
The Novel from 1950 to 1970

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If the very beginnings of West Indian fiction were predominantly Jamaican, the creative explosion of the 1950s, which preceded political independence in the Caribbean and initiated a period of transition, involved all the islands and Guyana (then still British Guiana). There is a tendency to speak of the West Indian novel as an entity, and, of course, the Caribbean consciousness that it expresses was shaped by the common historical experience of transplantation, slavery, and indentured labor. Nevertheless, the West Indian world, as reflected in the novel, is both complex and diversified. What is now seen as a specifically West Indian sensibility has grown and found expression in subtly varying and multifarious ways. For instance, a proportionately large number of excellent writers are from Guyana and have spent their formative years not in Georgetown, the capital, but in New Amsterdam or in some areas often described as colonial backwaters on the edge of the South American continent. Perhaps their very isolation, the call of the unknown both from the outside world and from the immense territories at their back, were a unique stimulus to their imagination, which, in spite of a common language, marked them off from the island writers. Territorial diversity and variations in the use of language and dialect, which are discussed elsewhere in this volume, should be kept in mind, for the European or North American critic, usually unable to distinguish between them, is too often tempted to lump them together.

Since it was in the 1950s that West Indian fiction appeared on the map of world literature, we may ask what its major characteristics were and in what way it differed from English or American novels, which, until then, must have been the staple reading diet of the educated middle class, at that time still a small minority. Unlike fiction in English from other former British colonies, and in spite of V. S. Naipaul's vision of West Indian mimicry, there was no long period of gestation or imitation of the metropolitan tradition in the anglophone Caribbean. This is not to suggest that fiction suddenly erupted out of a literary void. No literature or literary genre does anywhere, and apart from specifically Caribbean cultural elements, such as the little magazines or the possible influence of an oral tradition — for instance, the Anancy tales — novelists were very much aware of the European tradition of social realism. But they modified it from the start, partly by dealing with inescapable Caribbean issues such as exile, isolation and alienation, fragmentation, race, and the need for self-definition, and partly through their use of Caribbean idioms, which led to the recreation of so many Caribbean voices. Moreover, except for the Oxford-educated Naipaul, these novelists were not university graduates and were therefore less subject to the tyrannies of established forms. Beyond secondary school, at the time still a luxury, the majority of Caribbean novelists were autodidacts who often, though not always, sprang from the people and realized that education was a passport of escape from colonial isolation. Contrary, again, to the usual development of literature elsewhere, Caribbean

fiction does not begin by concentrating on the socially important man, or the hero. The singled-out character is often a man of the people in the literal sense. Caribbean fiction, then, tends to be oriented toward the folk and the community, while the values it explores concern the group, rather than individual, achievement, something that, in the 1950s, is only becoming a possibility. Edgar Mittelholzer, who was highly conscious of sociocultural and racial hierarchies, is an exception. But even V. S. Naipaul, whose early novels record his West Indian experience in a form both influenced by, and ironically distant from, the English tradition, portrays West Indian society through ordinary, rather than exceptional, people. The European novel, which developed from an ironic subversion of the epic and the traditional hero, was in turn subverted in the Caribbean to accommodate the European hero's victims.

The portrayal of West Indian society by its first indigenous group of writers since the pioneers of the 1930s tackled the harsh realities of a society kept silent for centuries, the West Indian condition that developed in the aftermath of a particularly inhuman colonization involving the extermination of the native population and a subsequent continuing lack of concern, up to the twentieth century, for the ordinary man's survival. This is shown, among others, in Ralph De Boissiere's ironically titled *Crown Jewel*, 1952, in George Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*, 1960, and in Roger Mais's novels. Yet the fiction of the 1950s is not predominantly one of social protest, even if this is implicit in the portrayal of the people's condition. The artist confronts the problems with which both he and his society must come to terms if they are to be reconciled with their origins, understand the present, and envisage their own future, that is, the impact of history and of endless economic exploitation, with their corollary of the most racially mixed population in the world, the thirst for literacy, and the individual's longing for self-realization.

Perhaps significantly, the 1950s open with the publication of Edgar Mittelholzer's *Morning at the Office*, 1950, not because it is a great novel, though it is free of the extravagance of much of his later fiction, but because it portrays in a nutshell — a morning's work in a Trinidad office — the social situation of the time in the Caribbean. Race and color, represented in their extraordinary variety with the white British manager at the top and black messenger boy at the bottom of the office and, symbolically, the social and colonial hierarchy, stand out as determining factors of possible achievement and, consequently, of attitude and behavior. A frequent source of personal frustration and social tension, they bring into focus the characters' individual and group histories, economically evoked, so that without actually exploring them, they bring to mind the major issues and themes that were to preoccupy most of these novelists throughout the decade. Paramount among these issues and themes is the question of racial identity, more crucial in the West Indies than in any other former British colony since, owing to the region's history, all possible racial admixtures exist along distinct types: African, East Indian, Chinese, and European. Racial identity obsessively informs the work of Mittelholzer, who is a pioneer in this, as he is in his treatment of other Caribbean themes (but not in the form of the novel). He differs from most of his successors, however, in considering color and miscegenation major causes of disorientation in Caribbean society. Many of his characters share his own dilemma: he was the "swarthy boy" of European-looking parents, and his father was a negrophobe. They see their color as "taint" and associate it with the weaker side of their personality while their white inheritance accounts for their strength, as in the case of the heroine of *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, 1953. Michael Gilkes has seen in this racial dichotomy the

reverse of Derek Walcott's acceptance, the source of the central psychological conflict by which the characters associate their own white-black division with "Intellect/Spirituality (strength) versus Emotion/Sensuality (weakness)" (King [1979], 99). Mittelholzer's conviction that he owed the strand of strength in himself to his German ancestry may explain his development toward extreme right-wing views, particularly in his last novels which take place in England and deplore the social and political liberalization of English society. From a very different standpoint and with considerably less talent, these novels prefigure Naipaul's perception of disorder in the once model country.

The divided personality and consciousness of Mittelholzer's characters with their attendant anxiety and, as Michael Gilkes points out, "cultural schizophrenia" (Gilkes [1975], x) was essentially a product of history. In his *Kaywana* trilogy, 1952–58, Mittelholzer relates the history of his native Guyana which, from the first European expedition to the British takeover in 1796, was tossed from one European power to another — Spanish, Dutch, and French. The novels cover a period from the first Dutch settlement in 1616 to the mid-twentieth century through the fortunes of the Van Groenwegel family. Kaywana is the half-Aboriginal/half-English girl who, in spite of her personal strength and courage (presumably the English in her), marks the Van Groenwegel dynasty with the "taint" of her blood. The settlers' adventurous struggle against all odds to create and maintain their empire illustrates the courage and will-to-power, the harshness and spirit of violence which presided over the founding of the plantation society and led to the worst aberrations. Though a good storyteller and interpreter of the impact of nature on his characters' behavior, Mittelholzer often resorts to sensationalism — for example, an old slave is buried alive when useless — and an incapacity to control his material often mars his narratives. The eroticism in these and other novels is seen by some as pornography, by others as a reaction against the prudery of the society he portrayed. But he successfully conveys a sense of Guyana's terrifying past linked to the fascination the area exerted on the European imagination, a sense of a mysterious environment haunted by the ghosts of the past, as is also obvious in *Shadows Move Among Them*, 1951, and the ghost-story *My Bones and My Flute*, 1955. In the same vein as Mittelholzer's *Kaywana* trilogy, one should mention Christopher Nicole's *Amyot* series, 1964–65, set in the Bahamas.

