

# *The Love Songs of Samuel Dickson Selvon*

KENNETH RAMCHAND

IT IS POSSIBLE—and it is a publishing necessity—to put together a positive and exciting book of writings about love by West Indian authors. Our prospective anthology would almost certainly include more verse than prose, and nobody would be surprised at the poetry of Derek Walcott having a special place in it. Another strong figure would be Samuel Selvon. This might be surprising to some because Selvon is best known as the creator of a gallery of extroverts, bouncing and bustling through a series of ribald and comic situations; in one of his best-known novels, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), moreover, love seems to be in exile and is absent from the sexual exploits of the marauding working-class West Indians in London.

But we need only to follow up the implications of what is now a commonplace in Selvon criticism. There is much behind the kiff-kiff laughter, the ballads, and the episodes of *The Lonely Londoners*: that unlikely knight-at-arms Bart, loitering at the entrances of bars, night-clubs, and good-time places in quest of his Beatrice; the irrepressible Sir Galahad, charioting himself on dreams over Waterloo Bridge, his eyes starry with the bright lights of Piccadilly Circus and his ears filled with the roar of water gushing out of the mouths of the lions in Trafalgar Square; and the old Moses himself on the bank of the Thames, agonizing over the great aimlessness, the “great restless, swaying movement that leaves you standing in the same spot” (125).

The situations themselves and the moods and images associated with them are more than enough to suggest that in *The Lonely Londoners*, comedy and humour serve to confront and open up social and metaphysical dilemmas: lovelessness, long-

ing, and an unaccountable desolation; fantasy and romance; and the curse or blessing of coming into being as a thinking creature. But there is still not much in critical commentary or popular opinion to suggest any strong move to integrate the introspective and speculative Selvon, that last lost romantic, with the more common happy-go-lucky persona of the calypso artist. And therefore the burden of love in his work has not been uniformly sensed.

Selvon was a complex man who wanted to be simple. He was a believer, fighting off unbelief. Like most thinking people, he was always wrestling with demons in the mind. In a poem of 1947, "Fear," the poet confesses that he is afraid of life, and that he has found uncertainty "creeping / lurking just a little way off / Waiting, watching for the unguarded moment." One possible source of sustainment he proposes to himself is love but of this he says:

I am afraid  
That love might be insufficient  
That life might not be full enough,  
So I build little vague gods  
Little vague gods in the deep night  
And in the shallow day  
And they all come tumbling down.

This fear, coming from nowhere and lodging everywhere, is elaborated upon as fear of life by a character called Foster in Selvon's neglected but seminal second novel *An Island Is a World* (1955):

If I tell you I'm afraid of Life, do you expect me to explain that? It's everything and nothing. It's sun shining and man eating, wind blowing, the sound of gurgling water. It's an ant and a giant, and a telephone conversation, and the cow that jumped over the moon. It's poetry and music and the smell of dirty drains and the flight of birds over the sea. . . . It's all these things and all manner of things, action and inaction, animation and inanimation, the spin of the world on its axis. . . . (64)

This dreadful feeling gives depth and meaning to what Selvon is most famous for—his comic celebrations of ordinary people's capacity to twist and turn and take delight in what *An Island Is a World* refers to as "the heartbeat, the pulse, the kiss, wine and the nearness of women" (219).

Instead of making him negative or cynical, this fear of life inspired him to take delight in things he loved, and it drove him to write passionately and philosophically on a wide range of subjects including education, art, politics, economics, and culture, the necessity for belief, the perils of communication, and the need to relate to place and landscape—in short all the means and devices by which intelligent social beings create constructs against despair, disorder, loneliness, and the work of Time.

In my Introduction to Selvon's *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986* (1989), I argued that the poems, stories, articles, and newspaper columns written by Selvon between 1946 and 1950 provide the evidence that Selvon was going to be the first philosophical novelist from the West Indies—not in the tiresome sense of using the space of the novel to air abstruse argument and wooden counter-argument, but in the sense that he is describing social and cultural situations and creating characters who are coming into consciousness as thinking beings and who, with varying degrees of articulateness, are trying to work out the meaning of life and of their own lives.

