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## Carnival of Fiction: Creative Masks of Recent Caribbean Writing

It is tempting when surveying a body of works in order to trace its major directions to delineate the neat contours of a framework within which to enclose the essential features of a genre within a particular culture and society. A recurring theoretical model applied to the postcolonial literatures in English bears upon the notion of identity: on what makes a culture truly national, as opposed to the former colonizing ideology or to a new internationalism in art as in other fields. National cultures and cultural nationalism do exist, but to impose a dominant or homogeneous model on West Indian fiction is bound to raise unresolvable contradictions, It may be significant that Homi Bhabha's Nation and Narration contains no essay on Caribbean literature and no reference to Caribbean writers. On the other hand, Stefano Harney, the author of a recent perceptive study of Trinidadian literature entitled Nationalism and Identity, argues that cultural nationalism in Trinidad is rooted in the popular arts - dance, masmaking, theatre, calypso, and spoken poetry (Harney 1996, 194) - but is seldom unreservedly professed in the work of individual novelists. One should add that, in the Caribbean generally, race, class, gender, and the ideal of community, as both sources of conflict and means of identification, have been more significant catalysts of fictional development than any ideal of national achievement.

My intention in this paper is twofold: to trace some recent developments in Caribbean fiction and, while doing so, to address the question of whether a new Caribbean fictional aesthetics is emerging, different from that of the first generation of novelists. West Indian fiction is, I think, one of the richest and most original among postcolonial literatures, and the novels I shall comment on represent a far from exhaustive as well as a very subjective choice of novels published in the 1990s. The wealth of material with which I was faced only partly explains my use of the carnival metaphor to convey its varied and imaginative scope. The first phase of Carnival called Canboulay (derived from the French cannes brûlées) is patterned on the procession of reluctant slaves forced to fight fires in the cane fields, a procession later transformed into freedom marches to celebrate the abolition of slavery. Like the first major outburst of Caribbean fiction in the 1950s and 1960s, it therefore enacts an irruption of self-assertion from the limbo of early Caribbean experience – what the novelist Wilson Harris calls "vestiges of the subconscious imagination" that were formerly repressed. Both as a metaphor and as itself a frequent subject of fiction, Carnival, like the real

event, is essentially dynamic and never stopped acquiring new accretions of meaning, ranging from the simple and popular to the highly complex, while each of its masks is an ambivalent expression of a Caribbean reality and of the self-reflexiveness it inspires in fiction.

Carnival is ambivalent because it can be mere burlesque masquerade, and, as several writers have pointed out, is not without its pitfalls. Already twenty-five years ago, Derek Walcott criticized the institutionalization of Carnival and its recuperation by the state and other money interests, as Earl Lovelace was to do in *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), suggesting that Carnival by itself is an inadequate ideal of communal identification. In a very different way, Wilson Harris in his novel Carnival (1985) shows the liberating and subversive power of the carnivalesque, but also presents Johnny, the Carnival king, as an exploited but hardened rebel adverse to dialogue and therefore seen as an "embalmed Lenin" (Harris 1993, 50) who perpetuates the spirit of impotence and the victim syndrome he has cultivated.

From Palace of the Peacock (1960) to Jonestown (1996), carnival has been a recurring trope of endless creativity in Harris's fiction,<sup>2</sup> at first an emergence into being of the so far 'invisible,' deprived West Indian who simultaneously impinges on the consciousness of the former exploiter, a reciprocal process summed up in the title of his novel Genesis of the Clowns (1977). As a coming to life, Carnival also dramatizes the surfacing of Caribbean communities from their eclipsed condition and so-called historical void, which Harris described as "the unborn state of exile" (Harris 1965, 95), a state he associates with a partly unconscious complex of forces, psychological, archetypal, mythical and, increasingly, religious. Their retrieval is only one of the multiple functions of the carnival metaphor in his fiction, which also represents the existential process itself, an interweaving of life and death, while in the unravelling narrative, carnival is the creative imagination, shaping what he calls "an art of carnival revolution" (Harris 1985, 62–63). In retrospect, one can read his opus as so many stages in this process of retrieval, the translation of a profound Caribbean reality into perceptible, necessarily partial masks or social faces.

