



Some of the Best Verse Around: Vladimir Lucien's *The Sounding Ground*

Title: *Sounding Ground*, by Vladimir Lucien. Peepal Tree Press, Leeds (Great Britain). 73 pages.
Reviewed by: Stephanie McKenzie.

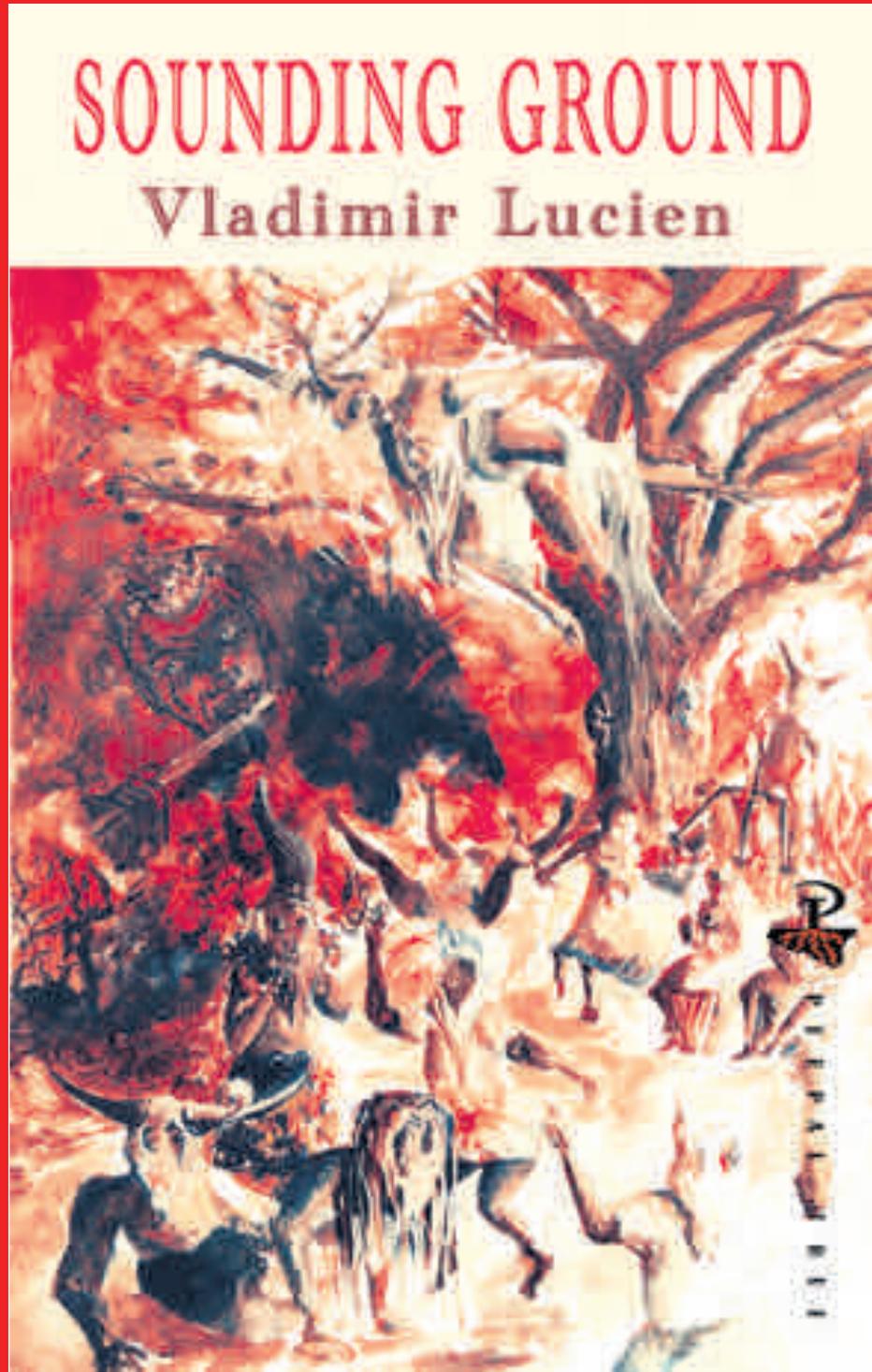
When I bought a copy of Vladimir Lucien's debut collection of poetry, *Sounding Ground*, after listening to him read at the Bocas literary festival in Trinidad in 2014, I wanted to put the book in cellophane and store it away. That way, I figured, when Lucien won the Nobel Prize in the future, I'd have a pristine, first signed edition. The temptation to read the work, especially after having heard Lucien read, was too great, of course, and my copy of *Sounding Ground* is now well dog-eared, coffee-stained and thumbed.

