of the presence of old, old intimations of spiritual salvation from a well deeper than historical reports.

Mrybel's religious sensibility, rather than being a syncretism, or even the symbiosis that Leslie Demangles described in his The Faces of the Gods , is an accommodation of parallel but distinctive ways, each with its own long history and present, but with –as Myrbel envisions it, a convergent future in the Apocalypse. His "separate but equal" notion of religions is in accord with his notion of perspective: each quartier has its special perspective, but all ultimately oriented to the same celebration.

The living waters that flow through Bob's baptism are in most of Myrbel's paintings. There are forest scenes that on first look appear to be simply landscapes with cascades. There is always more to be seen. Myrbel's connection with water may remind those who have read Jacques Roumain's Governors of the Dew that a spring of fresh water is more than an attractive feature: it is a necessary force of life, animated and animating, salvific in every practical and spiritual way. A man only lightly acquainted with Vodou, mulling over one of Myrbel's Cascade in the Forest scenes, questioned, "There is Vodou in this, isn't there?" Similar, more explicit works include ribbons tied to a mapou tree, lit candles, food offerings, folded papers of prayers; but in this one there was only the mapou that grows by the waters, the forest flora and the cascade bringing the essential of life. As in Roumain's novel, there is more there than water, yes: Vodou acknowledgment of inspirited substance. The material accoutrements of Vodou evident in some of Myrbel's other "landscapes" are identifying signs , but it is the land and the water itself that he presents as sacred beings. The man who looked at the works did not know about Vodou but was well-versed in the Hindu Vedas. The recognition was direct, unmediated by signs.

A more recent work of Myrbel's, like his earlier forests and cascades presents a multiple spiritual drama connecting the depths of the earth, the waters underground and coursing across the surface, while women take harvest from the growing crops (see Figure 3). This is the grand cycle of life, with its prayers to the Great God of All Creation, and to all the spirits animating the substances and people of this world. A Vodou service seen through a shining geometric cartouche happens in a Taino cave. In a smaller cave beside it a