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THE AWAKENING OF A WEST INDIAN SENSIBILITY (1)

One of the consequences of the growth of native literary traditions in the former colonies was the reinterpretation of history not only by the historians of newly independent countries but by their artists; until the twentieth century the accepted version of history was generally that of the colonizer. Some early historical accounts did attempt to draw attention to the destructive effects of colonization in newly discovered worlds. I am thinking in particular of the Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies by the Dominican friar Bartholomé de las Casas, who fought courageously to stop the extermination of Amerindian tribes in Latin America and to put an end to the cruel excesses of the Spaniards. But it did not prevent him from denying the Indians the right to their own religion. This contradiction between Las Casas' sincere wish to protect the Amerindians against the colonizer and the fact that, consciously or not, he was the instrument of that same colonizer, shows the amount of self-deception that usually goes together with a conviction of one's superiority. Las Casas protested against the physical destruction of the Amerindians but helped to destroy their cultural heritage and so denied them the right to be themselves.

Now that the formerly colonized peoples have recovered that right, the question is to know to what extent they have been able to re-create or develop their own way of seeing, uninfluenced by the colonizer's conception of them. The problem is particularly crucial in Central America where whole civilizations and cultures were annihilated. The surviving Amerindians were compelled to hard labour. But since they were unable to bear up against slavery, they were soon replaced by African slaves who had been torn away from their original environment, separated from their families and grouped with Africans of a different tribal origin who spoke a different language.

Thus dispossessed and alienated from his cultural past, the transplanted African had to face as best he could the psychological void that resulted from the "Middle Passage," the crossing of the Atlantic by the slaves. The resurrection from that void, whether apparent or real - opinions differ on that subject - is one of the essential themes of West Indian literature and one which I would like to discuss mainly through the approach of a few representative novelists.

In 1960 the novelist George Lamming from Barbados published The Pleasures of Exile (2) in which he claimed full kinship with his slave ancestry and identified himself with Caliban. This was not the first attempt to reinterpret Shakespeare's The Tempest as a historical or even a political drama while

adapting it to the author's period. There were several adaptations of this kind by Latin-American writers in the 19th century (3), and the pejorative identification of the French masses and the colonized peoples with Caliban by the French historian Renan is well known. Nearer to us in a book called The Psychology of Colonisation (4), Mannoni assimilated the colonial to Caliban and declared that he suffered from what he called "Prospero's Complex" which drove him to respect the colonizing Prospero and require his presence. This theory was severely criticized by Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks.

The theme of Lamming's book could be summed up in Joyce's famous words which he quotes as an epigraph: "History is a nightmare from which I'm trying to awaken." To awaken and free oneself from history seems to be the major concern of many Caribbean writers but the manner in which they try to do so often differs considerably.

Lamming's starting point is a narrative account by the 16th-century geographer Hakluyt relating John Hawkins's first trip in quest of "human merchandise." In Lamming's eyes Hawkins is Prospero, whom he calls "thief, merchant and Man of God" (5). Caliban is both the Carib Indian and the African slave. Lamming does not mention at first the Chinese and the East Indians who were brought to the West Indies after the abolition of slavery and now make up over a third of the population of Trinidad and Guyana. But when Caliban becomes for him the contemporary West Indians, he is the coloured peasant whatever his race.

Lamming's interpretation of The Tempest is deliberately subjective. He starts from Shakespeare's play to convey what he defines as "a certain state of feeling which is the heritage of the exiled and colonial writer from the British Caribbean" (6). This was his way of expressing what he saw as the tragic fate of the writers of his generation: the fact that their sensibility had grown out of the colonial experience and the obligation to go into exile in order to write in a more congenial atmosphere than in the West Indies and to find a publisher. The situation of the West Indian writers has greatly changed since the 1950s and they are now encouraged by Ministries of culture at home and by a growing local audience so that many have gone back to the West Indies. But practically all of them emigrated at one time or another to England, the U.S. or Canada. Even today it is difficult for them to be published in the Caribbean.