The posthumously published novels of H. G. De Lisser, a fair-skinned Jamaican, are not without resemblance to Mittelholzer's historical fiction. *Psyche*, 1952, *Morgan's Daughter*, 1953, and *The Cup and the Lip*, 1956, also evoke the plantation world with a prejudiced interpretation of nonwhites' behavior, though without the psychological exploration or complexity of Mittelholzer's fiction. Like *The Children of Kaywana*, *The Arawak Girl*, 1958, goes back to the beginning of Caribbean history, in this novel Columbus's stay in Jamaica in 1503–04. As Kenneth Ramchand suggests, De Lisser sees the Caribs as already degenerate primitives (Ramchand [1970], 164) and is aware of no connection between present-day West Indians and the island's early inhabitants. A similar interest in the history of Jamaica, in the seventeenth century, informs S. A. G. Taylor's novel *Capture of Jamaica*, 1951, and *Buccaneer Bay*, 1952. They were published by the Kingston Pioneer Press, a venture that was soon to collapse; no publishing house was then viable in the West Indies, one of the reasons that urged potential writers to leave their countries.

The first to go, in 1948, was Mittelholzer, who went to England, and Ralph De Boissiere

who left Trinidad for Australia, where his first two novels *Crown Jewel*, 1952, and *Rum and Coca Cola*, 1956, were originally published. De Boissiere has explained that his plots are fashioned by “the opposition of characters to society” (De Boissiere [1982], 5). *Crown Jewel*, rewritten three times, deals with the 1937 labor unrest in Trinidad and portrays the living conditions of the urban poor while tracing the growing political awareness of a major character, André de Coudray, which may have been inspired by the author’s own left-wing commitment. Though too explanatory, the narrative is interspersed with vivid dialogues in Trinidadian Creole, which Sam Selvon was to use so strikingly as the medium of expression of the West Indian consciousness. *Rum and Coca Cola* also illustrates the social injustice experienced by the destitute, this time during World War II when the Americans stationed on the island, in spite of their own offhand excesses, gave the Trinidadians a glimpse of a different social order and of the possible collapse of British imperialism. Set in Australia, De Boissiere’s third novel, *No Saddles for Kangaroos*, 1964, shows the same concern for economic injustice and a similar faith in positive social action.

The first two novels by the Jamaican Roger Mais also focus on the life of the dispossessed, however without reflecting the author’s political commitment, though that commitment was an incentive to his choice of subject-matter. Rather, these novels evince the moral outrage, intense sympathies, and spirituality which characterized Mais the man and the artist (he was also a poet, dramatist, short-story writer, and painter). *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, 1953, a biblical title used ironically, deals with yard life in the Kingston underworld. In the author’s words, it was meant “to give the world a true picture of the real Jamaica and the dreadful conditions of the working class” (Ramchand [1970], 179). Although the characters are individualized, Mais’s purpose is to present a community caught in a deadlock of poverty, hopelessness, and inevitable crime, from which there is no escape. This is symbolically suggested at the very end of the novel when Surjue, who has repeatedly attempted to outwit fate, is shot dead when attempting to escape from prison while his woman, Rema, is burning alive. The last sentence of the novel after Surjue’s fall — “He lay on his back, his arms flung wide, staring up at the silent unequivocal stars” (Mais [1970], 288) — has a Hardy-like resonance, though in both life and work, Mais seems closer to pre-war Orwell. There is a similar gap in their fiction between intention and achievement. But in spite of occasional overwriting and sentimentality, Mais’s writing is vigorous and poetic, and the sense of man’s tragic fate blends with the frustration due to social deprivation. Possibly under the influence of drama, the narrative is fragmented into short scenes intertwining the lives (and deaths!) of the slum-dwellers. The “Chorus of the People in the Lane” in *Brother Man*, 1954, may also impart an intention to elevate the characters to the level of tragic personae, though this is more successfully achieved in Mais’s third novel, *Black Lightning*, 1955.

Brother Man is also located in a Kingston slum and presents the efforts of a Rastafarian, John Power, to regenerate the squalid and brutal microcosm in which he is isolated by virtue of his moral rigor and spirituality. Full of compassion and integrity, which distinguishes him from fake Rastafarians and Obeahmen, Power is wrongly suspected of a crime he has not committed and, in a scene of Christ-like persecution, he is nearly killed by the very crowd he wanted to save. He survives his trial and is humanized, in a reconciliation of flesh and spirit, by his acceptance of the love of Minette, a young prostitute he had taken in but kept at a distance. As

an individual distinct from the crowd, Brother Man is explored in greater psychological depth than Mais’s earlier characters. It is not far-fetched to suppose that his trial is also an allegory of the plight of the artist alienated from the Philistine crowd, which prefigures the central drama in *Black Lightning*. In this novel, however, overweening pride destroys the hero Jake, a blacksmith and a sculptor, who believes in the artist’s social vocation but can live neither with nor without other people’s support. He creates a figure of Samson with which he identifies and is struck blind by lightning. Mais’s use of biblical symbolism is not as simple as it may sound: in Jake’s fate, he conveys at once a sense of the tragedy of life and of the dilemma of the Caribbean artist, whose imagination is nourished by his own community but who feels compelled to leave it. Isolated in rural Jamaica, Jake commits suicide. This takes place undramatically off-stage in a wood, whose beauty and peace are, at this moment, enjoyed by lovers. The novel’s most powerful image remains the moment of illumination and blindness, which eventually destroys Jake. Wilson Harris reads in Jake’s fall a mythical and healing dimension absorbed by Amos, Jake’s crippled friend, who is renewed by it (Sellick [1982], 6–7).

The development of Mais’s work and his decision to leave Jamaica — as it turned out, for only two years — exemplifies the predicament of the West Indian writer who is caught between the demands of what he sees as an unenlightened society and his own possibilities of achievement. Yet Mais’s departure seems to have been free of the desperate longing to leave and the near-hysterical fear to return expressed by Mittelholzer and Naipaul. It is not surprising, then, that exile, a heartfelt need for writers and a hopeful economic necessity for many ordinary West Indians, should be a central fictional theme explored at all levels of consciousness and a major factor in the creation of a specifically West Indian novel. To the writers who were to evolve original forms in their recreation of the Caribbean experience, mainly Lamming, Selvon, Naipaul, and Harris, exile gave the required distance to envision the setting and milieu of their youth, which they all portray in their early novels. It was also a complex issue with its closely related facets of identity, the colonizer/colonized relationship, language, and, as Wilson Harris was to show, deeper metaphysical undercurrents. But only George Lamming, in a book of essays, *The Pleasures of Exile*, 1960, carefully rationalized and examined the ins and outs of the writer’s urge to “get out” and its corollaries while investigating the fruitfulness of exile: “to be an exile is to be alive,” even if metropolitan culture is “a dubious refuge” (Lamming, [1960], 24, 22).

Lamming’s work is pervaded by his obsession with the Prospero-Caliban syndrome which he has reenacted and reinterpreted in several novels. Prospero’s major legacy, language, is for him an ambivalent gift, an instrument of education and developing consciousness; yet that very educational process and the use of English are means of imprisoning Caliban’s future. Unlike other postcolonial peoples, West Indians have no other indigenous language, and one must remember that, in the 1950s, the deeper effect of the generalized secondary and university education were not yet felt (the University of the West Indies had been founded only in 1948). Since then, Caliban the writer has, to use Lamming’s words, taken the “extraordinary departure which explodes ... Prospero’s premises (Lamming [1960], 109). But in the 1950s, it was envisaged with an urgency that may partly explain the creative drive of the period, and Lamming’s early novels explore the possible ways of assuming “Prospero’s privilege of magic [the Word]” (11) while breaking away from his colonizing vision.

