

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

From the libretto of "Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path"

These excerpts are from a work-in-progress, which is to be presented as an opera, with music by D.D. Jackson, at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, and published by Gaspereau Press of Kentville, NS, both next spring.

The author's disclaimer: "Trudeau: Long March / Shining Path" is a literary work. It offers an interpretation of the lives of several historical personages, thus rendered as fictitious characters. The author has taken vast liberties with known facts, imagined dialogues, and invented situations. These characters should not be confused with actual individuals, either living or dead. This dramatic poem (or excerpts) is not a biography or a history. It is a theatre of imagination. It is not 'real' in any real way.

In his introduction Clarke points out:

The impetus for this libretto is not hagiography, but respect—for the heroes of my Black Nova Scotian (Africadian), crypto-socialist, and poetry-besotted youth. Among the artists and politicians whose works offered me models and directions were jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, Pop bard Bob Dylan, orator Malcolm X, and The Rt. Hon. Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Naturally, this quartet is flawed: Davis and X were misogynists; Dylan seemed, at times, just an arty opportunist; and Trudeau exuded self-righteous arrogance.

True: my catalogue is steeped in the 1960s. But it cannot be helped: I was born in 1960, and grew up with the records or books of these men in my home. Thus, I have written poetry about almost all these figures, and my poetics is informed by the styles and texts of Davis, Dylan, and X.

Pointedly, Trudeau was the only Canadian to "place" in my eccentric pantheon of robust intellectuals or artists. Now here he is: the star of this show.

Admittedly, my decision to write up Trudeau—to actually put my words in his mouth—is peculiar: I am not Caucasian, Francophone, Québécois, cash-flush, athletic, a "playboy," or a sensation; nor do I belong to that caste—the Canadian élite—whose members kiss and applaud each other. Nor am I a Liberal or liberal. (I am, quixotically, a "Baptist Marxist.") However, as a "visible minority" person (my precise identity in white-majority Canada), I seize the right to "write what I like" (to cite Steve Biko), including this libretto about an upper-class, white male, one lionized — and demonized—by hordes of white Canuck lawyers and social scientists, but also poets, artists, film makers, journalists, and historians.

Yet, Trudeau was, is, a cult figure for many Canadians *de couleur*. To only mention Anglo-Afro-"Cano" writers who have written him into their texts, I must cite Austin Clarke, Kaie Kellough, Suzette Mayr, Andrew Moodie, Hazelle Palmer, and Oscar Peterson. (May I admit that I spy Trudeauvian elements in my late motorcycle-riding, poetry-reading, landscape-painting, woman-serenading, and social-working father?) Still, considerations of Trudeau by "Third World" Canadians are patently absent from media celebrations or interrogations of the man and his legacy. In line with the precept that Canada is a white country, "multicultural" Canadians are expected to limit their political expression to raucous, ghettoized, candidate-nomination meetings. However, our collective understanding of Trudeau would be enhanced were we to appreciate that he was less a "Canadian" or a "Québécois" than he was "*un citoyen du monde*," the first prime minister who was comfortable with a Canada that looked more like Expo 67 and less like the Grand Ole Opry. He was, in short, a *pur-et-dur* internationalist.

Indeed, Trudeau was the only Liberal Party leadership candidate to mention the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the previous night, in his April 5, 1968, address to the delegates. (His campaign poster — a groovy silhouette—mirrored those 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. (Note that *The Essential Trudeau* [1998] recycles the style of Mao's "little red book.") Trudeau met Mao Zedong twice—in 1960 and in 1973, and his only campaign promise in 1968 was to restore diplomatic relations with China (which occurred in 1970). In 1976, he riled some Canadians by touring Cuba and shouting "Viva, Castro!" In 1984, he appointed The Hon. Anne Cools, a Black progressive, to The Senate of Canada. Eventually, Trudeau visited liberated South Africa and hoisted a beer at 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 as closely with the Third World—or with Canadians "of colour."