The sensibility West Indians inherited from colonialism was at the outset a consequence of Prospero's gift of language to Caliban. Shakespeare's Caliban cursed this gift, and Lamming writes about it:

Prospero has given Caliban language; and with it an unstated history of consequences, an unknown history of future intentions. The gift of language meant not English, in

particular, but speech and concept as a way, a method, a necessary avenue towards areas of the self which could not be reached in any other way. It is this way, entirely Prospero's enterprise, which makes Caliban aware of possibilities. Therefore, all of Caliban's future ... must derive from Prospero's experiment which is also his risk.

Provided there is no extraordinary departure which explodes all Prospero's premises, then Caliban and his future now belong to Prospero... Prospero lives in the absolute certainty that language which is his gift to Caliban is the very prison in which Caliban's achievement will be realised and restricted. (7)

This passage has often been criticized. The Cuban poet Roberto Fernandez Retamar writes in Caliban Cannibale that "Lamming fails to break the circle traced by Mannoni" (8). In his book Caliban without Prospero Max Dorsinville, a Haitian critic living in Canada and for whom Caliban is both the black American and the man from Quebec, thinks that Lamming's approach to his subject is "articulated in cultural elitist terms" (9). And Janheinz Jahn in his History of Neo-African Literature criticizes Lamming for neglecting the "extraordinary departure" which, according to Lamming himself, must "explode all of Prospero's premises" (10). But Jahn does not see that in the chapter following this remark Lamming does deal with the "extraordinary departure" when he sums up the rebellion of Toussaint l'Ouverture as it is recreated by the West Indian writer C.L.R. James in The Black Jacobins. For both James and Lamming Toussaint is a genius who "orders history," and by "redeeming the human spirit" his rebellion has made possible "Caliban's resurrection from the natural prison of Prospero's regard" (11).

Another aspect of Lamming's book that seems to have been neglected by its critics is the irony that pervades it: there is first the irony of the title which questions the fact that metropolitan culture is necessarily superior; then there is irony in Lamming's style, in his way of approaching his subject as if he himself were Prospero, the better to emphasize the enormity of his prejudices. And finally there is an irony of situation since the exiled person is no longer Prospero only but Caliban whose migration "to the tempestuous island of Prospero's" he describes.

Now, as we have seen, language did not mean English, in particular, "but speech and concept as a way ... a necessary avenue towards areas of the self which could not be reached in any other way." Language is thus the instrument of self-knowledge and, as Lamming writes, "what is under scrutiny is our traditional way of seeing" (12). To say, however, that in Lamming's mind, this way of seeing expressed in Prospero's language would always be that imposed by Prospero, is to

simplify the dilemma with which many West Indian writers were faced when they started writing.

The first step towards self-knowledge is in what Lamming calls "the backward glance," that is to say the memory which enables the West Indian to understand what his past really was. In his first novel In the Castle of My Skin (1953) a schoolmaster denies that slavery ever existed in Barbados, and most villagers question this historical fact while the far-reaching consequences of slavery can still be felt since the planter remains the owner of the land and the people are subject to the arbitrary decisions of those who are still the only holders of economic power on the island.

This rejection of the past out of ignorance, shame or simply fear of offending the British authorities (Lamming's novel takes place between the wars) is the extreme expression of a state of mind of which the West Indian must free himself. "Unawareness," writes Lamming, "is the basic characteristic of the slave." And further "colonialism is the very base and structure of the West Indian's cultural awareness" (13). But he adds that the vitality of the West Indian will be genuinely dynamic and not mere "animal exuberance" when "the colonial castration of the West Indian sensibility has been healed" (14).

Before explaining what Lamming means by West Indian sensibility, I think it useful to point out that colonization is for him a reciprocal process and that the gift of language that resulted from it has become a contract which neither party can cancel. It is a reciprocal process because Prospero, who in Lamming's words was "colonized by his own ambition," soon became incapable of doing without Caliban and became the slave of self-destructive passions. Lamming was to illustrate that theme in one of his best novels, Natives of My Person. But above all, thanks to language, Caliban has learned to use Prospero's methods; he has made his Prospero's weapons and has "assumed Prospero's privilege of magic," in other words, his art. The desire to master this art has driven Caliban to exile. In England he discovered a very different Prospero from the one he knew on the island. More important still, he understood that what made the West Indian a product of colonialism was his false conception of himself and of his relations with Prospero. Finally, in exile thanks to the distancing that enabled him to appreciate what he had left without sentimentality, thanks also to his meeting and discovered kinship with West Indians of other races and from other islands, Lamming, the modern Caliban, awakened to a West Indian consciousness. "Most West Indians of my generation," he writes, "were born in England." Exile at first accepted as a necessity was becoming fruitful and the term West Indian, at first a mere geographical term, was at last assuming "a cultural significance" (15).

