ASPECTS OF PRIMITIVISM IN THE WEST INDIAN NOVEL OF THE 1930'S

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Cataclysmic forces were at work during the early years of our century which tended to weaken the faith of many in the liberal democratic tradition of the West. Foremost of these were World War One and the Russian Revolution. The victors of The Great War were unable to fulfill the hopes articulated in the two slogans associated with that conflict--to make the world safe for democracy and to put a definitive end to all war--while the social experiment in Russia seemed to offer a tantalizing alternative to liberal democracy. Nowhere was the weakness of the West perceived more sharply than in the British West Indies, the heirs to a long history of colonialism and limited self-rule. While speaking of the forces which prompted the authors of the 1930's to write, the Trinidadian critic Alfred H. Mendes comments:

> The first was, of course, the First World War where a large number of us had been abroad, and indeed, even those of us who had not been abroad were influenced considerably by what was happening in the world, and the second event was the Russian Revolution. Those, I think, were the two events in our lives at that time which drove us into writing about our islands.[1]

Of even more immediate consequence was the Great Depression of 1929 because the effects of the disaster were evident in massive unemployment throughout the area. With the West prostrate and the Soviet Union the prey of endless purges, writers who hitherto had searched for a solution to the islands' social ills abroad abandoned internationalism and began to look for an answer closer to home. Cultural nationalism was in the air, but this did not develop within a vacuum. Similar conditions in Europe and America led the cultural elite to formulate new ideals diametrically opposed to those which had gone before. In France, writers from the French-speaking islands of the Caribbean formed a close-knit group and even won the public praise of the influential Jean-Paul Sartre for their denunciation of colonialism and all else that was bad in European civilization. It was the Martinique poet Aime Cesaire who coined the term "Negritude," a celebration of the black experience, in his long poem "Cahier d'unretour au pays natal" (1939). Meanwhile, in the United States, the writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance had been evolving a new esthetics since the late 1920's. Writing of "Negritude" and the Harlem Renaissance, Kenneth Ramchand states:

> All these literary manifestations share certain features: a celebration of Africa as a cultural matrix; a favourable interpretation of the African past; a pride in Blackness; a contrast between a harmonious way of life and a decadent White civilization; and a joyful proclamation of the sensuous and integrated African or Negro personality.[2]

At first sight it appears that much of this could not easily be adapted to the Caribbean experience. The central position of Africa must have a limited appeal in a

society where Blacks represent only one end of the color spectrum, and some islands also support large East Indian and White populations. If Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement did have some support, it could hardly be seen as a panacea for all West Indians. Rather, writers of the 1930's modified the new theories to bring them into line with their perception of the West Indian reality.

We may complain that this perception was highly romanticized by the "noble savage" tradition and the suspicion that this island paradise had been corrupted by twentieth-century materialism, a creation of Western libralism. The aspect of race and color, although always present, was deemphasized and the "primitivism", so closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance, was transferred to the Caribbean. This created new problems for writers. In his book Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Irvin Huggins explains the limited nature of primitivism:

> For the purpose of ethnic identity, primitivism is peculiarly limited. It is especially a male fantasy. It is easier to imagine men as roustabouts, vagabonds, bums, and heroes, harder to draw sympathetic females whose whole existence is their bodies and instinct. It is also difficult to create the illusion of development and generation; there are no children anywhere in these works. Perhaps women, whose freedom has natural limitations--they have babies--are essentially conservative. [3]

Still, many of the Caribbean novels of the 1930's are about women. If these are believable women is another matter.

In the remainder of this article, I intend to show how West Indian writers of the 1930's contrasted their vision of the "primitive" and natural Caribbean life-style with the corrosive and artificial values of the West. This clash of cultures, which had intensified over a period of four centuries, had created a tragic and ambivalent situation in the opinion of these novelists--a dilemma which could only be resolved by the renunciation of either "primitivism" or the liberal West. For purposes of illustration, I will discuss three well-known novels of the period: Claude McKay's Banana Bottom (1933), C. L. R. James' Minty Alley (1936) and Edgar Mittelholzer's Corentyne Thunder (written in 1938 but not published until 1941). It will be shown that in the first work the liberal Western tradition is renounced in favour of primitivism. In the second, a "modus vivandi" is achieved where primitivism lives on as a nostalgic recreation of the past. In the last book, nothing is resolved, boding ill for the future.

