

Sam Selvon's "I Hear Thunder": An Assessment

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I

Writers are not always the best critics of their own work although they ought to know more about their conscious intentions in a given work than anybody else. In an interview with Michel Fabre (1977-78), Selvon evidently indicates just how far the finished product of *I Hear Thunder* is from what he wanted the novel to be. Selvon summarizes his fifth novel in a way that must surprise anyone who reads it:

Yes. [*I Hear Thunder*] is about a young Negro doctor going back to his community with his new, white English wife. He meets again friends who have grown and developed, and they exchange experiences. He tries to settle back and re-identify with his background and the people around him. The difficulty lies in keeping his marriage going and it finally goes on the rocks as he slides back to his former way of life. (Fabre 70)

What surprises us in this statement is that Selvon indicates that the real focus of the novel is the struggle of Mark to readjust to his home surroundings. This anomaly may be the result of Selvon's faulty memory of his novel published some 15 years before this interview, because quite frankly, Mark does not meet "friends," as such. Indeed, he meets one friend, Adrian, with whom he spends much of his spare time. More reasonably, this incongruity is no doubt indicative of the extent to which Adrian dominated Selvon's mind, so much so that he grows to assume a preeminent position among the characters in the novel. Moreover, Adrian's thoughts, beliefs, and actions easily form the novel's focal point —while Mark's life assumes a secondary importance. Derek Walcott, it appears, understands better than Selvon himself what the true matter of *I Hear Thunder* is:

And *I Hear Thunder*, which deals principally with the spiritual frustration of Adrian, a “fete-boy” who takes a vow of celibacy for a year but succumbs to the sexiness of his best friend’s white wife, is a solemn, almost ceremonious book on which the two or three bucolic characters obtrude. (126)

Walcott continues his assessment by observing that in *I Hear Thunder* “the investigation is sincere, but the report is predictable” (126).

These short but suggestive summaries are only two of many shorter but less rewarding reviews, almost all of which draw attention to the novel’s exotic setting as its most significant element. Published on both sides of the Atlantic in 1963, *I Hear Thunder*, with the recent reissue of *An Island Is a World* (1994), remains the only Selvon novel not in print. Kenneth Ramchand has provided an excellent introduction to the reissue of *An Island Is a World*, unravelling the complicated autobiographical strands of the novel and arguing convincingly for its place as the central novel in the Selvon corpus. The obvious gap, therefore, in the criticism of Selvon’s work is the absence of critical attention accorded *I Hear Thunder*. This, then, the first sustained critical analysis of *I Hear Thunder*, Selvon’s most neglected novel, seeks to fill the gap.

II

The novel opens with a lyrical and poetic description of the end of the dry season, emphasizing both the paradox of a twilight that is and is not there and an unending pattern. This description appears *prima facie* gratuitous, but to the careful reader it suggests the relationship between the landscape and the mind-scape in this opening paragraph. Unfortunately, this relationship is not sustained throughout the novel to make it a fictional technique. But Adrian, the protagonist, who walks across the landscape of the novel, almost immediately after this passage of lyricism, is, as we learn later, in “a kind of twilight [that] comes between the sudden shift from light to dark” (7). He is “a travelling representative for a canning company,” a “job” that suggests metaphorically that Adrian is in a state of flux, moving about in obedience to company directives, desperately trying to find himself:

Adrian walked the streets looking for himself, caught in the treadmill, seeking a way of escape from the thoughts whirling and whirring in his mind like an everlasting spring unwinding, breaking down mountains into molehills, reducing his aspirations to the lowest level, considering aspects dispassionately, employing all his wits and intelligence, and at the last wondering what he was going to do when he found himself. (123)

Adrian, a middle-class Trinidadian, is neither "professional" nor "educated," as Susheila Nasta would have us believe ("Introduction" 5), although he has attended Queen's Royal College, easily the most famous of high schools in Trinidad. But Selvon does not provide any information about Adrian's academic career, as he does about Mark's. Nor is there much to convince us that Adrian is truly "educated" in any sense of the word, though it can be shown that he is sentient and sensitive.