The present argument draws mainly upon the poems and short stories to notice that as part of this philosophical thrust and for much of his writing life, Selvon wrote with an alert mind and a still believing heart about love's mutability and its persistence. It becomes apparent that love in his works is similar to and often functions as a metaphor for all the other things that most excited and troubled him as man and writer. This is obvious as late as 1982 in the short story "Her Achilles Heel." The cynical but still hoping narrator of this story associates his loss of his Caribbean woman with the island's alienation from its true self: "What the hell has happened in Trinidad, and what has happened to my Caribbean woman?" (188).

But I want to begin with the more familiar "My Girl and the City" (1957), the best love "poem" in West Indian literature, a short story set in London. Its main action is the narrator's wooing of a beautiful but at first remote young woman. The narrator's account of his pursuit of his "reluctant leopard of slow eye" is a faithful record of the artist's unceasing battle to bring an elusive and recalcitrant reality into alignment with words.

The narrator is many things. He is an emigré wondering what it is that the alien city has “that you get so much to like it you wouldn’t leave it for anywhere else” (*Londoners* 121); and this emigré is trying to make his girl a party to his love for the city which is the inviolable and mysterious other: “My girl is very real. She hated the city. I don’t know why. . . . She shrugged when I asked her why, and when she asked me why I loved London I too shrugged” (185). He is a man of letters firing desperate words from every angle at a moving and unmoved target: “I wooed my girl, mostly on her way home from work, and I talked a great deal. Often it was as if I had never spoken. I heard my words echo in deep caverns of thought, as if they hung about like cigarette smoke in a still room, missionless; or else they were lost forever in the sounds of the city” (181). He is a creator of fictions in awe at the supreme truth of a fiction that makes something out of what turns into nothing:

I move around in a world of words. Everything that happens is words. But pure expression is nothing. . . . So now I weave. I say there was an old man on whose face wrinkles rivered, whose hands were shapeful with arthritis but when he spoke, oddly enough, his voice was young and gay.

But there was no old man, there was nothing, and there is never ever anything. (188)

And he is a seeker, wooing his way towards fundamental truths and being rewarded at last:

My girl, she is beautiful to look at. I have seen her in sunlight and in moonlight, and her face carries an exquisite shape in darkness.

These things we talk, I burst out, why mustn’t I say them? If I love you, why shouldn’t I tell you so?

I love London, she said. (188)

In this love story, Selvon places love at the centre of all his endeavours, but it is his only unambiguous account of success in love. The loss of love and the implications of such loss dominate his early writings—a number of short stories that deserve to be better known and a handful of poems. The first generation of West Indian novelists, authors such as Vic Reid, Roger Mais, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Edgar Mittelholzer, Alfred Mendes, C. L. R. James, and Ralph de Boissière, began their

literary careers as short story writers or poets or both.<sup>1</sup> Selvon's poems add to the meanings and implications of the novels that came after 1950.

In "At Tacarigua" (1947), a poem dedicated to his first wife, Droupadi, we find already Selvon's sense of place and the voices of place in the poet's humble confession of being "whelmed by the inability / To express" nature's wordless thoughts:

When we were by the river  
Tall bamboos criss-crossed the sky  
In moving hues of green  
and did a million things  
Of which the wind, passing  
Like the shadow of a ripple  
Spoke secretly not to us.

Despairing of the possibility of communication, the poet prays that there will be communion between him and his life companion; that she will share with him, since he cannot describe them to her or set them in amber, the secrets and the sustaining impressions emanating from earth and sky:

So we could go together  
Down the chasm, up the hill,  
And share the impression  
I am unable to express.

In the short story "What's the Use" (1949), however, the problem of communication is compounded by fearful reticence on the part of persons. (The spoken words in the story are accompanied at crucial moments by statements in brackets to indicate what the characters would like to say but cannot.) The girl cannot utter her love in so many concrete words, and the narrator decides that there is nothing for it but to give up: but she grants a last minute and momentary reprieve to the despairing man. As they run down the hill to get out of a sudden shower, she held his hand tightly and tried to squeeze her love into him. "When he felt her warm hand, he thought, oh Lord we'll have to do everything over again . . ." (115).

In "Life With You," another poem of the 1940s, there are signs that the poet himself is struggling not with communication, not with the reticence of the other, but with his own contra-

dictory impulses. With determination and partial truth, he re-dedicates himself. Droupadi's love is an anchoring love that brings peace, "Not the greatest love story / But humble life with you / Humble love." But this assertion of will does not settle an obviously troublesome matter. "Words and Hearts" pronounces that "Hearts are strange things," and we find that throughout the 1940s the love poems are less serene, less optimistic, and less willful than "At Tacarigua" and "Life With You."