I do not claim that Harris's version of carnival and the conception of fiction it substantializes have been a model for other Caribbean writers, though it may have influenced some younger novelists. But it is a convenient starting point and a useful simile to convey the emergence from the Caribbean psyche of the rich diversity of West Indian fictional masks, a diversity born from the exilic condition of the people both in the West Indies and abroad.<sup>3</sup> I need hardly emphasize the plurality of all aspects of life in the Caribbean and its diaspora; without denying a Caribbean

Derek Walcott (1972), 26. On the ambivalence of Carnival, see also Harney (1996, 44).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> On this subject, see Maes-Jelinek (1989), 45-61. In the following, capitalized 'Carnival' is essentially the concrete historical celebration, while 'carnival' implies various extensions of this.

On this, see Bénédicte Ledent, Exile and Caribbeanness in Caryl Phillips's Fiction (forth-coming).

specificity which has been a major subject of interrogation from the initial rise of Caribbean fiction, I would rather say that its originality largely developed out of a fruitful tension between, on one hand, the expression of a common experience and local belonging, and, on the other, the effects of multiple origins and exile both in the fragmented geographical reality of the Caribbean and among the growing body of West Indian writers in Britain, Canada and the United States. Most novelists of the first generation left the West Indies to become writers and intimated either in direct statements or through the subject of their fiction that they discovered their Caribbeanness in Britain. In contrast with characterization in the early British novel, most of them also concentrated on the ordinary, sometimes illiterate West Indian. The West Indian peasant was George Lamming's true hero, at least in his early novels. From beginning to end Sam Selvon portrayed the ordinary man in his fiction. Even Harris concentrated on the folk in The Guyana Quartet. This led to the notion of 'peoplehood' applied to the fiction of Michael Anthony and Earl Lovelace, who have both sought in the folk tradition, especially Carnival, the essence of a genuine Caribbean culture. In his realistic re-creation of the social context, Lovelace appears to offer a more authentic view of the popular ethos than Harris, though, however dissimilar their fiction in form and content, they seem to agree on the ambivalence of Carnival and on the primacy of the individual consciousness. But, paradoxically, for all Lovelace's reputation of being closer to the people, Harris presents both carnivalization and the growth in consciousness as means of achieving a heterogeneous community, whereas, in The Dragon Can't Dance, Aldrick, the protagonist, whose whole life used to focus on his participation in Carnival and what it meant for Calvary Hill, assumes responsibility for his individual self and his need to grow, as he says (Lovelace 1979, 204), by leaving his community and rejecting the offer of friendship of his East Indian neighbour.

The reverse takes place in Salt, Lovelace's latest novel, the winner of this year's overall Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Its title is inspired, I think, by a widespread legend among slaves that they could fly back to Africa before they began to eat salt to compensate for their dehydration in the canefields. The narrative opens with one of the mythical stories told by Uncle Bango about a slave ancestor, Guinea John, wanted for rebellion, but who was light enough to fly back to his pre-Middle Passage family in Africa, whereas the other slaves couldn't follow because they had eaten too much salt. Uncle Bango, a labourer on a creole estate, is the repository of myth and of the slaves' history in a village community and has made it his life's mission to free his fellow-villagers from the mental imprisonment, born of historical servitude, that continues to plague the island's inhabitants indiscriminately. The other man with a mission is Alford George, an enthusiastic teacher-turned-politician, who understands first that he must educate the young to live in the island rather than prepare a few for higher education abroad (as was usually the case), then that he must serve his local

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> A similar point is made in Michelle Cliff's Abeng (1995), 26.

130

community rather than support demagogic politicians in the capital. He returns to his village when, as his partner says, he has arrived at a self (Lovelace 1996, 254). So, in this case, there is identification between self and community, and he seems in a better position to achieve the purpose defined in his electoral campaign:

[...] he argued that because enslavement and indenture had brought our peoples to these islands, we had continued to see ourselves from the perspectives of our loss, characterizing ourselves as ex-enslaved, ex-indentured. In reality we would better address our future if we saw ourselves as a new people brought together and created anew by our struggles against enslavement, indenture and colonialism. (Lovelace 1996, 122)

Except in its form, this statement is reminiscent of Selvon. The novel as a whole blends – in a remarkably smooth, vivid, and witty narrative, clearly partly inspired by the oral tradition – all aspects of Trinidadian society in village and city; it represents all classes and races (and their history) now inextricably mixed, and it shifts unobtrusively between standpoints, including that of the white plantocracy. That the latter should be represented at all, from the inside, though not without dramatic irony, indicates an evolution in Lovelace's work, a recognition of the descendants of the plantocracy as an ineluctable part of Trinidad's social landscape.