Nowhere is a West Indian life-style more staunchly defended against the evils of modern Western civilization than in Claude McKay's Banana Bottom. McKay was ideally suited to transpose the new esthetics to a Caribbean settling since he was a Jamaican by birth who had emigrated to New York. Furthermore, he was a leading member of the Harlem Renaissance. If McKay himself could not make the adjustment to Jamaican life, the main character of his novel, Bita Plant, has little hesitation in opting for the more simple existence in spite of her English education. McKay given a very dark picture of the West's contribution to the fertile island--it is responsible for slavery, the social caste system, prejudice, sexual priggishness and violence, and all of this has been inflicted upon the island in the name of progress. McKay's characters are extremes--the bad ones support the kind of false progress which has brought the island to its present state, the good ones resist although they may realize that there is little that can be done against the march of civilization. The author is especially hard on West Indians who have accepted the dictums of the West at face value. Generally, the poison has been spread through the palliative of religion. At one point, the hypocritical Black minister Herald Newton argues with Squire Gensir, a sympathetic Englishman who has chosen to live in rural Jamaica:

> "I can get on without re-

> finement," said the squire, "and I don't care anything about progress." "Really, sir! But life without progress is stagnation. Look at us Negroes, for example. The savage brutish state we were in both in Africa and in America before Civilization aroused us. We owe all we are today to progress." "That's a fact," said the Squire. "After all, progress is a grand fact. It doesn't really matter whether one believes in it or not." [4]

Later in the book, Harold Newton is debunked when he is surprised "in flagrante delicto" shortly after having proclaimed the sanctity of the marriage vows.

McKay also spreads scorn on local racial prejudice which is inherited from the attitudes of the first English settlers. Those who decry the cultural blending on the island are guilty of de facto slavery. Miscegenation is an accepted part of West Indian life. In fact, the present population of Banana Bottom is descended from slaves and "a strange Scotchman who had emigrated to Jamaica in the eighteen-twenties." [5] However:

> In the island there are still extant a species of white humanity who cling to the belief that the Act of Emancipation was a bad thing and the mixing of different human strains. And they may point out to you the village of Banana Bottom and the descendants of the last owner of the original estate as a picture of decadence and degeneracy. [6]

Finally, McKay writes of the chronic problem of unemployment, a situation which still plagues the Caribbean. In a society where only a few receive an adequate education and where race prejudice persists, the poor and uneducated rarely are able to find jobs. Work is available only when some natural disaster strikes and it is necessary to clean up the wreckage. Otherwise, those who are not lucky enough or do not wish to secure government appointments are forced to emigrate. After a spell of bad weather has devastated the island, McKay's workers enjoy a brief period of prosperity:

> The transient Negro workers had a fat season of work clearing away the wreckage and the debris of the hurricane and flood. And when there was nothing left to do they used their savings to take ship to Panama. The Panama Canal was the big hope of the poor disinherited peasant youths of Jamaica and all those islands of the Caribbean Belt that were set in the latitude of hurricanes and earthquakes--all those who did not like to sport the uniform of the army and police force. [7]

Against this depressing backdrop of a stagnating civilization where Western values have failed, McKay poses a still plausible rural Arcadia where the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance could be tested and found true. First of all, society's ban has in no way diminished the pride which the undaunted Bita Plant feels due to her obvious beauty. After being insulted by a local bully, she muses:

> "Only a nigger gal!" Ah, but she was proud of being a Negro girl. And no sneer, no sarcasm, no banal ridicule of a ridiculous world could destroy her confidence and pride in herself and make her feel ashamed of the fine body that was the temple of her high spirit. For she knew that she was a worthy being. She knew that she was beautiful. [8]