Adrian is a classic bourgeois, who for many years has accepted the "inevitable destiny—to go to work, to parties, to fetes, to play Carnival, to screw as many girls as possible, to drink until there were no more bottles left . . . to buy a car—he already had a house—marry and have a large family, and send the children abroad to study" (10). Although an Indo-Trinidadian by birth, he is ethnically nondescript, showing little concern for confronting the meaning of his ethnicity, a need which becomes increasingly important, if not to Selvon's fictional characters, certainly to Selvon himself. Selvon has made Adrian even more creolized than Tiger, the peasant of *A Brighter Sun* and *Turn Again Tiger*. Adrian is also "completely westernized" (8), paying mere lip service to "the customs and habits which he had shed while growing up in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the island" (8). In this regard, he is the opposite of Polly's parents, who are Indo-Trinidadian in dress, cuisine, and thinking, and who are fiercely proud of their ethnic heritage:

She let the race down! I don't know about your family, but none of mine ain't interbreed up with no nigger chinee or white man, you hear! If it was Indian, I wouldn't mind so much, it time she get married anyway. Indian got to stick together, we got to keep we own blood and don't mix up. (145)

This utterance of Motilal, Polly's father, on hearing that his daughter is having Randolph's baby, represents a complex of

feelings and sentiments. To the cynical, inside or outside of the race, Motilal's outburst is a racist statement propagandizing an ethnic insularity and superiority that undermine even the most vigorous attempts at creolization. But to the majority of Indo-Trinidadians, especially the middle-aged and old—educated and uneducated—Motilal's statement encapsulates a hard-earned wisdom, born of daily experience, which teaches that there is too much to lose and too little to gain in miscegenation. His attitude represents a moral and intellectual fortification against the rampant, insistent Afro-centrism, that Procrustean bed of Caribbean culture that is perceived still as marginalizing the Indo-Caribbean presence, sensibility, and achievement.

We meet Adrian at a point in his "middle-class complacency" when he had "even ceased wondering how things would have turned out if he had gone to England" (8). Overwhelmed by a "drowsy complacency" with his job, the "careless revelry" of his spare time, and "a monumental melancholy" in the contemplation of marriage and of married couples, Adrian does not quite know what to do to give purpose and direction to his jejune existence. Maundering in this seductive dream of carefree experience, he decides, quite nobly and correctly, that self-discipline is the answer to spiritual inertia. Accordingly, he takes a vow of celibacy for a year to prove something to himself; this will prepare him sufficiently, he reasons, for marriage. In *I Hear Thunder*, as in *An Island Is a World*, Selvon's two middle-class novels, marriage appears, not surprisingly, to be the social ideal to which the protagonists aspire; but in this novel, marriage is more an imperious spiritual need, a moral prophylactic of sorts against the blistering contagion of bourgeois effeteness.

In his disgust at the inexorable middle-class malaise, and in his brave resolve to confront and best it, Adrian surely resembles Selvon. But Selvon distances himself from his fictional character by investing Adrian's vow and his struggle to carry it out with obvious irony. Adrian does not really agonize over the suitability of Polly as a wife, although it is true that his vow is more to prove something to himself than to impress Polly. Her sparkling sequins, her jet-black eyes that seemed to "have nothing to do with the rest of her," and her "iridescent" hair all tend, within the

context of what appears to be a largely metaphoric work, to suggest a certain lack of modesty, integrity, and stability. Even the eminently realistic detail of "a few flecks of dandruff on her shoulders" (13) serves the metaphoric purpose of suggesting a flaw or taint. And the novel boldly bears this out, in a blatancy that really does undermine Adrian's claim to self-knowledge and eventual success in his undertaking. Polly's lack of appreciation for "Adrian's true feelings" (40) and her announcement "to her friends that she was free and single" (41) serve only to suggest just how far Adrian has to travel on the road to self-knowledge, hampered by an unquestioning pride in the legitimacy of his vow and in his preparedness. Moreover, Joyce's scepticism and depreciation of Adrian's ability to carry through his vow indicate how Selvon has loaded the dice against him. In this regard, it appears, Adrian comes to resemble the Moses of *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* much more than he resembles the Tiger of *A Brighter Sun*. In the metropolitan novels there is a deliberate irony that undercuts the possibilities of any real achievement, in spite of the fact that Moses is in the process of writing his memoirs. Laudable as this is, it is the patent want of understanding of the meaning of art in general or of writing one's memoirs in particular that throws clear light on Selvon's ironic technique.

Adrian is isolated both by his sensitivity and by his wish to stay true to his vow of celibacy. But while being unique in the crowd may have some inherent significance, being insufficient to the task of uniqueness raises all sorts of questions. Selvon presents Adrian as typical of the Trinidadian bourgeoisie of the 1960s in his pathetic fecklessness. Lacking both intellectual rigour and spiritual tenacity, Adrian, at the end of his tether, so to speak, places himself in both a socially and morally untenable position. Selvon makes it abundantly clear that Adrian is too steeped in the morally bankrupt ways of his society ever to realize his ambition. And Selvon chastises Adrian for assuming an absolutist position; for in the fictional world of Selvon, there are no absolutes worth dying for. And no doubt, this is why the life and death of Father Hope (*An Island Is a World*), perhaps Selvon's most genuinely committed character, strikes us as being so obviously ambiguous and ambivalent. In Adrian, Selvon has given us a

character whose combined talents and virtues are not enough to permit him to pursue his task successfully.