In order to do this, the writer’s first task was to understand the nature of the bond between

Prospero and Caliban, in the past and the present, and of the imposed values Caliban had always taken for granted. Hence, again, the centrality of history is scrutinized through a painful (for Caliban) “backward glance” (Lamming [1960], 32). Lamming’s early fiction is not literally historical since it deals with a very recent past or the present; rather, it is history as it is being lived. *In the Castle of my Skin*, 1953, takes place against the background of the social upheavals of the 1930s and the beginning of West Indian migration. But the past is in the present, and its all-pervasiveness must be exposed in the feudal system that still prevails in the Barbadian village where G, the hero and main narrator, spends his childhood, in the villagers’ deculturation, in the deficient education system, and in the lack of any responsibility toward the peasants, whose lives are being disrupted in a transitional period while both landlord and rising economic and political leaders (Mr. Slime, the former teacher) wash their hands of them. The novel successfully blends several techniques: a social realism softened by humor which, in the West Indies, often seemed the only available defence against tragedy and is here a major aspect of plot and style; an intuitive and visionary, rather than factual, perception of the past expressed in the Old Man’s poetic and dream-like evocation; changes in point of view; symbolism, which Lamming was to use increasingly, and allegory: an unnamed Old Man and Old Woman are representative of former generations, and the Old Woman is the only villager who still remembers slavery but is also the one most respectful of the landlord’s prerogatives. Though often associated with West Indian novels of childhood, *In the Castle of my Skin* really concentrates on village life and its disintegration. Lamming records pessimistically the villagers’ general lack of awareness and understanding of their own condition; they include G, a largely autobiographical figure who, alienated from the other boys by education, is on the verge of leaving the island at the end of the novel. But there is all the difference in the world between a villager’s remark early in the narrative, “no man like to know he black,” and Trumper’s pride in the “Negro” race and people upon his return from the United States. Still, the novel ends with a sense of impotence and G’s awareness that, for all its hardships, a way of life has passed. This mingles in his consciousness with expectation.

Lamming’s next novels, *The Emigrants*, 1954, *Of Age and Innocence*, 1958, and *Season of Adventure*, 1960, interpret the experience of exile and return which, through actual journeys, take the West Indian on his quest for self-definition and self-realization, more difficult and distressing than expected. As its title indicates, the first novel focuses on a group who meet with disillusionment in an England very different from that of their dreams and from which they feel excluded. This is a recurring theme in West Indian fiction which, in this novel, leads to further alienation. “I have no people,” Collis, a poet, says at the end, a comment on his personal situation and on his estrangement, as an artist, from his West Indian roots. *Of Age and Innocence* presents the return home of some West Indians accompanied by English friends. They are traveling to San Cristobal, an allegorical composite of islands evoking a Caribbean microcosm with its multiracial population. They become involved in a political movement led, among others, by Shepard who, as Lamming himself has pointed out, remains imprisoned and cannot reject the yoke of history (see Tiffin [1986], 263). Lamming further investigates the possibility of growth and development, as well as of reaching the older generation’s ideal of unity and freedom. Eventually, both old and young fail, and it is an altogether different way of the colonial deadlock that the author examines in *Season of Adventure*. The novel traces the

recognition of her African roots by a white-looking mulatto girl, Fola, after attending a “ceremony of souls” in the *tonelle* of underprivileged Forest Reserve. Voodoo and steel drums are shown to express a genuine Caribbean sensibility, peasant and African, though Lamming does not romanticize Africa nor advocate a return to it. As Powell asserts, identity, personal and political freedom, are one — “freedom is what you is” (Lamming [1960], 18) — even though his own fanaticism leads to violence and murder. Lamming was clearly disillusioned with the failure of independence to bring real freedom. His hopes for a future based on a genuine understanding of, and feeling for, the past are in the peasants, not in the middle-class ambitious politician. But responsibility also lies with the artist, as a compassionate “Author’s Note” on Powell’s failed bid for freedom suggests: “I don’t think I should be far off the mark in describing myself as a peasant by birth, a colonial by education, and a traitor by instinct” (330). In that first hopeful decade, Lamming’s fiction also investigated the artist’s creativity in connection with his origins. As that decade came to an end, Lamming seemed to be poised between a not wholly satisfying achievement and further expectation. But, wisely, he stopped writing before bringing out *Water with Berries*, 1971, and *Natives of My Person*, 1972, the book usually considered his masterpiece.

Sam Selvon’s novels of this period are less ambitious than Lamming’s, but, in keeping with their clearly self-delimited purpose, they strike the right synthesis between form and content. With the passing of time and the help of serious exegesis, they are seen to be much more than exotic sketches or “diverting superficialities.” These are rash judgments paradoxically based on Selvon’s ability to capture Trinidadian Creole exactly, which, by the common consent of his West Indian critics, he adapts perfectly to his characters’ personalities. So whether in Trinidad or among West Indian immigrants in London, his fictional language is a congenial correlative to his vision, even though his work as a whole is uneven. *A Brighter Sun*, 1952, was the first novel by an East Indian writer to concentrate on East Indian characters. His young protagonist, Tiger, is cut off from his East Indian roots in a sugarcane district and sent to a multiracial village outside Port-of-Spain after his prearranged marriage to a girl he does not know. The opening of the novel in 1940 and references to world events emphasize the secluded life in Tiger’s village while preparing for his exodus (similar to that of many peasants) toward the outskirts of the city where he starts working for the Americans. They are building a road and, through them, Tiger becomes aware of opportunities in an even larger world. Tiger is barely sixteen when he gets married, and the novel traces his awakening to manhood, to the responsibilities of marriage, fatherhood, and his new, changing environment. His half-completed house — a frequent symbol in Caribbean literature — suggests his own partial achievement for he has experienced and learned much about himself, his society, and the outside world. But in his hard-won maturity, he is also aware of the limitations imposed on his development, educational and social, by milieu and circumstances.

A Brighter Sun already shows the mixture of comedy and pathos, the sympathy, humor, and wit typical of Selvon’s later tragi-comedies. Its sequel, *Turn Again Tiger*, 1958, shows a now creolized and more literate Tiger return to his village of origin for a season, from the planting to the harvesting of sugarcane on a plantation still run on the old, hierarchical model. His experience entails a psychological and social confrontation with the colonial legacy and gives him insight into the rural community’s aspirations to a better life. Struggle with his own relational and emotional difficulties finally enables him to see clearly where he stands with

regard to his origins and the society to which he returns in the city. Between these two novels Selvon had written *An Island is a World*, 1955, which deals with the major characters' emigration from and return to Trinidad and explores the always crucial problem of cultural identity, as well as the political tensions that preceded the discussion and temporary setting up of a West Indian Federation. This less satisfactory work was followed by the excellent short stories collected in *Ways of Sunlight*, 1957, and Selvon's matchless evocation of West Indian migrants' life in *The Lonely Londoners*, 1956.

The Lonely Londoners deals with the London experiences of a group of "boys" from various parts of the Caribbean, their disillusion and bewilderment never quite quenching their excitement at being in the great metropolis, the historical places that used to nourish their dreams on the islands now accessible at any time. Most of them lead a precarious existence in search of jobs, rooms, and women. Apart from the narrator's own West Indian voice, their experiences are linked and reflected upon by the honest and compassionate Moses Aloetta, their two voices merging at the end, as has been suggested by Kenneth Ramchand in his introduction to the novel (Selvon [1985], 16). The novel is experimental and wholly original in Selvon's use of a "modified Trinidadian dialect" for both narrative and character speech, often bringing it closer to Standard English, as in the long unpunctuated section — perhaps a parody of Molly's monologue in *Ulysses*? — which opens lyrically with the sense of rebirth in London in the summer and turns into a satire of its sexual mores as the narrative slips into Moses's consciousness. He reflects on the meaning of exile, the ordinary West Indians' capacity to hide their disorientation and fear behind laughter and bravado, their reluctance to return to the Caribbean because, in spite of all, "real" life is in London. Moses detects a paralyzing aimlessness soon assuaged by the strength of life reasserting itself. Selvon's rendering of this duality through the perception and sensibility of the common man and its expression in his own language is a major achievement which he was to reiterate in *Moses Ascending*, 1975.

