Cuckoo and Culture: In the Castle of My Skin

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The further we move from home, the more strongly rooted the particular becomes, the more distinctive and describable those things that are true to their time and place, whether they are the indigenous components of a novel, a play or a recipe.

Derek Walcott, *Sunday Guardian,* 8 Nov. 1964

Coo-coo, couscous. A standard dish. Here is the recipe for cornmeal coo-coo from *W. I. Cookery*: *E. Phyllis Clark*: "Wash and slice ochroes [sic], add salt, and boil them in half the liquid. When the ochroes are soft enough to be swizzled, mix the cornmeal with the rest of the liquid. Stir this paste into the boiling liquid and continue to cook, stirring all the time until the mixture is thick and smooth. Turn out into well-buttered mould or basin." Coo-coo is also made from Indian corn, guinea corn, breadfruit, bananas, yams, potatoes, etc., etc.

Frank Collymore, *Glossary of Barbadian Dialect*

GEORGE Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* ends with the protagonist, G., leaving his island, Barbados, for the first time to take a job in Trinidad, and so begin his adult and perhaps lonely journey through the world. His decision to leave is a deliberate but painful choice. His going marks not only a momentous turning-point in his own life, a culmination of the process of personal growth which the novel traces, but also an epochal point in the history of the island, and more particularly the community of which he has been a part. The momentousness of the departure and the ominousness and uncertainty with which it is invested are emphasized by the fact that the last picture we get of G. is of him walking alone into the night, the darkness suggesting all the danger and uncertainty ahead, the beckoning terror of the unknown, as well as the darkness of his ignorance which he must seek to enlighten: "The earth where I walked was a

marvel of blackness and I knew in a sense more deep than simple departure I had said farewell, farewell to the land."[1]

The last scenes of the novel are carefully placed to complement one another in developing the meaning of G.'s departure and in deepening the emotional resonance of the novel's close. The very last scene, that in which G. bids goodbye to the old man, Pa, is the one which conveys the most straightforward pathos and poignancy, and the most direct sense of an ending. Pa, the last relic and repository of the old ways of the village, is himself about to go on a journey, to the almshouse, to await the final darkness. The farewell blessing which he bestows on G. neatly conveys the idea of an old order changing, yielding place to the new, as well as the idea of the passing down of community traditions from one generation to the next, even though not all of the traditions are admirable and G.'s departure also signifies, to a certain extent, the break-up of the community and of its traditions.

Just before the scene with Pa there is G.'s conversation with Trumper, G.'s former schoolmate, who had emigrated to the United States. His return to Barbados on a visit, just when G. is about to leave, and his assertion of a newfound sense of purpose as a result of his American experience, serve as reassuring auguries for G.'s departure. But there is something glib and possibly naive about the new Trumper, which highlights by contrast the greater complexity of G.'s personal quest and anguish.

More elaborate and complex than either the scene with Pa or the one with Trumper is the long scene between G. and his mother. In terms of the story of G.'s development, this passage is the emotional climax of the novel. Rich in nuance, it provides us with our most extended view of the deep and intricate relationship between G. and his mother, a relationship which is central to the novel, and which is a microcosm of his relationship with the community or the island as a whole.

The occasion of this final scene between G. and his mother is a meal, the last she prepares for him. The dish she serves is a Barbadian specialty, flying fish and cuckoo, and there is one section of the narrative which is particularly intriguing and which I shall focus on in this paper. This is the detailed account of the mother's preparation of the meal, especially the cuckoo. Its very presence in the novel might seem odd. It is as though Lamming has interrupted the narrative, and his portrayal of the relationship between boy and mother, interrupted it for the space of three long paragraphs, to describe in detail how the mother made the cuckoo — to give, in short, the recipe for cuckoo. Was this merely a piece of exotica, a dash of tropical colour for the English market in which the book was to be published? This view might be encouraged by two details which show Lamming catering to a non-Barbadian audience. Having mentioned cornflour, he glosses this by saying, "It was a yellow powder almost as fine as dust" (p. 274). Indeed, to use the term "cornflour" was probably a compromise with the foreign audience, since the normal term is "cornmeal." Later, referring to the stick used to stir the cornmeal as it cooks, he says, she "had put the slab of wood *which we called the cuckoo stick* to soak in a bowl of water" (p. 274). Alternatively, was Lamming primarily indulging his nostalgia for flying fish and cuckoo?