The issues being explored in his feature articles (published in the *Trinidad Guardian*, the *Port of Spain Gazette*, and the *Evening News*) at this time suggest why love becomes so problematic and so necessary. Selvon was reflecting on Time, Death, Change, Memory, and the problem of reconciling the *now* of Season with the *forever* of Eternity. Here are the titles of some of his articles: "The Life of a Day," "As Time Goes By," "In the Cemetery," "The Same Old Life," "He is Going to Die," and "These People are Fatalists."

The poems are poems of loss, regret, and bewilderment in keeping with the thoughts expressed in the feature articles. In "The Empty Glasses" (1946), the poet-lover is found "wandering in the mist / of what is gone forever." In "Love Gone" (written under the pen-name Ack-Ack, 1947), he describes a parting in which love went away, "Leaving no hope, no prospect / Tossing memories on the way," but he cannot be sure of the facts or the emotions for, as he says, "I have forgotten," and "She too has fled the past." In "Come Back" (1947), another poem of loss, the poet seeks to recover an old love after a three-year separation ("You thought by tender words / Friendly hands / To span three lonely years / And piece the broken heart"), but the best the lovers can do is just stand there:

And all I saw was  
A girl I once loved  
And the sunny morning  
And I thought, How queer!  
Because I wanted to forget  
What I had forgotten.

How much the love poems and Selvon's attitudes to love are coloured by a sense of doom and transience, by the philosophiz-

ing on existential and metaphysical issues can be seen in "Evanescence" (1948). In this poem, the appalled poet has watched "this love of ours / Fade into the forgotten dark." But there is no one to blame. What has happened has happened as if in keeping with natural process ("You slipped your hand from mine / so quietly, so part-of-life like"), as if "knowing life" will always come to snap and burst love's innocent life-line. The fatalistic poet has followed it through all the inevitable stages:

Sun, westward bound I traced  
 To the glory of the sunset.  
 Your eyes no longer love-lighted  
 Greetings bred nonchalance.  
 And I aware of every moment  
 While it lasted to the abyss' brink  
 And now no more.

Some of these feelings are fleshed out, given social density in "Passing Cloud," a short story published in 1948 under the pen-name Denmar Cosel. This story begins by making an easy enough contrast between social success and happiness. Dan has returned to the island after four years. He has his degree in Law, but he is not sure he has what he wants:

Four years studying Law. Graduation day, success. Was it worth it? I had a funny philosophy of my own. The aim of life is happiness, and during the time I pored over books and argued justice and right with my colleagues, I used to wonder if I were happy, if I had not made a mistake in leaving Elsie and the acres of land and livestock which would have been ours if we'd got married. (100)

The story takes up the motif of happiness and heads for the deep and the dark with it. When Dan sees Elsie again, it is as if the four years had not intervened: "I saw the same wind-blown hair, brown eyes, the soft and tender lips I had once known. . . . When she spoke her voice shot through me, opening up again the wound of my love" (102). But Elsie is married and though the story implies that she has not married for love and she is not happy, she is unwilling to disturb the evenness of her life. She is definitely not interested in gambling on unknown entities. "Do you remember we used to wonder about happiness, what life was all about?" she says. "We never found out. . . . Time makes a great

difference." She brushes aside Dan's protestations and makes light of his feelings by telling him that what he feels now is just a passing cloud. He will see the sun again. Dan is left waiting for the dark and the candleflies after this poignant exchange:

"Are you happy?" I asked.

She looked at me with depth. She shrugged. "What is happiness?"  
(103)

There are other love stories or stories in which the theme of love is important in Selvon's output before 1950, and there is no room to discuss here "Rhapsody in Red" (1947), an exploration of a beautiful woman's hostility to and jealousy of the work of an artist. But the following is a safe generalization: the early Selvon love poems and stories are the works of an ardent introspective and unflagging inquirer, who believes, sometimes naively, in the possibility of fulfillment. But after *The Lonely Londoners* and "My Girl and the City," love is not a prominent theme, and the relationships between men and women are reduced to a series of sexual romps and easy congresses.