A very different account of West Indian experience in London is to be found in E. R. Braithwaite's novels, *To Sir, with Love*, 1959, *Paid Servant*, 1962, and *A Choice of Straws*, 1965. The author's conviction that a good education, total adherence to British culture and his loyal service in the R. A. F. would win him integration when he looked for a job after the war was disappointed. His fictionalized account of his own experience as a teacher in London's East End and as a social worker nevertheless seem to play up to British prejudice, for he does not tackle racial bias as an issue relevant to all colored people but works out a personal solution by fighting his own hatred, striving to forgive and to achieve moral superiority. While Braithwaite's answer to race issues is inadequate on both moral and aesthetic grounds because it is narrow and unperceptive, his rendering of black British experience remains similar in content to that of other writers, and he offers a good analysis of difficulties encountered in educating underprivileged children.

In a totally different register, John Hearne, one of the few novelists of his generation who stayed in the West Indies, writes mainly about the middle class and, from his second novel on, creates the imaginary island of Cayuna — similar to Lamming's San Cristobal — strongly reminiscent of his native Jamaica. His light-skinned or white heroes stand at the opposite pole of Lamming's with their assertive "peasant" sensibility. Whereas Lamming shows the West Indian middle class attempting to step into the shoes of the former colonizers and trying to seize power in all areas, Hearne suggests that the middle class and the landed gentry are being dispossessed

and are inevitably threatened by the rising majority of the formerly exploited. But even more importantly, his heroes are deeply aware of the vulnerability of their own cultural inheritance and the disintegration of traditional values. Though Hearne sees this as a universal problem, the particular plight of his characters is naturally determined by the issues at the center of Jamaican life: race, color, educational aspiration and the economic structure of a society in transition. His emphasis, however, is on the moral dilemmas of his characters, and he himself has been called a moral idealist. Mark Lattimer, the politician in *Voices Under the Window*, 1955, tries to reconcile his privileged position with commitment to the poor and is assaulted while rescuing a child from a riotous angry crowd. He recreates his past while lying mortally wounded. In *Stranger at the Gate*, 1956, the private values of Carl Brandt, who represents the landed gentry, are explored in parallel and opposition to the left-wing political commitment of his friend Roy McKenzie and that of an exiled politician, Henri Etienne. In *The Faces of Love*, 1957, Brandt's ideal is reasserted by his cousin Fabricus against the new forces represented by Jojo Rygin, whose dynamism, but also violence, eventually proves self-destructive. In *The Autumn Equinox*, 1959, political commitment is once more presented as leading to frustration and failure, the result of betrayal or treachery, while the hero of *Land of the Living*, 1961, is a German Jew whose family died in concentration camps and who becomes involved with Marcus Heneky, the leader of a black rebellion aborted when he is murdered by one of his group, another instance of betrayal.

The idealism of Hearne's major characters and their connection with nature have often been compared to Hemingway's. A good storyteller and interpreter of individual psychology, Hearne is sometimes taken to task for his treatment of non-middle-class characters, although there are among them morally or spiritually superior people. As a result, and because he privileges commitment to human values, above all love and personal relationships as opposed to political commitment, he has been called an escapist. His early fiction seems to many closer to a literary tradition that other West Indian writers are trying to subvert; this may explain why his novels are underestimated and have not received the critical attention they deserve.

Andrew Salkey is another middle-class Jamaican, whose first novel, *A Quality of Violence*, 1959, is set in rural Jamaica and recreates a devastating period of drought which actually took place in 1900, imposing further hardship on an already dispossessed population. While he avoids dealing with a major historical event, Salkey nevertheless explores the impact on his characters of undigested historical, social, and cultural conditions. The leaders of a Pocomania cult attempt to take advantage of the people's distress. First, Dada Johnson and his assistant go through a ritual self-flagellation until they unexpectedly die. Mother Johnson later tries to assume her husband's former power and induces the crowd to stone her to death after a ritual procession up to the hill of a symbolical calvary. There seems to be no end to self-destructiveness, meaningless sacrifice, and violence; even the children have their own rituals and are prepared to use violence to protect them. As a metaphor for the spiritual condition of the people, the drought fitfully blends with Salkey's exploration of those African survivals which the island's inheritance of oppression and repeated frustration turn, in times of stress, into the special "quality" of violence of the title. In *The Late Emancipation of Jerry Stover*, 1968, Salkey explores the cultural means by which his protagonist attempts to give his life meaning while helping a group of Rastafarians. His failure, which here, too, combines with a natural catastrophe — a fatal landslide — pessimistically exposes a void from which there seems to be no rescue either through religion or politics.

Escape to an Autumn Pavement, 1960, and *The Adventures of Catullus Kelly*, 1969, deal with exile in London, though Salkey's protagonists are middle-class and educated rather than working-class migrants as in Selvon's fiction. From a comfortable, socially respectable position in their own society, they are reduced to taking menial jobs in England and are therefore engulfed in the underworld of black migrants from whom they also feel alienated, as Johnny Sobert does in the first of these two novels. Mainly through his adventures with white women Catullus Kelly moves in a wider social sphere. While in England, however, he fails to understand the nature of the colonizing power with which he had set out to come to terms. Back home, he realizes that the colonizing forces have simply changed faces, but he cannot enlighten his countrymen and, once more, neither culture, religion nor politics are of any help. Catullus is driven to madness, even if to a clear-sighted one.

Rastafarianism developed among the urban poor in Jamaica originally as an alternative to the island's colonial and racial hierarchies when the destitute of African descent saw a potential savior, then a god, in Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. It became increasingly popular after World War II, particularly among slum-dwellers who challenged the Eurocentric social and spiritual values of the middle class. Besides Mais and Salkey, other West Indian writers have examined Rastafarianism's unique mixture of religious, racial, and political commitment, particularly when it was influenced by the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It may then have helped to give a new direction to Caribbean politics (see Cobham [1979], 25–26). Nevertheless, the Black Power movement was essentially political and intent on bringing about social change "here and now," even if it was also the source of a Black Aesthetic, whereas Rastafarianism, inspired by slavery as an historical and existential condition, is predominantly spiritual (see Mutabaruka [1992], 254) and ideologically utopian in its combined illusory identification with Ethiopia. Moreover, the most positive and eloquent expression of Rastafarianism is to be found in poetry, where, with few exceptions such as Mais's "Brother Man," it is frequently presented negatively in the period under scrutiny. In Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*, 1962, and J. B. Emtage's *Brown Sugar*, 1966, Rastafarianism is only one among other cults, all satirized together with West Indian politics by Emtage, a white conservative who seems to see little hope in African leadership. Though Wynter's novel is more of an intellectual than an aesthetic achievement, it is through art, in this case African wood carving, rather than through religion, that some kind of spirituality is attained. Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus*, 1964, is a more ambitious novel that analyses the close link between the deprived condition of slum-dwellers and their two-fold dream of escape to Africa and spiritual salvation, so that the novel combines a realistic rendering of the horrors of slum life and of the characters' awareness of them with their unrealistic attempts to transcend them. These are indeed doomed to failure, and for all his sympathetic rendering of Rastafarian aspirations, Patterson presents them as inherent to the hopeless, meaningless plight which the title of his novel so well conveys. The influence of existentialism is equally felt in his later novel *An Absence of Ruins*, 1967.