Attempting to pull himself out of the mire but still unable to do so, Adrian indicates just how little he knows himself or his ennui and accidie. His woeful unpreparedness is apparent from the initial and fateful meeting with Joyce, Mark's wife:

As he shook her hand Adrian felt a slight uneasiness as his reaction to her presence. It was as if a light had suddenly illuminated the room. Her blue eyes held some secret, a faint amusement which had him puzzled. She was gracefully tall, and in the quick physical attraction he felt he still held her hand, until laughing again, she withdrew it. He was accustomed now to steeling himself against the look in a woman's eye, but for a moment Joyce had him flustered. (34)

This meeting initiates what might be called the battle of the sexes in the novel, for Selvon presents Adrian as the protagonist and Joyce as an intended antagonist. Joyce possesses all the qualities necessary to be an appropriate antagonist: she is white, gracefully attractive, sexy, and ready to do battle, it seems. Adrian reads volumes in Joyce's expressive eyes, perhaps "some sort of secret knowledge" (35), even "a flirtatious glance" (35). His eyes move irresistibly from her eyes to her "waist," then to her "white thigh" as she sits down opposite Adrian "with an elegant sweep of one leg over the other" (35). Her choice of a seat "opposite" Adrian is perhaps suggestive of how we are meant to assess her role in the novel, a role intimated at in Adrian's musing, "And he knew that even now, if the opportunity came and he was attracted enough, he might be tempted" (39), and in Joyce's mocking dalliance: "Joyce laughed. 'Maybe he hasn't been tempted enough'" (41). The repetition of the identical word, "tempted," is no doubt deliberate on the author's part: Selvon knows, Adrian knows, and Joyce knows that she is cast in the role of the seductress/temptress. To this brown-skinned bourgeois Antony, she becomes a white Cleopatra, who, at least as far as Adrian is concerned, leaves hungry where most she satisfies. And as the fatal fictional irony would have it, Joyce shows up a mere week before Adrian's votive year is up. He is no match for her, and he succumbs only too easily to her rivetting sexuality. The sexual encounter between Adrian and Joyce, with its insouciance and casualness, undoubtedly recalls the sexual encounter

between Tiger and Doreen in *Turn Again Tiger*. The perfunctory brutality of both encounters suggests the inevitability of the confrontation. Here, however, it appears less a matter of Tiger attempting to exorcize the ghosts of a colonial sexual fantasy—a function of the diasporic history of Indo-Trinidadians—than a matter of Adrian falling victim to the siren song of a woman who knows what she will and must do.

Joyce's confrontation with Adrian is in a curious way anticipated by her relationship with Randolph, a local white who "mixed freely in all societies" (14). For Selvon has established a symbiotic relationship between Adrian and Randolph: one brown, the other white, yet both quite alike in behaviour. Randolph, it seems, is Adrian's alter ego. The quasi-identicality of their lives and the need for one to move in a totally opposite direction indicate Selvon's use of the staple fictional device. Adrian and Randolph are drawn together by an instinctual bonding born of the same moral values:

From the night of that party, challenging Randolph in a drunken mood, Adrian had tried to outpace him in quick seductions. As far as those affairs went, he became as friendly with Randolph as he had been with Mark. If he turned up alone at a party, sooner or later Randolph appeared. If Randolph went to the beach with some friends, Adrian appeared. Whenever and wherever there was gaiety and music and women, they came across one another, until it was a joke between them, and they discussed whom they had last screwed and when and where and how. (14-15)

One is tempted, after perusing the above-quoted passage, to venture that Selvon has Freud's tripartite theory of human personality in mind in his presentation of a three-in-one character in which white Randolph represents the id, black Mark the ego, and brown Adrian the conscience-stricken superego. While we cannot insist on making Selvon a Freudian, we can assert that Randolph is characterized as being representative of Adrian's subliminal desires, desires markedly opposed to those he deliberately adopts to prove a point, which to him is worth proving. This is why Randolph has been the one to take Joyce to the club from which Mark is barred; this is the reason Adrian can warn Mark to be wary of Randolph: "I wouldn't trust Randolph if I were you" (38). And this is why within the texture of the novel's