This experience is, of course, very similar to that of the negritude poets although, unlike them, many West Indians have

made exile into a permanent state. Exile prevails with the force of obsession in all West Indian literature as a state which favours all coming to consciousness. "To be an exile is to be alive," says Lamming. This coming to consciousness, however, is different from that of the negritude poets and except with Edward Brathwaite, does not lead to an assertion of Africanness as the only source of identity.

At the end of The Pleasures of Exile Lamming writes: "It is the common background of the social history of Indians and Negroes in Trinidad which can be called West Indian: a background whose basic feature is the peasant sensibility" (16). This definition is inspired by the fact that until a fairly recent past three quarters of the population were peasants who had worked the land as slaves or indentured labourers. On the other hand, Lamming greets the birth of the West Indian novel as a historical event because it was the first form of art to express this sensibility. Born of the meeting of Indians and Negroes with the colonizer, it cannot and does not want to ignore the consequences of the meeting. Lamming asserts that he is a descendant of Prospero as much as of Caliban and that he "uses Prospero's legacy of language - not to curse our meeting - but to push it further, reminding the descendants of both sides that what's done is done, and can only be seen as a soil from which other gifts, or the same gift endowed with different meanings, may grow towards a future ... which must always remain open" (17).

This statement occurs at the beginning of Pleasures of Exile, but even after describing his experience in Europe, Africa and the United States, Lamming advocates a co-operation which implies self-knowledge and knowledge of the other. As already suggested, he discovers infinite possibilities in Caliban, the artist, and sees his sensibility as still in the making.

It is easy to see that such a conclusion can be disappointing for those who seek an easy, and sometimes an aggressive answer to the agonizing problem of individual and national identity. In an article entitled "Some Speculations as to the Absence of Racialistic Vindictiveness in West Indian Literature," Austin Clarke, a Barbadian novelist who lives in Canada, regrets the lack of vindictiveness and nationalistic spirit in West Indian literature. While acknowledging that Lamming's novel In the Castle of My Skin was the first significant literary work by a West Indian, he criticizes the author for the subtlety of his writing and his lack of commitment, and he condemns his conciliating attitude in The Pleasures of Exile. Fortunately, Lamming was intelligent enough to know that mere protest does not make good literature. In his critical book, he describes an existing situation and the dilemmas of the writer who cannot rely on any given tradition, while in his largely autobiographical first novel, he attempts to give an answer to those dilemmas by scrutinizing the past in order to discover the roots of a new sensibility. It is true that one does not

find either in Lamming's work or that of most West Indian writers of his generation the racial militancy which Clarke takes as a criterion of excellence although a return to their racial origins is a major theme of their literature. But they express their deep commitment to the Caribbean in another way.

To take a simple example: there is a rather amusing episode in In the Castle of My Skin in which a few village boys manage one evening to enter the park of the local English landlord while a great reception is being held. While they watch, fascinated, what is going on on the terrace, the landlord's daughter comes out for a walk in the park with an officer and stops not very far from where the boys are hidden. The officer is on the point of seducing the girl when one of the boys realizes he is on an ant heap and utters a loud cry. The alarm is given and they are pursued as criminals. The next day during his morning ride the landlord meets an old village woman who has always appreciated his paternalistic attentions and he complains to her that three rascals have attempted to rape his daughter. The old woman is duly shocked and sympathizes with him. But the reader understands that far from sharing her feelings Lamming has given his own version of the passage in The Tempest when Prospero accuses Caliban of attempting to rape Miranda. Lamming satirizes the white man who is still full of the same fears and the same prejudices towards his black servant.