The early novels of the Trinidadian Earl Lovelace also explore the possibilities of a meaningful existence through religion, though not exclusively so. In *While Gods are Falling*, 1965, it is indeed from God, not as a transcendental power but as a humanized figure, that the young protagonist seeks support as a personal guide and a source of help for the poor. *The Schoolmaster*, 1968, is a more complex novel in which the influence of religion cannot be

dissociated from sociological and political forces. It has, in fact, been called an allegory of Caribbean history with reference to its keen analysis of manipulating and exploiting power. As in novels centering on Rastafarianism, a Christ figure recurs in Lovelace's fiction, a metaphor both for the sacrificial experience of the dispossessed and for the artist's search for meaning in a ruthless society. The latter is a major theme in *The Obeah Man*, 1964, by another Trinidadian, Ismith Khan. Zampi, the title character, is not a mere dabbler in magic and the supernatural but a highly sensitive and perceptive individual whose calling, as he sees it, makes him reflect on and attempt to remedy the sufferings and the isolation men hide under their reveling masks. The novel mostly takes place through carnival celebrations in Port-of-Spain during which Zampi looks for his girl friend Zolda whom he eventually takes away to a higher life of dedication, though sexual attraction is a major motivation for her. Whereas Lovelace reproduces in his fiction a wide variety of Trinidadian speech, Khan makes use here of the calypsonian mask and thus prefigures Lovelace's own blend of the oral and the written in *The Dragon Can't Dance*, 1979, while Khan's exploration of the dual meaning of carnival masks and of the reality they hide foreshadows Wilson Harris's *Carnival*, 1985.

In Khan's first novel, *The Jumbie Bird*, 1961, also coalesce major themes explored in the Caribbean in the 1960s: the continuing impact of the confrontation of cultures, the ensuing crisis of identity particularly for the individual alienated from his original milieu by education, and the experience of childhood. The milieu recreated here (Khan's own) is that of East Indian Muslims, though major celebrations, like the festival of Hussay, have been creolized or assimilated to festivals in other religions (Hindu and Christian), a syncretism with which V. S. Naipaul also deals in *The Suffrage of Elvira*, 1958. The three generations represented in *The Jumbie Bird* illustrate three stages in the West Indian experience: a deep sense of exile, at once nourished and resisted by the hope of returning to the country of origin; the disorientation of a second generation caught between two worlds; and the difficulties of the growing boy in the third generation, torn between a cherished childhood world he must leave behind and the need to adjust to a different, more sophisticated world itself in the making. The jumbie bird of the title, repeatedly calling its "message of death," is a symbol of isolation and death-in-life; it implicitly evokes new directions as yet undefined, but intrinsic to change.

Khan's novel is only one of a group generally called Novels of Childhood, a particularly fruitful genre in West Indian fiction. The experience of children in the Caribbean has often been viewed as a convenient metaphor for the growing and developing stage of the community at large. It does not express a patronizing outlook of the kind that sees colonials as the "children" of more sophisticated metropolitan "parents." Rather, the child's opening consciousness, his sense of insecurity when torn from the secluded world of childhood and forced to make choices and move on, above all his fresh and future-oriented approach to life in spite of nostalgia and the need to understand the past, all are elements whose significance can be extended to a community choosing for the first time its own destiny and direction. In Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, the young boys' gradual understanding of the villagers' social and political situation parallels that of the adults, as does the political maturity of one or two among them. It can also be argued that some novels concentrating on childhood and growth fictionalize a specific mode of writing. V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, 1961, and Wilson Harris's *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 1965, are cases in point. The former creates a West Indian social realism derived

from the British tradition, while the latter deconstructs that tradition and presents the narrator's development from childhood to maturity as a vision and a new mode of writing in the making.

Michael Anthony is best known for his childhood novels and for his capacity to present from the inside and with great sensitiveness a child's developing consciousness, his emotions and sense of self-discovery. Already in *The Games Were Coming*, 1963, which deals mainly with a young man's attempt at self-realization by becoming a cyclist champion in Trinidad, Anthony creates through the imaginative musings of the champion's brother, Dolphus, the response of a young adolescent to the outer world, his confused efforts to sort out his sensations and feelings, his response to environment and people, and his gradual understanding of major social choices and ways of life. *The Year in San Fernando*, 1965, circumscribes with great precision the experience of a twelve-year-old boy who leaves his village to spend a year in San Fernando, going to school and serving the old lady with whom he stays. The boy faithfully records what he sees and feels, as he is suddenly cut off from his warm home atmosphere and finds himself among indifferent strangers in an alien environment, so that the pain of growing up merges with the difficulty of adjusting to a new life while finding his bearings in a new place and taking on new responsibilities. The novel was inspired by Anthony's own experience, and it is no small achievement that the child's perception of events is never distorted by the adult's memory or changed reaction to them nor by sentimentality or idealization and that the reader should be able to grasp more of naively recorded incidents than the child. As has also been pointed out, the changing canefields become "an image of the progression of the boy's year in San Fernando" (Ramchand [1970], 215), while his growing familiarity with the city and some of its inhabitants are an initiation into life, including a delicately conveyed, pleasant, yet worrying, sensuality. In *Green Days by the River*, 1967, the boy protagonist, Shellie, is three years older and shown growing into adulthood when he is forced to choose between the two girls to whom he is attracted and, as a result, feels life closing in upon him. Here, too, Anthony is at his best in his accurate rendering of the boy's emotions and exceptional relationship of mutual trust with his father.

Geoffrey Drayton's *Christopher*, 1959, evokes the lonely childhood of a white boy in Barbados as the old plantocracy his father represents is being superseded by the new merchant class into which his mother was born. The boy is, therefore, troubled by underlying tensions between his parents and occasionally between the white and black communities. His refuge from isolation is a close observation of nature and, above all, his warm relationship with his devoted black nurse Gip through whom he comes to a better understanding of the villagers. His despair when she dies is also despair at the passing of an era and the death of childhood and innocence. The growing white boy in Ian McDonald's *The Humming-Bird Tree*, 1969, who leaves behind and even rejects his former intimate relations with colored children (an Indian boy and his sister, the protagonist's first love), becomes much more articulate in his eventual deliberate choice of white supremacy, though for some time he is attracted by an "emerging, different, mutual love" (McDonald [1974], 162). The beauty and colorfulness of the tropical world and the boy's perception of them are sensitively rendered, but by adhering to his parents' conservative outlook, he puts a stop to his growth toward a broader view of human and social relations, in contrast to the changing political and social scene in Trinidad. As in other novels by white West Indians, childhood in the Caribbean is remembered as a season in paradise from which fall is inevitable.

A similar nostalgia for a lost or perverted Eden-like past is expressed in novels by white

Dominican female writers, Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The Orchid House*, 1953, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966, both of which convey the beauty and latent sickness of a landscape sensuously recreated and responded to. In the first of these, the narrative, told by the dying old black nurse, Lally, shows the decline of the white creole family to whom she has devoted her life; the master himself is dying from consumption and a refusal to live after his return from World War I, while his wife and a life-long spinster admirer look on passively. The three married daughters who return to the island try, each in her own way, to save the family from total disintegration and death. Only John sees salvation in cooperating with the deprived black masses, now exploited by the merchant class in connivance with the Church representatives. Jean Rhys's masterpiece, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, also deals with impoverished creoles but in the nineteenth century, just after the abolition of slavery when ruined, suddenly insecure whites faced with terror their new poverty and the menacing vengeance of hostile blacks. It is a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, recreating from each character's point of view Rochester's experience in the West Indies and his first wife's childhood and youth, her growing alienation, brief period of happiness, then rejection by Rochester, despair leading to madness, and imprisonment in an England in no way corresponding to that of her imagination. This contrast is already emphasized in Rhys's pre-war novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, 1934, which also idealizes the heroine's West Indian childhood. With this exception, Rhys's pre-war work does not deal with the West Indies, though all of her heroines are, like Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, victimized, passive, vulnerable women. Antoinette's husband identifies her with her island, which substantiates the interpretation of his treatment of her as "double colonization" (of both land and woman) since he married her for the dowry she received from her rich stepfather. Though short and deceptively simple, Rhys's novel is a remarkable allegory of a major period in Caribbean history, its social climate, surface and subterranean tensions and, above all, of undigested psychological conflicts that were to erupt again violently in the twentieth century.