images, Adrian is depicted as being a patient suffering from the infection and contagion of a chronic middle-class inertia, while Randolph is both a hypochondriac and valetudinarian. Randolph is driven to seek a cure for his flagging sexual powers; and Adrian sedulously searches for the answer to the atrophy of his spirit and soul. He knows Randolph better than anyone else because they are one of a kind. And while Adrian is living as best as he can his vow of celibacy, Randolph goes in search of an aphrodisiac; and while Adrian hopes that Polly will wait for him, Randolph makes sure she does not. Mark's concerned questions about the worthiness of Polly and his commendable scepticism towards Adrian's "self-imposed penance" (39) are vindicated in Randolph's facile seduction of Polly. Not with Adrian, she even accompanies Randolph in his, or rather, *their* quest for vitafruit, a reputed and hard-earned local aphrodisiac. We are not really surprised that Adrian appears so nonchalant when Mark tells him that Polly is pregnant by Randolph. If the rumours that Randolph has seduced Joyce are true, then the seduction serves as a prolepsis of the fateful encounters between Adrian and Joyce.

Randolph, in the schematic of the novel, is the part of Adrian's life that he wants to and must erase, if there is to be any real purpose and meaning to his middle-class humdrum existence. What Randolph is to Adrian, Iago is to Othello—a comparison that must appear far-fetched on the surface. But in a real sense Randolph is Adrian's "ancient," to use Shakespeare's deceptively innocent word; Randolph is that part of Adrian that reminds him of his past that seeks to destroy him. Significantly, both Randolph and Iago are white ancients of black men: both Shakespeare and Selvon are reversing the normal associations of these polar colours. Whereas in *Othello*, Desdemona retains both chastity and innocence, in *I Hear Thunder*, however, both white and black have lost their innocence. Joyce in Selvon's drama more resembles Iago in intention than she resembles Desdemona; for Joyce and Randolph team up, iconoclastically, as it were, to destroy the pivotal vows of both marriage and celibacy of Mark and Adrian respectively. Joyce's and Randolph's refusal to sanction the value of chastity and faith in a morally turbulent world is reminiscent of

Iago's stance. Selvon, as I have intimated before, does not give Adrian, his protagonist, a fair shake; even if he is worthy, he is certainly not equal to his vow of celibacy, a failing reminiscent of that of another famous literary protagonist, Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, who takes a vow of abstinence from liquor for twenty-one years. Adrian too feels that he has transgressed not only social decency but also the dictates of human, and possibly, divine law. But *I Hear Thunder* differs from *The Mayor Of Casterbridge* because it lacks a preponderant tragic sense; instead, whatever tragic sense is present is subdued and sublimated.

If Selvon intended to write a tragic novel, and there is every reason to believe he did, then he has not succeeded mainly because he invests too much in Adrian and too little in Mark. It is true that Adrian, somewhat like Othello and Henchard, is a victim of self-delusion; but he lacks both the grandeur and the nobility of these two literary counterparts. Selvon's instincts, as evident in the interview with Michel Fabre already referred to, were right: Mark ought to have been made the true centre of the novel. For Mark has so much that Adrian lacks: a pride in the fact that his wife is white, a social eminence that Adrian can never aspire to or attain, a necessarily pragmatic trust in Joyce and Randolph, and politic ambitions, inchoate though they be. In addition, Mark as a man of moral scruples—an oddity in a profligate middle-class world—is obviously more substantial tragic material. But Selvon, like Adrian, is seduced away from his intention by the promise and lure of forbidden sexuality, a sexuality that promises much more than it delivers. This gratuitous sexuality along with a voyeurism that borders on prurience is present in the majority of Selvon's novels: *Turn Again Tiger*, *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*, *Moses Migrating*, and of course, *I Hear Thunder*.

Within the context of the novel, Mark is much more fortunate than his best friend, Adrian, in that he has studied abroad, has qualified as a medical doctor, and has married. Adrian, by contrast, has travelled only to Barbados on company business, has not qualified as a professional of any kind, and is merely contemplating marriage. *I Hear Thunder* appears to reverse somewhat

the value system of its counterpart middle-class novel, *An Island Is a World*, in that remaining in Trinidad destroys not only the protagonist's ambition but also his soul. It offers an effete life of pure sensation, whose appetite for greater sensation and pleasure is gargantuan. It is a hedonistic existence which prevents its adherents from "cogitation," to use the word of *The Lonely Londoners*. Liquor, fetes, and sex become an enervating trinity, which demands of its devotees absolute commitment, often to the point of no return. And Carnival becomes its ultimate celebration, a time of "gay confusion and abandon" (179). The insidious danger of Carnival lies in its comprehensive seduction of the population, at least according to the novel. Selvon exaggerates the reality to make a point about this ambivalent festival. For what Selvon preterms is that thousands of Indo-Trinidadians would have little or nothing to do with this bacchanalia they associate with the worst of Afro-Trinidadian behaviour. Times have changed, and today there might be even more Indo-Trinidadians "playing mas" than Afro-Trinidadians. Still, there remains a growing multi-racial group that avoids Carnival, either by going abroad, or by renting a beach house for the Carnival weekend, or simply by staying at home, although television coverage of Carnival does not allow them total insulation. Selvon generalizes and misguides the reader:

No one, even if they lived in the remotest part of the island, was going to miss this fete. Indian peasants came on their donkey carts, the families all dressed up, children with new shoes, women with richly-coloured saris, men shrugging uncomfortably in clean shirts. Carnival was a yearly excursion to town, perhaps the only time they ever came to the city. (181-82)

For Adrian and Mark, Carnival presents no problems; it is to them an eagerly awaited time, when "Trinidadians blew the top off everyday inhibitions" (178). Neither understands the relationship between the soul-destroying hedonism that characterizes middle-class living in Trinidad and its true ritual avatar, Carnival. We can excuse Mark for his committed participation in Carnival because he has a more positive and balanced view of life, evidenced in his ability to understand the link between the past, present, and future. He is a future-oriented professional, who

accepts the limitations of the middle-class life, but at the same time will not simply acquiesce in it. So we are not surprised to find him thinking, like Tiger at the end of *A Brighter Sun*, of becoming involved in politics, or of moving from achievement to achievement. Adrian, however, remains to the end a victim of the pervasive "drowsy complacency which seemed to infect everybody" (8). Not sharing Selvon's ambivalent feelings towards Carnival, described authorially, as "general ludicrousness" (177) and "more chaos and confusion" (190), Adrian is in the novel's final tableau, tired, passive, immobilized. He must in days to come "make another assessment" (192), and perhaps another and still another, as he limps onward to becoming "the symbol of a steady, reliable, collected man" (192).

III

I Hear Thunder is not Selvon at his best; it remains an unsatisfying novel, insipid and inconclusive. Selvon is less in control of his material in this novel than he is in *An Island Is a World*. Foster, Father Hope, Johnny, Jennifer, and even Rufus, come to life and stir the imagination in a way that neither Mark nor Adrian does. Selvon might have invested more in Randolph, who teases and fascinates the reader more than Adrian does. Randolph is the eternal libertine, unrepentant but chartered, a West Indian Don Juan of sorts moving in a less noble, grand, and engaging world than his sixteenth-century counterpart. Adrian, too weak, too passive, and too improbable a hero, is characterized by a crippling dishonesty of motive and a pathetic insufficiency of self-knowledge. Selvon creates a hero of straw, unable to subdue the fires of lust, and too weak to resist the fatal attraction of Joyce, whom he must think of as being, in the words of a world-weary, passion-cloyed Antony, "cunning past man's thought."

There is something essentially vapid and too self-interested in the meeting of two old friends, who are prepared to ramble over childhood haunts and to reenact childish rites and behaviour to make this the basis of a novel. One must needs fill such a novel with a bewildering amount of detail, incident, and thought. Lacking diversity and depth, *I Hear Thunder* is monolithic, content to move along the surfaces of things. There is a contrived,

formulaic quality that ill serves the author's intentions. A dash of sex, a generous helping of melodrama, a few drops of soul-searching are no doubt ingredients for a potboiler; and this is almost what Selvon has produced in his fifth novel. *I Hear Thunder* lacks the fulness and roundness of character, the architectonics of setting we associate with first-rate novels, and the cogency of the moral concerns of the protagonists. Still, it is an important novel in that it contributes more of geography, incident, anecdote, and ritual of Trinidadian life, all part of Selvon's lifelong commitment to creating the most comprehensive picture of the myriad aspects of Trinidad life in West Indian literature. Though not essential Selvon, *I Hear Thunder* ought to be read for its exploration of bourgeois life in Trinidad in the 1950s and 1960s, from which Selvon felt the need to extricate himself:

The reason why I left Trinidad is that I was finding myself in a situation where life was beginning to become easygoing; this general impression of beach parties and boozing-up parties and driving a car around and going swimming in the blue Caribbean waters, and things like that, is a part of life in Trinidad. And I felt myself getting into it. (Nazareth 82)

I Hear Thunder then makes a clear autobiographical statement of the need of a young, aspiring writer to emigrate, to save his soul, and to discover in the art of fiction a veritable aphrodisiac for a fugitive eroticism, on the one hand; and, on the other, an obvious palliative, if not cure, for the tubercular complacency of middle-class life in the Trinidad of the 1950s and 1960s.

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