The thirties with the strikes and riots that unsettled Barbados and other islands at the time form the historical background of the novel. It re-creates the living conditions of rural populations and the dislocation of their community under the pressure of new forces and of the struggle for power of a rising local middle class. When the villagers are compelled to leave the small parcel of land they and their forbears have occupied for generations, they simply cannot believe that they have been deceived and abandoned by the landlord and colonized anew by their own countryman, a former village teacher who has become a trade unionist and a politician. The effects of historical change on the villagers' daily life is the more tragic as they do not understand its cause; neither did the young narrator when the events took place. Here again it is in his imaginative reconstruction of history that one finds an implicit expression of the artist's criticism. Just as in the villagers' attachment for the land they are forced to leave, particularly that of an old man who is the archetypal ancestor, is to be found the expression of their incipient awareness of what they are.

At the end of the novel the narrator, who is on the point of leaving the island, meets a childhood friend who has just returned from the States. It appears from their conversation that two different ways are open to the young people, which were soon to represent two different trends in West Indian literature. Trumper, the narrator's friend, explains that in the U.S. he has discovered the black race, his people, and when

George reminds him of the sense of loneliness they used to experience in childhood, Trumper answers with great assurance: "A man who knows his people won't ever feel like that." But his simple choice is impossible to George. He is imprisoned in the "castle of his skin," a symbol of his ambivalence for it represents both the colour that ought to help him define himself and a protecting mask which isolates him even from his own people.

Trumper's discovery of, and pride in, his race might pass unmentioned nowadays but twenty-five years ago it was still something new in the West Indies. This theme has since then been mainly developed by the poet Edward Brathwaite. While recognizing the plurality of races in the Caribbean, Brathwaite thinks that the majority of people in Jamaica and Barbados ought to accept a specifically black culture which, in his eyes, is preferable to a cultural imitation of Europe. In his poetic trilogy (Rights of Passage, Masks, Islands) he describes the black man's return to Africa but shows that this can only be one fruitful stage in his exploration of the self, for the real discovery of what he is takes place in the islands where the black West Indian returns. Since then Brathwaite has encouraged younger West Indian writers to turn to the folk tradition for inspiration and new forms.

To come back to the narrator of In the Castle of my Skin, it is he who clearly expresses the meaning of Trumper's discovery:

Trumper made his own experience, the discovery of a race, a people, seem like a revelation ... He had found something to cradle his deepest instincts and emotions. He was a Negro and he was proud! (18)

But about himself the narrator merely says as he leaves the island: "I knew in a sense more deep than simple departure I had said farewell, farewell to the land" (19).

From then on Lamming's work is a continuous attempt to reconcile in a precarious balance his interpretation of the West Indian experience and his alienation as an artist who had to leave his country to write. This is how he has expressed his dilemma in The Pleasures of Exile:

The West Indian writer hungers for nourishment from a soil which he (as an ordinary citizen) could not at present endure ... And yet there is always an acre of ground in the New World which keeps growing echoes in my head. I can only hope that these echoes do not die before my work comes to an end. (20)

In V.S. Naipaul, the East Indian writer from Trinidad, the cleavage between origins and the temptation to fit in the English

cultural tradition is more obvious. While at least in his early novels he appears to care as much as Lamming about the future of the West Indies, it seems impossible to Naipaul to identify himself with his country of origin. He once described himself as "an Indian writer writing in English for an English audience about non-English characters who talk their own sort of English" (21). Both he and his brother Shiva consider themselves as writers without a society in spite of the fact that, ironically, West Indian society remains their main subject, though in V.S. Naipaul's case the condition of his displaced people acquires a universal dimension. The central metaphor in his novel The Mimic Men (1967) is a shipwreck, and his main character is obsessed with a feeling that both he and his father are but castaways on the island of Isabella. Hence his need to identify with a culture imposed by the colonial system which denied the obvious reality:

We denied the landscape and the people, we who could see out of open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher (in a country where there were, of course, no apples) and wrote essays about visits to temperate farms. (22)

As John Thieme has pointed out, all Naipaul's work, fictional and critical, "has been concerned with the human consequences of imperialism in colonial and post-colonial societies" (23). Among his historical and critical works, The Loss of El Dorado recreates the history of Trinidad and underlines the total failure first of the Spaniards, then of the British to lead a constructive policy. Alluding to 19th-century writers like Trollope, Kingsley, Froude, who came to the West Indies and wrote about everything except what mattered, he says:

None questioned the lesser life of the agricultural colony, which made nothing, imported everything, where it had begun to be felt that education was an irrelevance, something for the ambitious poor, that the rich, the white or the secure needed only to be able to read and count. (24)

In The Middle Passage (1962) which describes his return to the Caribbean for a visit, Naipaul writes: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was ever created in the West Indies" (25). It is the same cry as Césaire's "We who have created nothing" but far from seeing in this nothing the source of his humanity, like Césaire, Naipaul repeats that Trinidad is "unimportant, uncreative, cynical" (26). In a later essay, he describes the Caribbean islands as "The third world's third world" (27).

It has been said about Naipaul that he saw the West Indies with the eyes of an Englishman or a European. But I do not think that a European would experience that fear of the West Indies he expresses so well in his novels, nor the sense of panic

which he cannot resist as he approaches Trinidad after years of absence because suddenly he feels again the "threat of failure" which, according to him, was the dominant impulse in the society he had known. Naipaul's merciless criticism of West Indian society in his travel books can only come from someone who, rightly or wrongly, is extremely sensitive to what he calls the "West Indian futility," and who tries to escape the sense of void it creates in him. But when he went to India, the land of his ancestors about which the main character in The Mimic Men keeps dreaming, he found he had nothing in common with it. In An Area of Darkness which describes that voyage, Naipaul criticizes as much the Indian tradition become weak and static as the cultural alienation of East Indians in the Caribbean.

Of course, one must discriminate between the uprooted man and the artist who in A House for Mr Biswas (1961) tries to define the positive element of the West Indian personality. Mr Biswas struggles all his life to free himself from his economic dependence on his wife's family, rich mercantile Hindus who proclaim their attachment to India without understanding the customs they keep. He tries to survive in a chaotic and paralysed environment symbolized by the successive houses in which he lives, houses that resemble a prison, are shaky, unfinished or empty. But he is finally able to buy his own house which, for all its shortcomings, represents the assertion of his personality and the fact that through his terrors he has been able to come out of the void to which he seemed condemned. When he comes home from hospital shortly before his death, Mr Biswas is supported by the knowledge that there was "the house," his house:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it ... to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (28)

If one remembers that for Naipaul the "Middle Passage" is also that of the East Indians transplanted to the West Indies after the Africans, "to lay claim to one's portion of the earth" does mean to free oneself from the condition and the state of mind described in The Middle Passage. But it remains true that taken as a whole Naipaul's work emphasizes the historical void of the Caribbean and its incapacity to break the colonial relationship with Britain. He sees in this a cause for despair and in his later fiction he was to extend his hopeless view to other areas of the Third World, particularly Africa. So although Naipaul writes in The Middle Passage, "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands" (29), he himself remains too self-divided "to help his people," in Césaire's words, "make the economy of the learning of freedom."

By contrast, the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris is probably one of the rare Caribbean writers in whom the artist and the West Indian are in perfect harmony. He has also been living in exile for over twenty years but, like Joyce, he seems to have taken his native country with him. Harris reacts very differently from Naipaul to the so-called historical void of the Caribbean because, while stressing the terror experienced by the tribes and peoples that fell victim to the conqueror, he thinks that the void which resulted thereof is only apparent. The human person alone matters to him, and he criticizes those for whom history is only a series of material achievements and victories or defeats that determine the fate of nations.

History, according to Harris, plays itself out in the soul of individuals. His dynamic vision of the human personality and of the West Indian community has its source in the history of the Americas, not as it is usually told, but as it was felt by the victims of successive conquests.