Garth St. Omer's first published work is a childhood novella, "Syrop," 1964, about a young boy whose sense of responsibility for his family makes him dive for coins thrown by a sailor when he is sucked down by a ship's propeller. This tragedy foreshadows the pessimism and fatalism of *A Room on the Hill*, 1968, *Shades of Grey*, 1968, which contains *The Lights on the Hill* and *Another Place Another Time*, and *Nor Any Country*, 1969. St. Omer recreates with great perceptiveness and accuracy, the social and cultural environment in his small native island of St. Lucia, where, as in Dominica, the pervading influence of the Catholic Church is the major force uniting a deprived population living on the island's meager resources. The typical St. Omer protagonist belongs to the educated minority who managed to escape abroad to be educated. When he returns, intending to take up a responsible position in his society, he is forced on a quest to define himself and seek an outlet for his personal angst. His isolation and sense of being trapped in the midst of poverty, religious conformity, and moral paralysis (shades of Joyce, as has been pointed out), together with the need for personal choice and responsibility, often deviated from by sexual adventure and guilt, convey a sense of absurdity and impotence frequently described as existentialist, or even nihilist. Yet the protagonists' attempts to come to terms with the past, historical and personal, the blend of "terror and pity" which determines their behavior (compassion rather than absurdity), are generally seen by West Indian critics as

expressing a search for a new kind of humanism.

St. Omer's use of language has been compared to Lindsay Barrett's experimentation in his single promising novel *Song for Mumu*, 1967, often considered as the most interesting from this point of view. Although Barrett's vision of Caribbean society is one of frustration, poverty, and spiritual loss, there is a pervading passion, intensity, and energy in scenes of West Indian life recreated in a language largely inspired by the oral tradition. Another novel of "return" to one's native land is Neville Dawes's *The Last Enchantment*, 1960. As the hero, Ramsay Tull, approaches Jamaica, the island is viewed from different perspectives; the narrative is told from varying points of view, and his progression, both actual and imaginative, toward his native village at the top of the mountain can be seen to represent the "labyrinths of tentative selves" through which he is attempting to define himself. This novel is also a political satire, as is Peter Abrahams's *This Island Now*, 1966. Abrahams, an exiled South African, had written several novels about his own country before his dystopia set on a Caribbean island. From his very first novel, he spoke in favor of a then impossible multiracial society in South Africa, but he also faced crucial racial problems when he settled permanently in Jamaica. In *This Island Now*, racial problems are linked with the island's power structure and economy. As in many so-called Third-World countries, the black leader's choice of policy is inevitably dictated by racial considerations which corrupt his ideals and mar the efficiency of his plans. Eventually, the revolution which he started for his countrymen turns against them as the means he uses corrupt his ends.

In Austin Clarke's *The Survivors of the Crossing*, 1964, the purpose of the revolution is also political and economic but focuses on a powerless peasant, Rufus, who rebels against the white plantocracy in Barbados. Unlike Abrahams's protagonist, who can discourse abstractedly on the dialectics of power, Rufus belongs to the laboring poor, and his revolutionary ideal has grown from reading a friend's letters about prosperity and freedom in Canada. In Clarke's second novel, *Among Thistles and Thorns*, 1965, it is a young adolescent's pride in his race which has been fired by his father's reminiscences about Black America. In both cases, however, the hero's dream of emancipation or fulfillment is destroyed or cut short by an apathetic and treacherous community or by selfish unimaginative adults. Rufus is turned into an outlaw and imprisoned; Milton, the young boy, is taken away from high school. In their isolation Clarke's heroes cannot envisage the emancipation of their racial and social group because the group itself is not prepared to act.

Racial consciousness, which runs as a powerful theme through Clarke's work, grew out of his own experience in Canada, where he has been living for the past thirty years or so; it also has been strongly influenced by African-American political movements. In his next novels, which form his Toronto trilogy, *The Meeting Point*, 1967, *Storm of Fortune*, 1973, and *The Bigger Light*, 1975, he explores the cultural encounter between West Indian and Canadian cultures through the experience of ordinary Barbadian immigrants, the "meeting point" of the first title suggesting conflict followed by frustration and alienation rather than multiracial solidarity. There has always been a strong element of protest in Clarke's fiction, which blends here with a satire of the cold, inhospitable WASP community but also of the self-deceptive weakness of West Indians torn between nostalgia for their island and a desire to fit into Canadian society, although their own relaxed and exuberant behavior clashes with the more subdued and conformist Canadian life-style. Increasingly, Clarke internalizes these conflicts and

explores their psychological effects in women as much as in men, one of the very few writers of his generation to do so.

Other West Indian novelists who belong to the North American West Indian community are Frank Hercules, Rosa Guy, and Paule Marshall. Hercules's first novel, *Where the Hummingbird Flies*, 1961, concentrates on inter-war Trinidad, its social and political mores, while *I Want a Black Doll*, 1967, deals with an interracial marriage and its tensions in New York. Paule Marshall, an artist of an altogether higher order, was born in the United States of Barbadian parents. Her first novel, *Brown Girl Brownstones*, 1959, may suggest a comparison with Clarke's fiction of cultural and spiritual conflict among Barbadians in Canada, for it dramatizes the life of Barbadian immigrants in New York as they attempt to reconcile their West Indian way of being with the exigencies of success in a materialistic society. But Marshall is also a pioneer among West Indian women writers. While tracing a young girl's growth to self-understanding through the tensions inherent in her adolescence and the Barbadian community's life, the narrative blends major themes: feminism subtly actualized in the female characters' behavior and development, understanding of the past, self-acceptance and, above all, a sense of belonging to a black community.

A sense of community is also central to Marshall's second novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, 1969, particularly among the peasants of Bournehills on the imaginary Bourne Island, who each year reenact, through carnival, the rebellion of an eighteenth-century slave, Cuffee Ned (also fictionalized in Wilson Harris's *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness*, 1977). Marshall's novel is an exploration in depth of the significance of slavery and its lingering implications, as well as of the values of white civilization and black culture: the former are represented by white liberals who come to the island intending to improve it, but their instruments and behavior prove destructive and self-destructive; the latter offers a possibility of redemption to both individual and community. As the title indicates, both setting and people are important in themselves and for their mythical significance. The heroine's decision at the end of the novel to go to Africa in search of her African husband and her child reenacts the union, actual and psychological, between the New World and Africa separated by millions of slaves drowned in the Atlantic on the Middle Passage.

Actual return to Africa in search of one's racial roots rather than the largely spiritual, even mythical, ideal of the Rastafarians is the major theme of two novels by Guyanese writers who have themselves lived in Africa, O. R. Dathorne's *The Scholar-Man*, 1964, and Denis Williams's *Other Leopards*, 1963. In the first of these Adam Questus, a Guyanese university lecturer, finds an Africa still indirectly controlled by Europeans for the benefit of a minority but does make contact with the real Africa through its destitute, suppressed people, particularly a woman who embodies their suffering yet also the hope of a genuinely new Africa. However, the element of parody and caricature in the narrative does not blend easily with its serious ideological intention, and the whole is an uneven achievement. Not so Williams's remarkable novel, in which Lionel/Lobo Froad, another Guyanese intellectual on an archeological expedition in the Sudan wavers between two selves, the sophisticated European-trained scholar and the instinctive African. He finds no easy solution to his self-division in Africa, nor does the author try to give final answers. After attempting to exorcize Europe by striking his white boss with a screwdriver, Froad covers his naked body with clay, climbs a tree to be "free of the earth," and thus appears to have

moved from uncertainty to nothingness. Yet this need not be read as negatively as it often is, even if Froad's quest for identity has failed. His last words are about the uncertain light, possibly that of a new beginning. For Williams, as for Wilson Harris, a mixed ancestry is a potential source of strength rather than the reverse. In much West Indian fiction, however, the "mulatto" condition is a source of self-hate and bitterness, as shown in Vic Reid's *The Leopard*, 1958. This novel is set in Kenya during the Mau Mau rebellion and concentrates on the behavior of a physically and psychologically crippled boy who, with his putative white father, hunts down his actual father, an African involved in the struggle for liberation, who takes him up but fails to save him. The novel offers a deeper exploration of human relations and their tensions than the obviously symbolical triangle and their journey in the forest might suggest. Through the evocation of colonial rule and its predatory effects in Africa (and implicitly the West Indies), the narrative, in spite of improbabilities, conveys, powerfully and without complacency, the destructive forces in both man and nature, for which the leopard of the title is an apt metaphor.