Though utterly different in form, Lawrence Scott's Witchbroom can be read as a counterpart to Salt, both titles evoking the history of Trinidad with equally striking brevity. While 'salt' calls to mind the horrors of slavery and its lingering effects, 'witchbroom' stigmatizes the parasite and curse inherent in the system, gnawing at it down to the near-extinction of those who established it. Whereas Lovelace tells the story of the people, Scott, a white creole living in Britain, traces the history of a colonizing Spanish family of Trinidad (here called Kairi, the island's aboriginal name) and, by extension, that of the Caribbean. But in spirit, his novel belongs with the work of a new generation who show the terrible legacies of the past still influencing the social and political complexities of the present but envisage a Caribbean future in terms of reconciliation.

Apart from Sam Selvon and Harris, the older generation of novelists were prone to emphasize the divisive elements in Caribbean society. Scott does not ignore them and, as one reviewer pointed out, his is a "postcolonial text [...] deeply rooted in the engagement with colonialism and its attendant demons and monsters" (Dawes 1997, 121), not least, I would add, through will-to-power, eccentricities, and sexual perversity as well as religious excesses within the one Spanish family. He also traces the origins, growth, and legacies of the colonial society through an inextricable web of contacts – often unacknowledged in the past – between races, classes, and genders. The importance in this novel of women, often stronger and more imaginative than the men, is a new feature in the fiction of male Caribbean novelists, equally present in Salt, which, in this respect, differs markedly from The Dragon Can't Dance. Significantly, the main narrator in Witchbroom is an androgynous being called Lavren, inspired by his mother and muse Marie Elena and by the stories of his second mother and Black

nanny, Josephine. As a hermaphrodite who, in his narrative role, emerged from the Gulf of Sadness (the Gulf of Paria?) and still swims occasionally in its undercurrents, Lavren is a vessel for the dreams, ambitions, and sufferings of his family and the Caribbean peoples. Again, the emergence of fiction from the Caribbean unconscious, stimulating the portrayal of social reality rather than the reverse, is in direct line with Harris's novels. So is Scott's carnivalization of fiction as a vehicle for history and creativity, though carnival sometimes appears as too facile a means of unification and he tends to idealize its equalizing power in a way Harris never does.

Lavren's narrative consists of two sets of "Carnival Tales" framed by the self-reflexive comments and diary of a first-person narrator who presents a more realistic version of the same events. If the story of the white plantocracy dominates the narrative, it is by way of a confession and as an act of expiation, while signalling the dissolution of the colonial tradition in both reality and text when Marie Elena dies. The novel ends on Jouvert morning (jour ouvert) suggesting the openness and the promise of the future without being blindly optimistic, for "the memory of treachery and cruelty" (Scott 1992, 269) endures and the vestiges of a long history of exploitation and torment are still to be seen. Finally, the old plantation, derelict and eaten up by the parasite, disappears, and there remains only an absence full of "remembered selves" (272), though the novel does not so much attempt to transcend Caribbean divisiveness as to fill in the interstices between its fragments.

From the outset, fragmentation has been a keyword in Caribbean cultural history, a factor of alienation and impotence but also of fulfilment, as Michael Gilkes's challenging and fertile notion of "creative schizophrenia" (Gilkes 1986) suggests, as well as Wilson Harris's conversion of dividedness and its attendant uncertainties into a new ontological perception of the human personality or, in his words, "the many partial existences" and carnival masks I alluded to earlier. If fragmentation was a founding agent of Caribbean society for peoples wrenched from various backgrounds, it could also be turned into a disrupting instrument of tyrannical absolutes and the seminal agent of a developing 'cross-Caribbeanness.'