Next, the peoples in the Caribbean, of varying hues and colors, have their own haunting beauty. The same miscegenation

which is anathema to some can be a source of inspiration. McKay describes the guests at a party which Bita is attending with her escort Hopping Dick. In this free atmosphere she doesn't suffer from the constraints of the mission where she must act as a well-born English lady:

> The assemblage was basically black, but charmingly variegated with the tints of some of the finest flowers of miscegenation. The girls were picturesque in those striking prints that are seen mainly in Southern Spain and tropical countries as if they were specially designed and sold to such places. They giggled and chattered like parrots over little local trifles, and Bita felt a surge of pleasurable relief to be in the midst of them away from the staid atmosphere of the mission. [9]

Most of all, Bita is attracted, and finally won over, by the "primitive positiveness" of the islanders--an attribute which seems to be much the same as the "primitivism" advocated by members of the Harlem Renaissance. It is a strange irony that the island's non-conformist churches which had been instrumental in the elimination of slavery should lose members to the established Anglican Church, the denomination of the former slave owners simply because the Anglicans were more responsive to this freer Caribbean life-style:

> The Negroes loved their dances and carousels, and because as a people they still possess more of primitive positiveness than formal hypocricy it was comprehensible that they should ease from under the rigid discipline of the non-conformist churches that had laboured for their emancipation to the church which in the eyes of their slave fathers had appeared to be the exclusive spiritual defender and mainstay of their masters. [10]

Bita renounces Western civilization, but she cannot escape her Western education. We may feel that McKay is stretching the point a bit when, at the end of the novel, the erudite young Jamaican girl plucks from her library a copy of Parscal's Pensees. Here she finds confirmation for her decision to live simply and to follow the dictates of her heart:

> ... "la vraie morale se moque de la morale; la morale du jugement se moque de la morale de l'esprit.
> ....
> Perhaps Pascal would have been incredulous if it had been prophesied to him that in future centuries a black girl would have found in his words a golden thread of principle to guide her through the confusion of life. And in a receptive and critical mood Bita turned the familiar pages, picking here and there an outstanding passage at random and thinking how like a risen river overflowing its banks was the man, bigger than the Christian creed in which he was confined. [11]

Minty Alley is C. L. R. James' only novel. It has received both condemnation and praise for the uninhibited portrayal of the seamy side of life in Kingston, Jamaica. Minty Alley tells the story of Haynes, a Black middle-class clerk. Due to reduced economic circumstances, Haynes is forced to leave his home and seek lodging in a cheap boarding house. Here he encounters a kind of life that he has never known before. Because of his education and job, Haynes is seen by the other roomers as a great gentleman. He, on the other hand, is attracted strangely by the uninhibited emotional lives that he sees going on around him. As the member of a somewhat priviliged class, Haynes can be considered a product of Westernization. The other lodgers, who are little bothered by logic, morals or financial responsibility, may represent various aspects of "primitivism" as it was understood by the authors of the 1930's.

First of all, Haynes is a victim of color prejudice. Being Black, there are only two ways that he can succeed in the world--by having either money or a profession. Having neither, his prospects are slight. Perhaps this is both the cause and the effect of his uneventful childhood. After his mother's death, he realizes that he must make a new beginning:

> He wanted a change. It was better that he should move. Most of his childhood and youth had been passed here, untroubled about anything except his own adolescent dreams. He had spent seven years at the secondary school, a shy, solitary boy, doing his lessons, playing games but making few frineds, no friends--no, not one ... He had grown up under the shelter of his mother, to whom he was everything and who was everything to him. Ever since he had known himself, he had known and accepted her plans for his future. [12]

In fact, the "change" which Haynes needed was the opportunity to exercise some control over his own life. In this sense, number 2 Minty Alley was a training ground for him where he could build a healthier emotional life. Not surprisingly, one of the first problems which he encounters is how to treat the preditory female members of the household. Haynes prior experience with women had not been very encouraging:

> To read of these things in books was one thing, to hear and see them was another. And Haynes, though passionately interested in women and always reading about them, had never since he was grown up kissed or been kissed by a woman who was not related to him. He had at sixteen, after much cogitation, but without preliminary, put his arm around a girl's waist and been soundly slapped. Since then he had never repeated the experiment, and often experienced difficulty in looking young women fully in the face. And here now he had been pitch-forked into the heart of the eternal triangle. [13]

Another problem which Haynes is forced to face during his first days at Number 2 Minty Alley is how to react to the violence which he encounters everywhere. As a civilized person, Haynes senses that he has a responsibility toward these people but, when danger strikes, he is paralyzed with fear. In one episode, he whitnesses the sadistic nurse beating her child. Afraid to become involved, he seeks refuge in his room:

> Haynes locked his door, and overwhelmed with shame tried in vain to shut out the thud of the cane on the little body, the yells and screams, and the "Hush, I tell you, hush" of his mother. He felt that he should have done something, that he should do something. At each blow he winced as if it had fallen on his own flesh. As he moved across the room he struck his damaged foot a sharp blow on the edge of the chair and a stab of pain struck him. Throwing himself on his bed he buried his face in the pillow. [14]

It is clear that Haynes' Western education has left him defenseless for this encounter with "life in the raw." His stay at the boarding house, on the other hand, has the salutary effect of awakening his instinctive powers, of liberating his libido. It is his rite of manhood during which he does evolve a more effective and integrated personality. The proofs that he will soon be able to live a more fulfilling life are many. Around the middle of the book Haynes is asked to make a speech after the Christmas dinner at the boarding house. He finds that, for the first time in his life, he is able to speak in public:

> On the few occasions in his past life that he had been called upon to speak he, having prepared carefully, had made rather a

> mess of things. (There was that never-to-be-forgotten occasion on which he had begun with, "I--personally--myself--" and could go no further.) Now he rose to his feet, and confident of his intellectual superiority got going from the first sentence. The champagne also helped enormously ...
> There was a sustained burst of applause, and a chorus of "excellent" from Mrs Atwell. Ever afterwards one of her favourite remarks was that Haynes should stand for the Legislative Council. She then got up, rummaged in a drawer and produced a cigar. [15]

Another sign that this contact with less inhibited beings has been beneficial is that Haynes has mustered the courage to ask his employer for a raise. He has worked for years in a bookstore at a ridiculously low wage. Encouraged by the enthusiastic Maisie, he goes forth one morning determined to take his stand. Later, he returns:

> That afternoon as soon as he turned the corner he could see Maisie standing by the front of No. 2. She came running to meet him.
> "Don't tell me you didn't ask him, Mr Haynes."
> "I asked him," said Haynes, gravely.
> "And what happened?" asked Maisie, apprehensively.
> "He asked me what I thought I required," said Haynes, still gravely.
> "And what you said? Five, I hope, Mr Haynes."
> "I said five."
> "And what he said, Mr Haynes?"
> Haynes put aside his gravity and held her by the arm.
> "said that was exactly what he was thinking. And he intended to let me have it at the end of the financial year. The liar. I should have asked him before. I am going to manage him in future. I'll never forget you, Maisie." [16]

In Banana Bottom, we can be quite sure that Bita Plant and her library will never be integrated fully into the rural Jamaican scene. Likewise, we know from the beginning that Haynes education and his interests make it impossible for him to remain forever at Number 2 Minty Alley. The apprenticeship over, Haynes is ready to go into the world as the book closes. In fact, he must move because the boarding house is sold to a solid middle-class family. Still, Haynes frequently walks by the building in the evenings, filled with feelings of gratitude and nostalgia:

> One night, however, he was walking along Victoria Street and almost instinctively came to a halt when he reached Minty Alley. The front doors and windows were open, and from the street he could see into the drawing-room. Husband and wife and three children lived there and one of the children was sitting at the piano playing a familiar tune from Hemy's music book. Over and over she played it, while he stood outside, looking in at the window and thinking of old times. [17]