Nevertheless, this libretto is no elegy. Trudeau committed grotesque mistakes, including, in 1970, his government's plot to assimilate Natives—an attempt that rightly incensed First Nations peoples. He also refused to extend reparations and official apologies to ethnic-minority and racial-minority Canadians who had been victimized by the State. Moreover, his government only meekly opposed South African apartheid and United States imperialism, and merely talked up North-to-South wealth transfer. His rhetoric was provocative, but his practice was conservative. To apply a Maoist formula, he was "left in form but right in essence."

(Critics may object that Trudeau is unfit for operatic treatment because the greatest Canadian prime minister was John A. Macdonald,

the nation's creator. But, I must reply that Macdonald has his opera: it's titled *Riel*.)

Eschewing sociology, political science, economics, and constitutional law, this 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 a Warhol silkscreen, not surreal, but sidereal: an insubordinate reality. My Trudeau is *the* contrarian—with the *brio* of Irving Layton and the jaunty glamour of John F. Kennedy, plus Mao's ascetic aesthetic, Davis's sunglasses, X's sass, and Dylan's alluring mystery.

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Act I presents meetings in 1949 between Mao and a young Trudeau in China. The first scene of Act II shows Trudeau in conversation with Castro in 1960 while the second scene takes place in a nightclub in Montreal where the black jazz musician Roscoe Robertson sings:

Pierre's a macho aristocrat,
A dialectic acrobat,
A *Candid Camera* Candide,
A buttoned-down, James Bond dandy,
A cold-as-ice-cold rationalist,
A photogenic Platonist,
A Sphinx-like Statue of Liberty—
Napoleon as Castiglione—
And he's got the gall of De Gaulle:
He's J.F.K. of Montreal

After some scenes in Beijing and one in Tahiti Act III Scene II opens in Ottawa, 1968. Trudeau addresses the Liberal Party Convention to the applause and cheers of his audience:

Trudeau: Open all the windows! The sun
 Wants in! It's April once again.
 How beautiful is Ottawa!
 How beautiful is Canada!
 How beautiful is Ottawa
 In the spring – for all Liberals!

Robertson: *(Aside.)* The Tories are so offensive –
 They're worse than the Tet offensive.

Trudeau: Though April sunlight gleams and gleams,
 Though beautiful are all our dreams
 For Canada, we must improve
 This nation with our toil and love.
 Because we must make it better,
 I now accept to be leader
 Of Liberals, prime minister
 Of this bright, north country vista –
 Four thousand miles all mapped by snow,
 Such excellent cartography,
 Its lines hugging every square mile.
 Our Kingdom is snow – and fragile.
 But such geography allows
 Only a great people to flower.

Marguerite: *(Aside.)* He's a man's man, a poet's poet,
 A lady's man, and a real poet.

Trudeau: No school could teach me patriot
 Love, but I feel in my bones the riot
 Of winds over tundra, field, and moor,
 This land's majesty, its vast grandeur.

Cixous *(Aside.)* In poet Irving Layton's vision,
 Trudeau's the first politician
 Of Canada who's worthy of
 Assassination, that weird love.

Trudeau: Our Canada glows red and white
 (Maple leaves red on snow delight) –
 But Earth shudders and shakes with *Hate*
 This spring of 1968:
 Two days past, Martin Luther King,
 Was gunned down, in cold blood, just for dreaming
 Of a truly Just Society—
 Exactly what Canada should be.
 The US war in Vietnam –
 Now roasts shrieking babes with napalm.
 And in the tragic Middle East,
 Israel's still allowed no peace,
 While stateless Palestinians,
 Convert to unholy violence.
 And here at home, Quebec protests
 That "Anglos" are "imperialists."

It craves more power or its own state,
To Canada disintegrate.

Marguerite: *(Aside.)* Pierre's fine, refined Latin phrases,
Plus his English social graces,
Plus his smooth, French witticisms,
Place him beyond criticism.

Trudeau: No "New Frontier," no "Great Society":
We'll erect the Just Society.
Using rationales of reason,
We'll reject riots and rebellion.
We'll protect all minorities –
Both French and English harmonize.
We'll print two languages on all cash
And cheques and laws and succotash.
We'll create counterweights (just like Mao)
To poise Quebec and Ottawa.
Canada must not become at all
A Confederation of shopping malls.

Robertson: *(Aside.)* The cool politician is living theatre.
No one votes for a peanut-munching,
Numbers-crunching,
Hotdog eater.