Race is also an all-pervasive preoccupation in the fiction of exiled Guyanese writers, particularly in their early largely autobiographical fiction. In Jan Carew's first novel *The Wild Coast*, 1958, the young hero, Hector Bradshaw, has "the blood of both master and slave" in his veins. In the village of Tarlogie where he is sent to recover from illness, he not only becomes familiar with the "wild coast" of the Corentyne, but his initiation into manhood occurs through the discovery of slave history and his own slave ancestry as well as other family secrets, like his father's living with an Amerindian woman. Carew's treatment of race is often superficial and sometimes unconsciously prejudiced, but he renders with sensitivity the atmosphere and the moods of Guyanese landscapes, particularly in *Black Midas*, 1958, in which the hero's search for El Dorado, his making a fortune and quick squandering of it, and his maiming in a second expedition serve to free him from illusory pursuits and give him a better understanding of the Guyanese poor.

Life on a big sugar estate is approached from two different angles in Peter Kempadoo's *Guiana Boy*, 1960, and Christopher Nicole's *White Boy*, 1966. In the recreation of country (as opposed to city) life, the voiceless poor are usually presented in Guyanese fiction as getting on well together, whatever their race, linked by their difference from the white estate owner. The subject of Kempadoo's novel is the laborer's struggle for survival and the efforts of the hero's father to help his son escape their deprived condition through education, whereas Nicole's protagonist, Rupert, lives in the "big house" and later, with no higher education, gets a good job because he is white. He befriends the son of their Indian butler who hopes that they will cooperate to build a better country. But when trouble is imminent, Rupert simply leaves the country that his ancestors have ruled and helped exploit for many generations, a departure in keeping with the white man's lack of responsibility also shown in Lamming's fiction.

By their magnitude, scope, and continuous development, V. S. Naipaul and Wilson Harris's fictions stand out as major achievements in Caribbean literature, supported in each case by a considerable activity as essayist that has further emphasized the extreme disparity of their response to West Indian society and their conception of the novel. Naipaul began by insisting on the absence of a West Indian tradition; he has claimed that there is "no people in the true sense of the word" in the Caribbean, no achievement, and therefore no history. Yet he has made these absences into the subject of his writing which explores traumas of loss, displacement, alienation

and failure, first as specifically West Indian, then as a generalized human condition in this century. While other writers of his generation have been at pains consciously to contribute to the growth of a West Indian sensibility through the portrayal of their society, Naipaul has used the same material with ironic detachment and non-commitment, though not without compassion, in his early novels. Frequently criticized in his native Trinidad for his unflattering image of it, one above all that is strongly skeptical of potential achievement, he is often considered elsewhere the finest living writer in English both for the quality of his prose and for what is seen as a "true," if deeply pessimistic, view of the Third World. His vision of it certainly grew out of his Caribbean experience, and it is not the least paradox of his work in the 1950s and 1960s that the never wholly controlled insecurity, fear, and hysteria one detects in it make him perhaps more subtly West Indian than his fellow writers.

The Mystic Masseur, 1957, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, 1958, and *Miguel Street*, 1959, (the latter is actually his first written work) all recreate the Trinidad of Naipaul's boyhood and youth up to the early 1950s when the island was on the verge of change and opportunists were quick to seize their chance of climbing to wealth and fame by exploiting the ignorance and superstition of their compatriots. When the narrator in *The Mystic Masseur* writes that the history of Ganesh Ramsumair (later G. Ramsay Muir, M. B. E.) is "the history of our times," he means that his protagonist's success and climb from failed teacher to "mystic" masseur to politician is in keeping with the anarchic, second-rate, "mimic" world he (Ganesh) comes to represent, just as in the second novel *Harbans*, the lucky candidate in a farcical election campaign, exemplifies the gap between genuine democratic practice and the corruption Naipaul dramatizes. The effect of his satire here as in the more gentle, tragi-comic sketches of *Miguel Street* arises from the discrepancy between the ideal to which his characters aspire (like "B. Wordsworth") and the utter futility of their dreams and results (particularly in the sketches,) in a rare blend of humor and pathos, often reminiscent of Selvon. The island world in this early fiction is uniquely West Indian, not least through the narrator's ear for local speech and wit (see Ramchand [1970] and Thieme [1987]) and his eye for the eccentric detail, though the confusion and absence of values, the rootlessness and namelessness of both people and "thing," foreshadow the gloom of the later fiction.

A House for Mr Biswas, 1961, is usually seen as Naipaul's masterpiece, a New World epic that traces its memorable hero's life-journey as sign-painter, shopkeeper, and journalist toward a precarious achievement while recording the process of assimilation of the closed East Indian community into which the author was born and the awakening of Trinidad from colonial apathy partly through education and ambition. The novel's panoramic multi-generational scope, the title's emphasis on the protagonist's individuality and the house (actually a series of bleak houses) as a metaphor for personal achievement link it with the nineteenth-century English novels of the "great tradition." But though it can hardly be doubted that Naipaul had the English model in mind, he subverts it by once more showing the gap between inaccessible dream and partial failure, which account for the perhaps unintentional irony at the heart of this novel. Mr. Biswas, however, is the first of Naipaul's characters to reach a clear understanding of his own predicament and of the void that the author saw as inherent in West Indian society. Biswas has been described as everyman, clown, rebel, artist, and he is indeed all these, full of contradictions and presented with a mixture of impatience with his inadequacies and affectionate admiration for his courage and resilience (he is a fictionalization of Naipaul's father Seepersad), his never

faltering determination to be free and self-sufficient, symbolical of the colonial struggle for independence. With its share of satirical and comic episodes, its large set of acutely grasped secondary characters, its mythical and allegorical overtones (see Thieme [1984]), its analysis of a society in the making, though at the cost of receding Indian values, *A House for Mr Biswas* is also a masterpiece of psychological realism, whose uncertainties give it the humane dimension that Naipaul's later fiction often lacks.

After *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, 1963, which extends to a British protagonist in London, Naipaul's vision of alienation and disillusionment, *The Mimic Men*, 1967, initiated a new narrative method while confirming his perception of West Indian society as nihilistic, uncreative and, as the title indicates, purely imitative. Together with the pervasive use of metaphors such as houses, trees, shipwreck, its narrative technique and point of view make it a more complex novel than anything Naipaul had written before. Ralph Singh, the first-person narrator, travels in memory from his student days and marriage in England back to his childhood and early education in Isabella, a barely disguised Trinidad, through his political career on his native island, then final dismissal and exile in London, a circular journey marked at all points in time and space by a deep sense of displacement both physical and psychological. In essence, the subject has much in common with *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, though it is treated here in a serious mode and shows West Indian politicians falling back on mimicry, corruption, and racial prejudice to palliate their total powerlessness. Although Singh initially sees himself as a twentieth-century Gibbon writing about the dissolution of empires and their after-effects (actually Naipaul's subject), his vision is too narrow to encompass more than his personal history, which is nevertheless representative of the island's predicament. The reader's difficulty lies in correctly assessing the nature of Singh's self-reflexiveness which has even been read as an allegory of the writing process itself. Whether he is self-deceived throughout (see Thieme [1985]) or whether Singh, the narrator, must be distinguished from his former self (see Ramraj [1971]) remains a point of controversy. In light of Naipaul's later work and of the hollowiness and despair underlying the comedy in *A Flag on the Island*, short stories published in the same year as *The Mimic Men*, one is tempted to believe in Singh's total self-deception and unredeemable selfishness. It would imply, then, that Naipaul's satire of both individual and society is totally unrelieved, while the human, if not the moral, values in the name of which such satire is wielded are not clear.