Mittelholzer's Corentyne Thunder is a somber tale of passion, set on the Guyana coast. It deals mainly with the poor East Indians living in the colony. Mittelholzer self-consciously tells us that his book is the story of Ramgolall, the miser, and his two daughters, Beena and Kattree. But the work is much more than that. It is a universal tale of murder and revenge, involving a considerable number of characters. Ramgolall dies when the money canister that he has been filling for years with his meager savings suddenly is stolen. But the tragedy continues, always against the background of the stormy Corentyne coast. In our other two novels we have seen characters struggling to embrace either Western contemporary values or primitivism, but nowhere has the battle been so intense as in Corentyne Thunder. Here, the tension of the opposing forces has become like schizophrenia and is

pulling the main characters in different directions with fatal results. The characters Big Man Weldon and his son Geoffry clearly represent the West with its wealth, prestige and education. Ramgolall and his daughters are primitives--they live close to nature and by their instincts. However, both primitives and Westerners sense that there is something missing in their make-up, something which is dangerous and which they can never quite seize. Ramgolall, for example, longs for the easy life that money can buy. He is especially proud to be related to Big Man Weldon although the Westernized branch of the family would perfer to ignore this primitive connection. It is this aspiration to become Westernized that causes Ramgolall to be a miser and thus to live all the more primitively. He maintains himself and his two daughters in abject poverty and he practices deceit to obtain more coins for his money box. His greatest joy is to take out the bags of cash from his canister at the end of the day:

> He kept grunting deeply while he tied up the bundle. When he put it back in the canister he did not close the lid at once. He crouched there for a time, looking at the fat bundles, looking at them and smiling a smile of memory, for he had had to work very hard for the money in these bundles. He had walked knee-deep in mud, surrounded by clouds of mosquitoes. The ague of malaria had shaken him and the fever had scorched him so that his anguished brain dreamt weird visions. Angry shouts from the overseers he had borne without a murmured word, without a frown... Crouching there, he looked at the bundles, and he kept smiling and waggling his head faintly while the events of the time gone rumbled through his memory like drums in the fantasy of a drowning man. [18]

Ramgolall may be an extreme character, but he is not an exception. It seems that all of his family suffers from the fatal necessity to achieve a Western life-style. Beena, who has lived happily in the primitive hut, is won over completely by the Westernized Geoffry after the gift of a five-dollar bill:

> She had often seen a five-dollar note, but never handled one in her life, let alone owned one. Twenty shillings and ten pennies: She could hardly believe it. It was as though a miracle had happened and Geoffry the magician who had performed it. Thinking of Geoffry, she grew aware of something stirring deep in her, something deep and alive and full of power, like the wind last night. It was a feeling that frightened her a little by its strength. It made her mind go into a kind of pained whirl, so that she seemed to hear the moaning of wind, with thunder, and the roar of flood-water, all making a dreadful chaos in her soul. [19]

The consequences of such emotions are depicted with depressing realism. For example, the uneducated Sosee, Ramgolall's daughter, now suffers constant indignities as Big Man Weldon's wife. After one rebuke, Sosee ponders:

> His words sounded very terrible, especially as he kept staring at the window as he spoke to them. It always seemed more terrifying to Sosee when he spoke to her without looking at her. She would have preferred him to glare angrily at her. Even though his eyes would have burnt holes into her, she would have found this less frightening. There was something unearthly about the way he avoided looking at her in his wrath, something of the dark Unknown. It doubled her fear. She could say nothing. [20]

The daughter Kattree, for her part, becomes pregnant and is abandoned by Geoffry. These earth-bound characters are like the dilapidated buses which bounce and rattle over the back roads of the Corentyne coast

sporting the names of Hollywood stars--"Clark Gable" and "Claudette Colbert."