In recent years, it has sometimes been argued, usually by critics who became interested in postcolonial fiction via their work on postmodernism, that postcolonial literatures are a branch of the postmodern plurality, on the ground that the dismemberments and disruptions they portray, the sense of living in a spiritual and psychological void, are of a similar nature and have generated similar narrative techniques. I have expressed elsewhere (Maes-Jelinek 1997) my disagreement with this view and won't labour the point here. Postmodernism is an essentially Western phenomenon even if it shares with postcolonialism a sense of disorientation and loss, a fairly recent feature in Western societies but experienced with greater intensity in the Caribbean from the beginning of its colonization and throughout its history. Postmodernism and postcolonialism also share some formal and stylistic characteristics. However, the obvious and major distinction between postmodernist and Caribbean fiction is that in postmodernism the collapse of former certainties, the dissolution of forms, and the new

strategies this entailed originated in scepticism and a loss of values. Whereas Caribbean fiction, from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, has been essentialist and evinces a constant search for, and frequent re-definitions of, values. If twentieth-century events have led to 'the sense of an ending' and of void in postmodern fiction, it has been the reverse in Caribbean writing: from the experience of alienation, fragmentation, and the apparent void to an assertion of purposefulness and potentiality, which may explain the dynamism and continuing evolution of the Caribbean fictional aesthetic.

This distinction makes me question a recent assertion that Harris, Scott, and Erna Brodber, the Jamaican novelist, are the only genuine postmodern writers to have emerged in the Caribbean - unless its author simply has in mind experimental techniques (see Dawes 1997, 121); though even so, in Britain at any rate and with a few exceptions, postmodernist writing does not fundamentally question the premises of the realist tradition. Harris, Scott, and Brodber take a more differentiated approach: for all their doing away with the controlling author or narrator, as in postmodernism, they plumb a living but subterranean tradition which comes to the surface through a vicarious, mediating voice articulating the accumulated remains of an experience that will erupt from the depths of the Caribbean psyche (sometimes of its own accord) and engage in dialogue with the exploring narrator. This is the case in Witchbroom, in Brodber's latest novel, Louisiana, in which the narrator calls herself "a talking drum" (Brodber 1994, 46), and in Harris's novels of the 1990s. In all these fictions, the first narrator is a mere editor at a further remove from the talking voice which evokes legacies that must be assimilated, however painfully, in order to envisage a more promising future. Together with the challenge to the social and ontological premises that have shaped the 'Great Tradition' of English fiction, these novels express a sensibility more attuned to intuition and a non-rational epistemology that runs counter to the Western approach.

Scott, Lovelace, and Brodber belong to an in-between generation. Younger writers appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, giving a new directional impetus to Caribbean fiction marked by a less conflictual approach to the concept of Caribbeanness than that revealed in earlier writing. Caryl Phillips, Fred D'Aguiar, and David Dabydeen, though educated in Britain and part of its literary scene, travel back and forth to the Caribbean; Neil Bissoondath, I understand, returns regularly from Toronto to Trinidad, while Phillips and D'Aguiar also teach in the USA.

This expansion of the Caribbean experience to encompass the Black British and Black American diasporas has also extended their fictional territory, though they still find it necessary to rewrite their West Indian origins differently from their predecessors. As Harris said about his own perception of the genesis of Caribbean peoples, "it is not a question of rootlessness but of the miracle of roots" (Harris 1981, 65).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> On this subject, see Hutcheon (1988) and Lee (1990).

From Higher Ground onwards, Caryl Phillips's fiction is most clearly sustained by an expanding twofold vision of his own Afro-Caribbean legacy and by a moral engagement with other peoples similarly torn between belonging and displacement in Europe and America. His more recent novels, Higher Ground (1989), Cambridge (1991), Crossing the River (1993) and The Nature of Blood (1997), bring together several stories of different times and places, characters from dissimilar backgrounds with their own specific history, who all strike a different vocal register in their narrative. Yet this plurality and surface fragmentation is counterpointed by a common experience of displacement, persecution, suffering, incomprehension, and loneliness. Phillips is probably also the first male Caribbean writer to unravel with such sensitive and subtle immediacy the vibrations of a woman's consciousness and psychological vulnerability, as he does with pervasive irony in his earlier novel Cambridge and with deep compassion in The Nature of Blood.