What I should like to show is that this account of the preparation of the meal is an integral part of Lamming's artistic control of the narrative, and that it embodies and brings into sharp focus certain vital concerns of the novel. It symbolizes certain values and signifies the lack of them or the possibility of them in the kind of society which the novel depicts, as well as the importance of them in human life generally: values attaching to the concepts of tradition, community, self-respect, creativity and work. It symbolizes, in effect, a vision of life and society, and, consequently, criticizes actual conditions of life and society depicted in the novel.

Louis James has called attention, but only fleetingly, to this passage. Writing on the childhood theme in West Indian literature, he says, in an aside:

> The lovingly exact account of the preparation of cuckoo and flying fish for the meal G's mother prepares for him before he leaves the island — a last supper in more senses than one — exemplifies the anthropologist Levi-Strauss's insights as to the social importance of cooking.[2]

James leaves the matter there, it not being within the scope of his paper to show just how the account exemplifies Levi-Strauss's insights. Nor shall I attempt any such exercise in anthropology, using the passage as a case study. What I am more concerned with is seeing how the passage functions as part of a literary artifact. To do this one need not go to an anthropologist, or into the subtleties of Levi-Strauss for precedent or sanction. There is precedent in literary criticism. For example, there is Barbara Hardy's essay on "Food and Ceremony in *Great Expectations*," which argues that "eating and drinking are valued by [Dickens] as proofs of sociability and gusto, but more important still, as ceremonies of love."[3] She shows that, in Dickens, "moral values are attached to meals — to the giving, receiving, eating and serving of food,"[4] and that

> food is used to define various aspects of love, pride, social ambition and gratitude, and the meals are often carefully placed in order to underline and explain motivation and development.[5]

The meal which G.'s mother prepares for him is also, clearly, a ceremony of love, one which shows forth the deep and sustaining bond between them. And Lamming's awareness of the social and cultural significance of food is expressed not only in what the reader can see underneath the account of the meal, but also in the mother's own observations on this topic, as well as in comments by other characters elsewhere in the novel. For instance, there is the episode in which Trumper tells the other boys that he is thinking of going away to America. Boy Blue says that he has heard that there is "food in galore" in America,

"an' they says you don' have to cook it yuhself." Then he explains about automats:

> 'I ain't like the sound o' that much,' said Trumper. ' 'Tis true this business of cooking with wood give you a lot o' trouble, 'cause you got to keep blowing the blasted fire an' the smoke get in yuh eyes all the time, but when all said an' done I like the look o' a pot on the fire, an' I like to hear a pot boiling 'cause it make you feel something happenin'; an' if there's one thing I like, too, 'tis to see the way my mother turn food out from the pot to the plate. It give you a kind a good big feelin' in the bottom o' yuh stomach an' yuh mouth start to water an' move without yuh permission. Seems to me all these little things make food what it is. Something to make a big fuss 'bout, an' that's what my mother always say.' (p. 168)

Trumper is perhaps most taken with food as food, with the mouth-watering aspects of it, but he also shows an awareness of values other than the purely sensual attachment to food and eating, and these values are largely social ones.

G.'s mother is conscious, more so than Trumper, of the potential of meals as ceremonies of love and social communion. While she and G. are eating, she voices the fear that God alone knows when next G. will get a meal like the one which she has prepared:

> 'I think they cook in Trinidad,' I said. I was uncertain of the result, but the strain between us had passed and I took the risk of speaking frankly. 'They cook all over the world,' she said, 'but 'tis how an' what they cook. If you think cookin' is putting a pot on the fire an' leavin' it till it tell you to come, you make a sad mistake. There be people who eat all sort o' jumble up mess and they call it cookin' too. An' once they got a hole in their face to stuff, they couldn't care less what an' what they stuff it with. But if you think that's cookin' you make a sad mistake.' (pp. 268-69)

She claims, moreover, that Trinidadians, unlike Barbadians, "don't know what an' what a home mean." They never invite strangers home for a meal which their mothers or wives have prepared.