It will be recalled that at the end of *The Lonely Londoners*, Moses contemplates the aimlessness in the lives of those around him and in his own life, discovering a virtue in the fact that for the first time he has begun to think: "Still, it had a greatness and a vastness in the way he was feeling tonight, like it was something solid after feeling everything else give way, and though he ain't getting no happiness out of the cogitations he still pondering, for is the first time he ever find himself thinking like that" (126). From this he begins to think about the possibility of writing a book about the things he has seen and suffered in his time. Such is the closeness between Moses and his creator at crucial moments in this novel that it is not out of order to suggest that *The Lonely Londoners* is the book Moses wanted to write.

Be that as it may, I have used the difference between this Moses and the Moses figured in *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983) to argue elsewhere that in the writings after *The Lonely Londoners* there is a broadening of the humour and an increased ribaldry; and that comedy and humour after *The Lonely Londoners* serve more to evade or deny than to con-

front the misery and the pathos and “the frightening what” that lies beneath the surface.<sup>2</sup>

This loss of idealism functions dramatically in the love affair between Moses and Doris in *Moses Migrating*. Moses finds in Doris the island woman who might become the window to frame his life. He describes himself as being in love with her, and it would appear that the girl has awakened in him capacities that could not survive in the hard world of the alien metropolis. Moses talks in terms that suggest re-birth:

I did not dream of Doris when I went to sleep, though I tried hard to, maybe too hard. But when I got up, she was first in my thoughts, and I savoured strange and new sensations. . . . Our protective feelings, our gentle considerations, our yen to sacrifice everything for a sweet smile or a light touch of the hand—even for the loved one to drop her handkerchief and be the lucky man to retrieve it—what has happened to all these beautiful and lovely emotions in this world that we live in today? Are people really so bitter and hardened and disillusioned that they are blind to the flash of a hummingbird’s wings in flight, to the heady, intoxicating perfume of the hibiscus, to the sun setting in colourful splendour over the green mountains of Venezuela? (99)

Moses’s description of the dinner at Tanty’s shack, and his first date with Doris (a walk in the night down John-John, a visit to a calypso tent at the foot of St. Vincent Street, and a stroll round the Savannah before returning to John-John, where he is content to kiss Doris’s hand as they separate) more than confirms that he is in love with her (105-08). In the din of the bands and the voices on the street on J’ouvert Morning, his head “giddy with a kind of irresistible exultation like I just get emancipated from slavery” (164), Moses even proposes marriage to Doris and tells her that he is not going back to London.

At this point, the novel becomes problematic. Moses pulls back, but the plot creaks and Doris does not hear a word that Moses is saying, so it is not all that clear whether Selvon is pulling back too. Moses seduces Doris on J’ouvert morning and by the time he gets around to paying a visit to Tanty’s shack, it is clear to Doris and Moses that “the Carnival [is] over” (178); he has come to say goodbye. Moses tells her that he is in a miserable, funereal

state and confesses that “this Ash Wednesday, when I left John-John and going down the hill, I feel like Peter must of felt when he deny Christ” (179).

If the reader feels that Moses has betrayed Doris and the light in himself, it can be argued that it is Selvon’s presentation which induces such feelings. But it is difficult to resist the speculation that the clash between faith and cynicism in this novel is a reflection of an uncertainty or confusion in the author himself. The case is not an easy one to close. But Selvon seems to be in much greater control in a later story, “Her Achilles Heel” (1982).

This is a narrative about an islander coming back to the island he loves and to the woman he used to love and still loves in spite of all that might have happened in her life. Beginning with the parallel between the island and the woman, we can see that Selvon is connecting the theme of love with other issues like the condition of island society, the state of the world, and the fate of literature and art in developing countries.

The narrator combines Dan’s belief in love, in “Passing Cloud,” with the worldly wisdom of the confused and cynical Moses of *Moses Migrating*. The narrator is accustomed to suffering at the hands of his lady, and there are comic moments that lighten the ballad and insinuate his need. At a party in Champ Fleurs, he is so exhilarated by her presence that he hardly notices she has her boyfriend with her. He goes around loudly proclaiming his “love for her and the unnecessariness of reciprocation: [he] was even happy to keep out of her way, her being there was all that mattered” (186). Later during the visit, she invites him home but then remembers that she cannot have dinner with him since she herself has been invited out:

She fed the watchdogs, though. I even helped her to mix the Lassie or Fido or whatever the fuck they call dog food these days, and on the way back to the campus she bought me a box of Kentucky fried chicken. But there were more kicks than that, for I was invited into the bedroom while she washed and changed for her engagement, and I suppose I could be bitter and say that she trusted me. (186)

The narrator finds that the woman has changed: she is hurried, and harassed. In spite of the fact that he does not “hear her say

rain and poui and flaming immortelle are all right at one time, but life isn't like that anymore" (186), he hears it in all her actions. Her change is connected with changes in the material culture of the island and in people's attitude to the land: "She lived, like every well-to-do Trinidadian behind a barrier of fierce dogs and barbed wire. When you visit a home in Trinidad it is like entering a security zone: you are privileged. The people have to protect themselves against the people" (184). His woman is surrounded by house plants, beleaguered by the land she loved, trapped without peace in this restless cage.

Armed with his persisting love, however, the narrating character seeks out her Achilles heel. He understands her position. He can hear what she does not say. "Listen, listen, listen, she didn't say, I've got my life to lead—you think I'm going to allow you to upset my routine and cry after you've gone?" (189). All the signs and portents are against the recovery of this love, and the narrator knows that he might have no choice but to leave the island and the woman again: "It saddened me the way she had to live. If I return to the island I do not think I could live like that. And if she lives like that then I cannot return to the island" (185). Like Moses, the narrator departs, but far from being a betrayal of love, this departure is calculated to preserve it.

So, "Her Achilles Heel" is a romantic assertion, a salvaging and a celebration, in terms proper to our denuded times, of the ghost of a love:

Still and all, it would have been something to be able to communicate with the land together, like old times. I didn't want to fuck her. I just wanted to lay on grass and look at sky, maybe tug a hibiscus flower off a hedge as we walked, maybe scent a begonia if we were lucky. Poor pickings for the scandalmongers. Nothing like a night in a seedy hotel in Port of Spain, not even a quick one in the back of a car on the Lady Young Road above the city.

The land watches the people. The land loves the people, but the people pay no mind to the land, nor the things it brings forth.

So much left unsaid, undone, it saddens me. (189)

"So much left unsaid, undone." It remains to work out why the changes in Selvon's treatment of love and in the nature of comedy took place and what implications there are for the assessment of the author's later writings.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is the subject of my work in progress *The Poems of the Novelists*, in which the poems are being collected for their own sakes and because of the light they shed on the men and their novels.
- <sup>2</sup> See "Comedy as Evasion: The Later Novels of Sam Selvon."

## WORKS CITED

- Ramchand, Kenneth. "Comedy As Evasion: The Later Novels of Sam Selvon." *The Comic Vision in West Indian Literature*. Ed. Roydon Salick. Printex: San Fernando, 1994. 31-48.
- . Introduction. *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-86*. By Sam Selvon. London: Longman, 1989. viii-xviii.
- Selvon, Samuel. *An Island Is a World*. 1955. Toronto: TSAR, 1993.
- . "At Tacarigua." *Trinidad Guardian Weekly* 24 Aug. 1947: 12.
- . "Come Back." *Trinidad Guardian Weekly* 16 Feb. 1947: 11.
- . "The Empty Glass." *Trinidad Guardian Weekly* 15 Dec. 1946: 10.
- . "Fear." *Trinidad Guardian Weekly* 9 Feb. 1947: 10.
- . *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986*. Ed. Susheila Nasta and Kenneth Ramchand. London: Longman, 1989.
- . "He is Going to Die." 1948. *Foreday Morning* 38-42.
- . "Her Achilles Heel." 1982. *Foreday Morning* 182-89.
- . "Life With You." *Trinidad Guardian Weekly* 20 July 1947: 12.
- . "My Girl and the City." 1957. *Ways of Sunlight* 181-88.
- . *Moses Ascending*. 1975. London: Heinemann, 1984.
- . *Moses Migrating*. London: Longman, 1983.
- . "Passing Cloud." 1948. *Foreday Morning* 100-03.
- . "Rhapsody in Red." 1947. *Foreday Morning* 66-76.
- . *The Lonely Londoners*. 1956. Toronto: TSAR, 1991.
- . "These People Are Fatalists." 1948. *Foreday Morning* 47-49.
- . "What's the Use." 1949. *Foreday Morning* 112-15.
- . "Words and Hearts." *Trinidad Guardian Weekly* 23 Mar. 1947: 11.