Trudeau: All wrong beliefs and poison weeds
Must be replaced by dreams made deeds.
All lethal, dumb superstitions
Must be exposed as ghosts and goblins.

Cixous: *(Aside.)* Women and the media thrill
At any man who smiles and kills,
Who orates poetically,
And dresses aesthetically,
Like Kennedy or like James Bond:
His cool style is a magic wand.

Trudeau: Our challenges are linguistic,
Political, and economic –
Fish, bread, oil, electricity,
Wood, paper, heavy industry,
Small business, wages and prices,
Boom-and-bust, financial crises.

The Constitution's full of worms –
Each word wriggles and each clause squirms.

Marguerite: *(Aside.)* Pierre's the cream of the Liberals,
The star dream of the Liberals,
The chic pose of the Liberals,
The sweet rose of the Liberals.

Trudeau: Dream of chasms fluffed with glaciers,
The white, hushed Rockies a-glitter
With snow, that never-melting snow,
As bright as in rhymes by Rimbaud –
Poetry beyond a typewriter:
Let us adventure together.

Applause and cheers erupt. Trudeau pirouettes offstage.

The last scene but one is set in Havana in 1995:

Trudeau, 74, stands at a podium with Nelson Mandela, 77, first president of a democratic South Africa, and with Castro, 66. Trudeau and Mandela wear safari shirts; Castro is in fatigues.

Mandela: Trudeau, it is good to meet you.
The whole world's heard of Pierre Trudeau.
Furthermore, your Constitution
Models peaceful evolution –
Essential for South Africa.
We also care that Canada
Promotes multiculturalism,
That offspring of your grand vision.

Trudeau: Mr. President Mandela,
I'm pleased to be in Havana,
For your parley with dear Castro:
This moment historians will know,
April of 1995:
For this moment, we have survived.
Out of office eleven years,
Memory is now my treasure.

Castro: Why did you resign your post, Pierre?
You could have died prime minister.

Trudeau: I walked in snow and saw no stars.
I was a hero who'd outlived his wars.

Castro: President Mandela, begin
As you wish, your splendid orison.

Mandela: I bear greetings to all Cubans
From Africa and Africans.
South Africa's liberation
Was won by brave Cuban action
Against South African soldiers
In decolonized Angola
And in oppressed Namibia,
At Cuito Cuanavale,
Where Cuba beat South Africa,
Defeated racist South Africa,
And unshackled Namibia,
Buckling *apartheid* South Africa.

Castro: Trudeau, you were upset about
Cuba's army in Angola.

Trudeau: I was pissed off, Fidel, because
You lied to me, lied when I asked.

Castro: Liberty requires stern measures
That contradict *bourgeois* pleasures.
What's one lie to free a people?

Trudeau: In the shadow of the steeple,
Statesmen live and die like devils.

Castro: We are instruments of evils
To deliver Heaven on earth.

Trudeau: At any price?

Castro: What's Heaven worth?

Mandela: I've read your Charter of Rights and Freedoms,
Trudeau, but look how far we slaves have come!
Look how far now we slaves have come –
Despite brute imperialism,
Robber-baron capitalism,
Reactionary fascism.

Castro: "Backward things are identical:
If you don't hit them, they won't fall."
"Political power flows and runs
Out of the barrels of our guns."

Mandela: How can we slaves progress, if we
Let bosses dictate liberty?

Trudeau: Mr. Presidents, I'm saddened
By your hard-earned, well-spoken wisdom.
We are old men now, soon to stand
Within Eternity's remand
And answer for triumphs and crimes,
Our weighing of lopsided times,
And how we balanced, how we fell,
How we ordered, how we rebelled.
I am so sad that guns still speak
So much louder than songs of peace.

Castro: And yet you called out your army
To quash rebs in '70.

Mandela: Trudeau, you mustn't feel sorry.
We do not inhabit any
Eden, just this tear-wracked, war-wrecked
Planet. Be a king, walk erect,
Into history – what we've made.

Castro: Rulers walk in a lone parade.

Trudeau: Gentlemen, we are old. I see
Politics faint before Eternity.