Her insularity and ignorance aside, here we have a woman from the most deprived class of her society, a class traditionally supposed to be without, and without care for,

what is termed "the finer things of life," without "culture," expressing, through a sophisticated understanding of the social significance of food, of cooking and eating, a concern for the quality of living, a sense of style and decorum, of life as an art. And the conviction with which she can express these values, including the magnanimity and graciousness of hospitality to strangers, arises in part from her pride in belonging to a community which traditionally has shared these values, her pride in belonging to a "we" who, no matter how materially deprived, are, or may be ennobled by their moral values. Moreover, when we remember that this is a woman whose family consists of one illegitimate son, and whose home is a chattel house, symbol of impermanence, and when we remember how hard it is for her to make ends meet, the ease and authority with which she can advance the virtues of family life, of "what a home mean," are all the more remarkable witnesses to the moral strength of her character and the character of her kind.

The mother's sense of values and of style are embodied in action in the account of her preparing the cuckoo. Her pride in her skill at "turning" cuckoo is a sign of the value which she attaches to local or native traditions and skills and, consequently, a sign of the importance which Lamming attaches to the idea of community or social rootedness. She grants that Trinidadians may be able to make ice cream well enough, "but," she says, "I don't think they can turn cuckoo down there. I don't think so at all at all" (p. 275). And it would seem that G. enjoys eating the ice cream best of all, but it is the cuckoo that is most important to the narrative.

In his exact and delighted recall of the process of making cuckoo, G. is himself enacting the preservation and importance of the "true" traditions of the community and the values which those traditions represent. His careful preservation of the memory is also the preservation of his love for his mother and the community. Furthermore, analysis

of the way in which he recounts the process also reveals other social and moral significances which he uses the process to symbolize. In this regard we may consider first what the account of the preparation of the cuckoo does to the reader's image of the mother.

Nowhere else in the novel does her authority assert itself so naturally, so unforcedly. Interestingly enough, at this moment she herself is not being described, only the activity in which she is engaged. But what the description of the activity impresses upon us is the commanding presence of the doer and shaper of that activity. The account is charged with a sense of the worker in the work, the harmonious integration of the two, and of the value of work motivated by love and by joy. From the earlier sections of the novel we know that the mother is a commanding figure, a figure of authority not only for G. but for her immediate community; we know that she deserves love, respect and admiration; but we primarily *know* these things, in our *minds,* rather than *feel* them in our *senses.* What impresses itself more on our senses, generally speaking, is a feeling of the strain which characterizes her life and of which G. is very conscious in his relationship with her, a sense of her as being harrassed, pained and quarrelsome. But here, as she turns the cuckoo, she achieves a quiet authority which becomes for the reader a lived experience. In these three paragraphs, life for the moment ceases to be her adversary, and she becomes, as it were, a comely vessel into which, or out of which, it flows serenely.

And as her hands silently express her personal pride in craftsmanship and achievement (we remember, incidentally, that G. feels most at ease with her when she is not talking *at* him), we do not forget that the individual achievement is part of a communial continuity. Her pride exists partly in her awareness of herself as continuing a tradition. At this moment, her individuality is in harmony with the general will. She is only one of countless numbers of Barbadian women who have engaged or will engage in the

routine task of turning cuckoo, but for whom, each time any one of them strives to turn the best cuckoo that has ever been turned, routine becomes ritual.

That Lamming is concerned not so much with food as biological necessity or sensual delight as with symbolic and moral values is clear from the fact that he pays no attention to the eating or the taste of the food, apart from G.'s obvious pleasure in the eating of the ice cream and his brief compliment to his mother, "[The meal] was very good." Of course, G. does get special enjoyment from eating flying fish and cuckoo. Nor do I mean to belittle the value of food for the gustatory pleasure which it offers, or to rule out the possibility that there might even be a moral dimension to this. Some fine things have been written about the pleasure of eating; for example, Lamb's rhapsody on the delights of crackling in his celebrated "Dissertation Upon Roast Pig." A comparison between his account and Lamming's would be instructive by virtue of the differences of intention.