Vladimir Lucien is a writer, actor and critic from St Lucia. His poetry has been published in *The Caribbean Review of Books*, *Wasafiri*, *Small Axe*, *the PN Review*, *BIM Magazine*, *Caribbean Beat* and other journals, as well as the poetry anthology *Beyond Sangre Grande* (edited by Cyril Dabydeen). Lucien was awarded the first prize in the poetry category of the Small Axe Literary Competition (2013). Some of his poems have been translated into Dutch and published in the literary journal *Tortuca*. He is also the co-editor of the anthology *Sent Lisi: Poems and Art of St Lucia* (2014) and the screenwriter of the documentary *The Merikins*, which premiered at the Trinidad and Tobago film festival (2013). *Sounding Ground* was published in May 2014 by Peepal Tree Press.

Sounding Ground begins by grounding itself in family portraits and tributes and opens with "Sambo I," a tribute to Lucien's grandfather, Samuel Lucien. There are three Sambo poems (the strongest of Lucien's verse) spread throughout the collection; together, they capture the strength and idiosyncrasies of things that make us human. "Sambo I" depicts a man who *didn't go no secondary school, who had to carry the stink of fish in a basket on his head walking from Gros Islet to Castries* (11)

This man has "the presence of a conch-shell blown," and the rhythm and originality of that image and sound find their match in "Sambo III" (in the book's second section, "Coast"), dedicated to "The Least of [the grandfather's] Brothers," Uncle Bravelly, who *... looking from underneath those barbed-wire eyebrows that still prohibit his eyes ...*

... walking through his own absence, wanting nothing more than to lift things, to



*feel again
the heaviness of life, then let go, to bob
up and down
in memory like the cupped heart of a
fishing boat* (66)

It is through such chiselled descriptions of individuals as these that Lucien has his reader enter and fall in love with his poetry, as in "A Picture": "My father use to wear an afro in the '70s — / black champagne on his head . . ." (20) the poem begins.

The book's first section, "Interior," uses poems about family, the power of obeah, and fellow writers and thinkers to underscore the inner workings of a poet who has entered the public domain on solid rock (epigraphs by Blake, Césaire, and Ovid frame poems, and poems are dedicated to or remember Walter Rodney and Vahni Capildeo, amongst others). "Black Light," a

tribute to Guyanese thinker, writer and activist Walter Rodney, who taught at Mona Campus, UWI, who was killed by a bomb blast in Georgetown, and for whom an International Commission of Inquiry (probing the details of his death) was recently established in Guyana, is a powerful, timely and poetically provocative comment:

*It inevitable that all o' we bound
to step on our shadow foot
and not say sorry . . .
... is because you start givin' the system
backchat,
... Is because you did not hold your peace in
your pants'
pocket, did not take your UWI cheque
quiet
... And to think*

*that in Georgetown, in Kingston, and
down
in Bridgetown, youths with good heads
on their shoulders,*

*...
will go to school and learn all kind of
nothing
about themself, that they will mash their
shadow foot
as it go behind them. How one day, one
of them,
one of your own, playin' smart, go deny
you, go spit
their new light on the darkness of
your heart.* (29)

Sounding Ground uses individual remembrances to address larger issues, to speak of the history, politics, and artistry in which Lucien swims.

Lucien is a metaphysical poet who writes with the magnitude — and what seems to be, at times, the rhythmic echoes — of Yeats. There is, of course, the temptation to compare him to fellow national and Nobel-Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott — as Lucien enters the world stage with similar aplomb — or to take the other side and, pointing to Lucien's reliance on his "nation language," to put him into a neat Brathwaite camp. However, the strength and originality of Lucien's verse resists neat divides as much as his poem "To Celebrate St Lucian Culture They Put On Display" warns one of the dangers in displaying cultural voices and artifacts as "indiscernible / with rust" (49).

Steeped in many canonical traditions and employing a wealth of influences, as well as departing from them, Lucien's voice is unique and evidence that a committed poet is here to stay. In particular, Lucien is a master of last lines: "...He, more than any of us, knew / how to talk to the rain as equals" (30), "At the Grave of CLR James" concludes: "...The first love, and the last, is human pity" (68), "Small Island" ends. Lucien is also a master of sound, of assonance especially, as "the pure and mellow melodies of bees" (23) make us aware in "The Story of Toutouni."

Such a poet can take and begs criticism, and so, too, his publishing house. Lucien's talent is polished, but the book deserved more careful editing. Page numbers in the Notes at the end of the book do not correspond with the text, and Lucien should also have been advised to cut one short poem — "Home" — which does little to illuminate the collection.

However, this is small criticism for such a significant poet who writes with full grace.

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