In spite of all this, Corentyne Thunder is not only about a depressed family and the desire of its members for the material goods of Western civilization. Those in the book who possess wealth and education yearn for what they perceive as the simpler life of the poor. Even Big Man Weldon sometimes wishes that he could take a new wife from among the pretty East Indian girls whom he sees every day along the roadside. Geoffry and his school chum Stymphy spend their holidays wandering through the rural countryside. Stymphy is excited before the aspect of a primitive existence which he has never experienced. While bicycling along an abandoned path. Stymphy suggests to the more cynical Geoffry:

> "Tomorrow we should go and pay a call on some of these folk, you know. I've never seen the inside of a mud house. I'd like to capture the atmosphere."
> "I wouldn't. Sure to be bally smelly."
> "Don't get into one of your cynical phases again, for goodness' sake. You know very well I don't mean that kind of atmosphere. When I say "atmosphere" I mean the local colour of the place, the spirit and all that sort of thing."
> "You're not trying to tell me you think the inside of a coolie mud-house would inspire you to write a great poem?"
> "And why not? It's simple settings like that which contain the deepest things in this life."
> Geoffry grunted cynically and began to whistle, pedalling harder. "Front tyre soft as hell," said Stymphy, pedalling harder too.[21]

By the end of the novel we realize that the deep passions which have been released and have swept over the land like a storm finally have run their course. Love, desire, hate, theft, murder and a variety of other emotions all have played a part. Only the natural elements themselves have not changed. In the final paragraphs, Beena returns home. She is surprised to discover that all seems to be as it was before:

> She had better go and drive the cows into pen for the night. A frog squeaked somewhere behind the mud-house. She looked all about her. No, nothing had changed at all. Surely, the savannah must know that Ramgolall was dead and that there were pebbles and pieces of dried mud lying scattered on the floor in the mud-house. It looked so untroubled, so flat and at peace as though nothing at all had happened. And the sky, too, and the wind, the sunshine--all untroubled, the same as they had been yesterday and all the days before: the sky blue, the wind cool, the sun red because it was low in the west. Ramgolall was dead, but the whole Corentyne remained just the same. The frog behind the mud-house squeaked again. Yes, she had better go at once and drive the cows into pen for the night. It was getting late.[22]

We have seen that some of the most outstanding writers of the West Indies during the 1930's chose to include as a major theme in their novels the struggle between Western materialistic values and primitivism. The modernized West was seen generally as a corruptor of a mythical idylic, rural, easy-going civilization in grave danger of extinction. However, in the last two novels, the very passions inherent in primitivism contain the seeds of its eventual destruction New forces soon would change the direction of the West Indian novel. World War II, nationhood, federation, mechanization and the emergence of the Third World required new efforts on the part of writers. Nevertheless, primitivism remains a recurring theme in Caribbean fiction as it does in other parts of the world. This is because the dream of returning to a less complicated, freer and perhaps happier way of living is universal.

N O T E S

[1]Alfred H. Mendes, quoted in West Indian Literature, Ed. Bruce King (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), p. 45.

[2]Kenneth Ramchand, The West Indian Novel and Its Background (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 133.

[3]Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 188-189.

[4]Claude McKay, Banana Bottom (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1961), pp. 170-171.

[5]Ibid., p. 2.

[6]Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[7]Ibid., p. 293.

[8]Ibid., p. 266.

[9]Ibid., pp. 195-196.

[10]Ibid., p. 193.

[11]Ibid., p. 314.

[12]C. L. R. James, Minty Alley (London: New Beacon Books Ltd., 1975), p. 22.

[13]Ibid., p. 37.

[14]Ibid., p. 46.

[15]Ibid., p. 150.

[16]Ibid., p. 172.

[17]C. L. R. James, Minty Alley, p. 144.

[18]Edgar Mittelholzer, Corentyne Thunder (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1970), pp. 30-31.

[19]Ibid., p. 123.

[20]Ibid., p. 34.

[21]Ibid., p. 50.

[22]Ibid., p. 229.

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