To the question: "What is a West Indian?" Harris answers:

What in my view is remarkable about the West Indian in depth is a sense of subtle links, the series of subtle and nebulous links which are latent within him, the latent ground of old and new personalities. This is a very difficult view to hold ... because it is not one which consolidates, which invests in any way in the consolidation of popular character. Something which is more extraordinary than one can easily imagine. And it is this possible revolution in the novel - fulfilment rather than consolidation - I would like to look at in a prospective way because I feel it is profoundly consistent with the native tradition - the depth of inarticulate feeling and unrealized wells of emotion belonging to the whole West Indies. (30)

Unlike other artists for whom the lack of a great cultural tradition is a source of despair, Harris thinks that the West Indies are not without a tradition but that it has existed in a latent and generally unconscious state for a long time. For he believes that at the heart of the terrifying void that resulted from conquest something frail and vulnerable subsisted, a "living immaterial element" which can become a source of rebirth. He illustrates his belief in an immaterial tradition made of the unacknowledged sufferings of men with his interpretation of mythical remnants such as Carib legends, Haitian voodoo and West Indian limbo - provided they are taken seriously and not as a source of tourist entertainment.

He explains that the slave's sensibility was not wholly stifled because his inner tragedy could externalize itself in space through limbo or voodoo. Harris sees in this re-enactment or transmutation of experience into space an art of compensation which enabled the slaves to express through the dance what

could not be said in words. He also sees in those dances the representation of an unconscious wish for a re-assembly of the soul that could become the source of a genuinely West Indian art.

It is worth recalling here that in his novel Season of Adventure Lamming describes a voodoo ceremony as a means of re-discovering the ancestral soul. But Harris goes further by giving the poet a task which is inverse and complementary to that of the dancer: to explore and recreate through imagination the psyche or inner space which the dancer tried to externalize. The Guyanese consciousness is saturated with images of a terrifying past, fixed images of historical antagonisms between the different races that have contributed to the making of that consciousness. For the Guyanese (or the West Indian in general) was born of what Harris calls in his first novel "the complex womb," thus evoking the multiracial character of the Guyanese personality. According to him, this mixture of races could give rise to a cross-fertilization of various cultural trends which could serve as a prelude to a renewal of sensibility and a reunification of the divided West Indian soul, provided the writer's concern is to "conceive," i.e. to understand and create the human person rather than remain obsessed by the ideology of the "broken individual" (31).

Each novel by Harris is a "drama of consciousness" which attempts to create a dialogue between the components of the West Indian personality. Because he is multifarious, each West Indian represents a "community of being." So to be reconciled to one's own self is to contribute to the harmony of the community. But this is only possible if one agrees to re-live imaginatively the trials of the past, to identify with the Amerindian fleeing the conqueror, with the poor East Indian peasant or the runaway slaves whose descendants still live hidden in the jungle, the very image of a past that many want to ignore. Thus, contrary to those who try to find security in a homogeneous image of themselves, Harris sees homogeneity as a partial and static condition which subsists by stifling what is different. The potential richness of the West Indian sensibility lies in its heterogeneous character.

The trials which have traumatized this sensibility are, as we saw, exile, dismemberment, and the exploitation of man by man. The three are linked and have led to division and alienation. To re-live those trials in one's individual soul is to exile oneself from the tyrannical ego and from prejudices in order to meet the other. It implies the disintegration of what Lamming called "the castle of my skin" in order to reach the psychological nakedness that used to be the condition of most West Indians and is still that of people whom Harris calls the "uninitiate," i.e., all who are excluded from the established rites of a given society. But we have seen that this nakedness and this void are only apparent; they are the consequence of a refusal to recognize the human person in eclipsed people. The

void goes together with a lack of identity, but here too Harris suggests that the lack is not real because beyond the identity of race, which is only a mask and a source of selfish pride of-ten serving economic interests, there is, to use the words of his first novel, "a nameless kinship and identity." It is this nameless identity common to all men that must serve as a foundation for the reconstruction of the manifold personality of the West Indian.

The landscape plays a primordial role in this reconstruction. Whereas in Naipaul, for example, the sea is a source of isolation or at best a means of escaping the islands, Harris sees in the Guyanese landscape an equivalent to the Guyanese soul. It is animated with a spirit born of the successive confrontations between peoples and of the similar trials they have undergone, so that the contemporary Guyanese is the spiritual inheritor of the Amerindian as much as of the other races. The landscape materializes the anguish of the soul and reflects its uncertainties. Guyana lends itself particularly well to this equation between outer landscape and inner psyche because the mobility of the jungle, the uncertain course of the rivers, the sea eating up the coast and continuously modifying its topography, all create an image of disorientation and dynamism. The characters' disorientation in Harris's novels is a painful and terrifying process but it is necessary and positive because it allows for continuous change: the breakdown of fixed attitudes entails the coming to consciousness and the integration of formerly suppressed fragments of the personality whether these are fragments of experience, the unrecognized ancestors man carries within himself or those "uninitiate" excluded from the human community.