This last-mentioned novel interweaves the story of Eva Stern, a survivor of Belsen concentration camp, with a re-creation of Jewish persecution in fifteenthcentury Venice and a rewriting of Othello mainly from his point of view, in which his envisaged repudation of Desdemona is not motivated by jealousy, the 'green-eyed monster,' but by his own latent racism and nostalgia for his African past and family. The narrative foregrounds the Jewish experience, the object of frequent comparisons with African exile in Caribbean, especially Rastafarian literature. Racism and exclusion are recurrent phenomena to which all humans are prone. But it is Othello who sees Desdemona as 'other, and the novel ends with a dramatization of Israeli discrimination against the Ethiopian Falashas who were flown over to Israel. Early reviews of the novel were very contradictory: high praise and rather superficial dismissal. Only a close reading and analysis of its texts will show whether the orchestration of its various strands is wholly successful. But I found the novel's imaginative empathy and its stylistic rendering disturbingly sober, and an example of Phillips's advocacy "to conceive of Caribbean literature as rising above national or linguistic boundaries" (Phillips 1997, 10). This is not an encouragement to internationalism - rather, a translation of a common fund of human experience, embedded in what Harris calls the "cross-cultural psyche," branching into a mosaic of forms.

Nevertheless, the younger generation are still affected by the tension I mentioned earlier between a sense of belonging and the reality of exile. Fred D'Aguiar has argued against the label 'Black British literature' (D'Aguiar 1989), because it makes race a criterion of evaluation, and Neil Bissoondath sharply criticized the official policy of multiculturalism in Canada on the ground that it prolongs rather than erases divisions and prevents integration. Yet both writers still draw inspiration from their Caribbean origins, though Bissoondath's second novel concentrates on white Canadian characters, apparently deliberately eschewing so-called 'ethnic' or 'migrant' writing. Not so D'Aguiar, whose first novel, *The Longest Memory* (1994), is a sensitive, poetic meditation in prose on the master/slave relationship on a Virginian plantation which

points to a recent strand in West Indian fiction: the exploration of the shared experience of slavery in the Caribbean and America.

The four parts of D'Aguiar's second novel, *Dear Future* (1996),<sup>6</sup> are not as smoothly integrated, though it would seem that the narrative fragmentation is intentional, its unconnected sections textualizing the disruptions in individual and community by arbitrary power and corruption in Guyana under Forbes Burnham's dictatorship. The consciousness of a young boy fluctuating between dream and reality after he is accidentally struck on the head with an axe dominates the novel. But the two parts in which he is involved end abruptly in the middle of action or reflection as if what mattered were the strong emotions of the boy – first when his grandparents' house is attacked by a government-supporting crowd and he is faced with a hallucinatory scene of battling fires in the dark, but the outcome of the battle is eluded; then, in the last part of the novel, when he writes letters to "Dear Future" in the hope of finding out whether he will be reunited with his mother and little brothers stranded in London, for whom he has been pining all along, while the future remains obstinately silent.

A far bleaker view of Guyana emerges from David Dabydeen's latest novel, The Counting House (1996); unlike D'Aguiar's, this tale of violence, greed, dispossession, sexual predation, is seldom relieved by genuine warmth or tenderness. While Phillips and D'Aguiar have re-created the actual experience of slavery uncharted by the first generation, who, except for Edgar Mittelholzer in his Kaywana Trilogy (1952; 1954; 1958), tended to concentrate on its contemporary consequences, Dabydeen evokes the early days of indentureship through the fate of a young East Indian couple, when extreme poverty in India, aspiration to liberation from its rigid traditions, repression after the Indian Mutiny, and false promises drove many to bind themselves to the Guyanese plantation, the 'counting house' of the title and a symbol of imperial capitalization. But sheer acquisitiveness dehumanizes labourers, too, and antagonizes the newly emancipated slaves, who see the newcomers as intruders coming to reap the benefits of their own hard labour. In spite of some powerful poetic imagery, the novel seems inspired by a not fully controlled urge to denounce and throw light on the period preceding the time-span recreated by V.S. Naipaul in A House for Mr Biswas. However, whereas Naipaul portrayed a self-contained East Indian community, which may have reflected the Trinidadian social reality, Dabydeen suggests that, from the very beginning, Africans and Indians were trapped into the one colonial system and forced to struggle through together despite reciprocal hostility, which explains its lingering effects in Guyana down to the present day. But the narrative also adumbrates

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Since this paper was written, D'Aguiar has published a third novel, Feeding the Ghosts (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). This is a superb fictional re-creation of an actual event in which the captain of a slaveship, the Zong, ordered 133 Africans to be thrown overboard on the pretext of illness and water shortage. This event is mentioned in passing in Michelle Cliff's Abeng (164).

the accepted multiracialism that he had portrayed with sensitiveness in his first novel, *The Intended*.