Unlike Naipaul, who sees Western myths as alien and irrelevant to the Caribbean because incompatible with its unheroic past, Wilson Harris sees them as the legacy of a common human ancestry and, from his earliest to his latest fiction, has recreated many of them through local personae in a Caribbean setting. His first novel *Palace of the Peacock*, 1960, significantly fictionalizes the myth of El Dorado, both West Indian and European, using it as a metaphor for the conquest of the New World and the meeting between Europeans and dispossessed Amerindians. Its plot is at once simple and terrifying in its reconstruction of Guyana's past. The time is not specified since it is clearly a symbolic reenactment of all conquering expeditions into the heartland of Guyana. Through the main character, Donne, Harris evokes at once Renaissance ambition and the poet's imagination — what Derek Walcott, in his poem "Ruins of a Great House" refers to as "ancestral murderers and poets" (Walcott [1962], 45) — which could have produced a new conception of man and society. Donne leads a multiracial crew into the interior

in order to get cheap labor for his plantation and pursues Amerindians on a dangerous river through the jungle. Most of the crew die, and only Donne, with two of his companions, reaches the waterfall above which his mistress and her folk are thought to have taken refuge. In the rest of the narrative, the realistic and historical sources of the plot are transformed into a visionary sequence in which Donne becomes at last fully aware of the hell he has built. The crew and the folk are momentarily united in the "palace of the peacock," and an alternative is offered to historical disaster and enmity through the agency of consciousness and the imagination. The regeneration of the imagination is indeed a major theme in this as in all of Harris's novels. By breaking the mould of ingrained prejudice and stasis and in spite of, or rather through, the resulting void, Harris suggests that the Caribbean catastrophic past offers a largely neglected potential for reconciliation and development and that the emergence of multiracial societies could have led, and may still lead, to cross-culturalism. Understandably, then, he rejects the notion of a pure, or distinct, West Indian identity as the expression of a partial, and limited, perception of both individual and community.

It has sometimes been wrongly suggested that Harris's visionary writing seeks to transcend history, to escape or reject it. Actually, all his novels are steeped in history, past and present, though he does indeed show that it need not be deterministic. The novels he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s indirectly recreate the history of Guyana: its origins and the nature of its various communities in his first four novels *The Guyana Quartet*; the economic depression of the 1920s and the 1948 Guyana strike in *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 1965; a psychological reenactment of the "void" that resulted from the Middle Passage in *The Waiting Room*, 1967; and the traumas of history in individuals and peoples in *Tumatumari*, 1968, a reinterpretation that covers the history of one family, and of Guyana, from the end of World War I to the late 1960s and is presented as an "epic of ancestors" (Harris [1968], 133). Harris does not present historical events as such but their consequences or effects as they are played out in the individual soul and affect it, providing what he calls a "drama of consciousness" (Harris [1967], 34). His fiction differs from much Caribbean writing through his rejection of realism which, in his view, attempts to "persuade" the reader that the selected elements it presents — historical and social situations, manners, fashionable conventions, and even moral attitudes — belong to an inevitable order and condition. His own early fiction seeks to retrieve the lost, or eclipsed, elements of community, for the land is alive with the spirit of all its former inhabitants and, by an act of memory, the narrator resurrects their elusive presence in order to initiate a dialogue between the broken parts of the country's heritage and, at a deeper level, between the divided selves that people his unconscious.

Because Harris's narratives develop on several levels and linear time is often disrupted, they create disorientation and uncertainty. But these are positive prerequisites to the transformation of the characters' apprehension of events. Most of Harris's fictions follow a pattern of dislocation and reconstruction though, again, not in a linear process but in a canvas of partial "crumbings" interwoven with partial revisions. His in-depth exploration of the characters' psyche, the fact that he privileges the frail clues that occasionally erupt from their unconscious over what he sees as the illusory objectivity of appearances, and the importance he gives to intuition and the "subjective imagination," as opposed to reason, also alter traditional characterization and modify plot. Thus in *The Far Journey of Oudin*, 1961, Beti, an illiterate East Indian

woman, twice defeats the powerful money-lender Ram, with a thirteen years' interval between the two occasions, through her intuitive grasp of his intentions and the way he makes use of Oudin, her husband. After the latter's death, she swallows the piece of paper, or "covenant," by which Oudin has sold his as yet unborn son to the impotent Ram. In *The Whole Armour*, 1962, Christo's visionary, "shamanic" encounter in the forest with a group of flying Amerindians makes him see his coming execution for a crime he has not committed as a reenactment of their dismemberment and enables him to visualize a potential reassembly of genuine community. In *The Secret Ladder*, 1963, Fenwick, a surveyor, meets Poseidon, the frail leader of descendants of runaway slaves, in the forest, and this meeting enables him to envision a new kind of community through the retrieval of lost antecedents. In each case, the self-sufficient character of traditional fiction allows the rigid limits of the self to dissolve to make way for a dialogue with others, dead and living. It is through imaginative sympathy with the "unwritten lives" of the defeated and dispossessed and exploration of their "ground of loss" that the consequences of history can be altered.

Such alteration and "revision" are conveyed through language that Harris frees from its conventional usage, or fixed meaning, and, above all, through "convertible" images and metaphors. In *Palace of the Peacock*, for example, the sun is at first a symbol of destructive will-power but splinters into fragments when Donne's hard personality breaks to make way for a new consciousness. The "waiting room" is another protean metaphor, at first "the convertible void of the waiting room," that is, the heroine's consciousness in which she indicts her lover, but at the end of the novel it is a cavern and a womb, still her consciousness, in which her lover achieves vision. In *Tumatumari* a Gorgon's head, the "Gorgon of history," becomes "unprejudiced flesh and blood" (Harris [1968], 156). Harris's language constantly revises itself, just as, to use his own words, his fiction "seeks to consume its own biases" (Harris [1985-b], 127) so that his narratives are revisionary process, or what he would later call "infinite rehearsal" (Harris [1987], 1), a process already present in *Palace of the Peacock* in the different reenactments of Donne's death. In *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, his first consciously self-reflexive novel, the I-narrator describes as follows the creative process in which he is involved: "It was to prove the re-living of all my life again and again as if I were a ghost returning to the same place (which was always different), shoring up different ruins (which were always the same)" (Harris [1965], 25).

This statement actually describes Harris's own approach to experience, his repetitive return from different perspectives to past experience, whether individual, social, or historical, in order to detect in the past unsuspected avenues to fulfillment, or neglected opportunities of reconciliation between adversarial characters or groups. As suggested above, no human situation, no state of mind, is final, just as, however absolute or fixed ideals may seem, they are but partial apprehensions of an ever-receding, unattainable wholeness. To participate in the process of "rehearsal" and try to understand the characters' real motivations, to discover hidden possibilities of transforming evil into saving deeds, is also to take part in what Harris has more recently called "the unfinished genesis of this imagination" (Harris [1992]). As he was to imply in his *Carnival Trilogy*, 1985, 1987, and 1990, such a concept of the imagination as both seat and source of creativity, or "womb of space" (Harris [1983]), requires a philosophical and intellectual revolution akin to the scientific revolution that modified our perception of the universe in the twentieth century (see Maes-Jelinek [1991], 236). But this dynamic conception of the imagination

was already perceptible in the novels of the early period, which are all open-ended instalments of an unfinished imaginative journey and conclude either with an evanescent vision, as *Palace of the Peacock* does, with a continued exploration, as in *Heartland*, 1964, or with a process of transformation, like the "translation of the Gorgon of history" at the end of *Tumatumari* (Harris [1968], 155). This emphasis on the need for constant revision is the most original and fruitful response, at once aesthetic, philosophical, and political, to have originated in the West Indies. It influenced many younger writers, such as Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips, as is obvious in the prominence they both give in their writing to memory and cross-culturalism.

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