Of course, this notion of a fluid personality linked to the disintegration it has to undergo before being reborn modifies our usual conception of fictional character and even of narrative, and Harris alludes to this in the passage I have quoted where he suggests that the fulfilment of the West Indian personality can give rise to a revolutionary and genuinely West Indian art of the novel.

In order to illustrate the way in which landscape awakens the individual's sensibility to his own nature, I should like to come back for an instant to The Tempest. There is a beautiful passage in which Caliban calms Stephano's fears by telling him:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.

Commenting on this passage, Janheinz Jahn has suggested that Caliban has access to a way of knowing different from Prospero's, and indeed the island's noises make him dream and the dream generates vision: "the clouds methought would open and show riches."

In Palace of the Peacock, Harris's first novel, the narrator loses himself in the forest:

I stopped for an instant overwhelmed by a renewed force of consciousness of the hot spirit and moving spell in the tropical undergrowth ... At last I lifted my head into a normal position. The heavy undergrowth had lightened. The forest rustled and rippled with a sigh and ubiquitous step. I stopped dead where I was, frightened for no reason whatever. The step near me stopped and stood still. I stared around me wildly ... I gave a loud ambushed cry which was no more than an echo of myself - a breaking and grotesque voice, man and boy, age and youth speaking together. (32)

Already in In the Castle of My Skin one of the characters achieves consciousness in a kind of visionary dream. In the passage just quoted the noises of the forest make the narrator aware of a presence that is both in the forest and in his deepest self. The narrator and his brother together with a multiracial crew pursue the Amerindian people in quest of gold and cheap labour. This journey symbolizes the invasion of the Caribbean by successive waves of conquerors. All through the novel the forest and the river are catalysts which help the narrator perceive the hidden reality within and beyond the material world and make the crew aware of their own destructiveness. At the end of the novel the gold and the folk turn out to be their communal self. Their main discovery is that of their unity which is not achieved once and for all. The narrator's vision fades away; their unity is an acquired conviction that must be achieved again and again.

Palace of the Peacock is the first part of the Guiana Quartet of which each novel evokes a different landscape and a different community. Viewed as a whole, it describes the birth and perpetual becoming of a people and suggests that the West Indian identity is both one and many since it was born out of "a treaty of sensibility between alien cultures." The end of the quartet, like that of each novel, is a beginning, that of the spiritual liberation of the West Indian. Such is also the conclusion of Islands, the third part of Brathwaite's trilogy whose last section entitled "Beginning" also evokes a rebirth:

For on this ground
trampled with the bull's swathe of whips
where the slave at the crossroads was a red anthill
eaten by moonbeams, by the holy ghosts
of his wounds

the Word becomes again a god and walks among us
 on this ground
 on this broken ground. (33)

Anmerkungen

- 1) This article is based on a lecture delivered on 13 November 1979 at the University of Bremen.
- 2) George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (London, 1960).
- 3) On this subject see Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Caliban Cannibale, translated by J.F. Bonaldi (Paris, 1973).
- 4) O. Mannoni, Psychologie de la Colonisation (Paris, 1950).
- 5) George Lamming, op. cit., p. 12.
- 6) Ibid., p. 9.
- 7) Ibid., pp. 109-110.
- 8) Roberto Fernandez Retamar, op. cit., p. 47.
- 9) Max Dorsinville, Caliban without Prospero (Erin, Ontario, 1974), p.12.
- 10) Janheinz Jahn, A History of Neo-African Literature, Writing in Two Continents, translated from the German by Oliver Coburn and Ursula Lehrburger (London, 1968), p. 240.
- 11) George Lamming, op. cit., p. 151.
- 12) Ibid., p. 63.
- 13) Ibid., p. 35.
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