Of the writers so far mentioned, only Lovelace and Brodber live in the Caribbean and are likely to keep writing about it. The younger novelists' manifold exploration of their West Indian inheritance, exilic condition and their sometimes precarious integration into their adopted country is right now generating a transcultural fiction which offers a new model of universality no longer synonymous with what the West can comprehend or assimilate, while adding a new dimension to their new country's cultural scene, at least in Britain and Canada. In the USA, a few women writers of West Indian origin — Paule Marshall, Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff — seem to be frequently identified with their Afro-American sisters. Apart from referring to Erna Brodber, I have not discussed women novelists, who have clearly opened new vistas of Caribbean reality neglected by men, especially on the women's 'double colonization.' It did seem that, from the 1980s onwards, they were dethroning their male counterparts through their originality and formal experimentation. To discuss their fiction, however, would have meant a different paper altogether.

But as a conclusion, I want to draw attention to The Ventriloquist's Tale (1997), a remarkable first novel by Pauline Melville, an Anglo-Guyanese writer of partly Amerindian ancestry. Her titles alone - the ventriloquist; and Shape-Shifter (1990) and The Migration of Souls (1998), two collections of stories – take us back to the protean, fluid masks of Caribbean identity and to an approach to fiction as a text of reality untrammelled by sharp divisions into categories of being. In this she clearly follows in Wilson Harris's footsteps and, like him, builds a bridge between the Amerindian and the European world-views, between myth and science. There is a major difference, however, in her mode of writing, which, in her narrator's words, is "hard-nosed, toughminded realism" (Melville 1997, 9). The nameless narrator is a trickster figure and, as such, is part of a carnival constellation, though he can also be identified with Macunaima, an Amerindian folk-hero, or alternately with the vanished son of an incestuous couple whose relationship in the 1920s, re-created in the first part of the narrative, gives way to another affair in present-day Guyana between a half-Scottish, half-Amerindian descendant of the same family and an Englishwoman doing research on Evelyn Waugh's journey to Guyana. The natives' memories of Waugh are a witty satire of his evocation of the Guyanese interior and its people in A Handful of Dust.

I hope the following extract will give some idea of the imaginativeness and verve with which the past and its present-day narrator meet in this novel:

In my part of the world there are many lakes. [...] I went fishing in the lake of mud. [...] Poking around there, I dredged up from the bottom of the muddy lake a word. Yes, you heard right, a word, heavy like a stone and covered in moss. It made a 'gluck' sound as I recovered it from the dark mud that tried to suck it back. But there was no returning. I cradled it to my chest with a mixture of fierce excitement and possessiveness [...] Cleansed it. Scraped the moss of centuries from it.

Then I saw that on the word were carved other words, [and] I became aware of the noisy and voluble existence of words, an incessant chattering from the past, and as the babble grew louder. [...] and approached along the forest trails, the words, some declaiming, some whispering, were joined, firstly by laughter and ribald whistles and finally by an unmistakable clattering that could only be the rattling dance of bones.

They came into sight. What a jostling, shoving awesome throng of chattering, hobbling, jigging, ramshackle bones from as far back as the eye could see. [...] Child skeletons bounced rubber balls. Adults made lewd and suggestive wiggles with their pelvic bones, other began to picnic by the wayside, cooking in pots over hastily made fires. [...]

And so, from where I had been peeping them through an ear-ring bush, I took a step forward, hesitating only a second before plunging into the bobbing, undulating crowd which received me with whoops of joy and squeals of approval as they lifted me on their skeleton shoulders, the excited babble mounting in volume, until one massive voice that could be heard from Mahaica Creek to Quito City, the bony crew's chatter merged into one gigantic roar as they shouted: 'That's my boy.' (Melville 1997, 5–6)

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