As we read Lamming's account, we almost forget that the cuckoo is something to be eaten. Instead, we are invited to concentrate, in the first place, on aesthetic aspects of it. The aspects of colour, shape and harmony or composition are highlighted:

> The calabash had given it a smooth even curve all round. It was like a visitor waiting to be shown in . . . The ochroe seeds were a dull pink and all over the surface of this curve you could see them pushing up like dots that decorated the mixture. Here and there were the bits of green that edged the slices of ochroe. Whether or not you liked to eat cuckoo it was something you could look at and feel quiet satisfaction from. The colours were sharp in contrast. Yellow and pink and the green of the sliced ochroes. (p. 275)

We experience the finished product as we would experience a painting. We experience the process as we would experience an artist-craftsman's fashioning of a beautiful object. Ultimately, what we are experiencing is the creation of order out of disorder, and beauty out of ugliness. And these ideas merge into the ideas of social grace and com-

munity in the likening of the cuckoo after it has been turned out of the calabash to "a visitor waiting to be shown in."

Lamming highlights the aesthetic quality of the finished product by stressing the original muddle and even unpleasantness of the ingredients. In its unsifted state, the cornmeal is fouled by "lumps and bits of extraneous stuff," and the sifting seems to G. "a very tedious undertaking." "The prickly surface" of the okras irritates the skin when they are being sliced, "and the slices [fall] off on the hand in a slimy mess." This sliminess is insisted upon. When the okras are thrown into the pot, the water becomes "a thick boiling slime." It is in keeping with this pointed contrast between the formlessness and unattractiveness of the cuckoo in its early stages, and the symmetry and beauty of the finished object, that meals which are badly prepared, without love or due regard for ceremony, are described primarily in terms of repulsive disorder. The mother speaks contemptuously of "people who eat *all sort o' jumble up mess* and . . . call it cookin' . . ." And the only Trinidadian dish which G. had heard of was, as he imagined it, "*a vegetable muddle* called callalloo" (my italics). The making of cuckoo represents the creative process itself, and its function in revealing the order in, or imposing order upon, the chaos of events and circumstances, and bringing unpleasant actualities into harmonious relationship. The attractive and delectable cuckoo not only includes but also *depends on* slime.

The slime in the cuckoo also brings to mind a major character in the novel, Mr. Slime, the schoolmaster turned corrupt politician, who inspires the people to break out of their meek acceptance of their position of subservience, and then betrays them in order to satisfy his personal greed. The slime in the cuckoo is a comment on Mr. Slime, whether we see the two as similar or contrasting. The slime in the cuckoo ultimately exists in harmony with everything else in its world, whereas Mr. Slime is ultimately at odds with

his community, an exploiter and divider, preventing harmony. However, if we consider that the people needed someone to awaken them to a new consciousness as Mr. Slime did, then we may see him as being essential to the process of change and development which the community had to undergo, just as the slimy okras are essential to the cuckoo.

The comparison of Mr. Slime with the slime in the cuckoo is one indicator of ways in which the account of the preparation of the cuckoo stands in essential relationship to the novel as a whole. But we may describe that relationship more generally and comprehensively. All those values which we have seen as the deeper concerns of the description of the cuckoo in preparation, are what the novel is, *inter alia,* about: tradition and ceremony, social rootedness and the sense of belonging, creativity and a sense of style and beauty, the purposeful direction of energy towards the creation of an order inspired by love and feelings of humanity, an order in which the individual, in satisfying his own best instincts, finds at the same time a fulfilling relationship to society. The description of G.'s mother making the cuckoo is a symbolic expression of the fusion of all these in action, as process.

In the Castle of My Skin depicts a society that is wellnigh feudal in its order; but it is a somewhat uneasy and mechanical order, partly imposed, maintained by ignorance, fear and the unhappy authority of the overseer, lackey of the "massa," distrusted and hated by his own people. It is a society in which concepts of tradition and ceremony are vaunted, but the traditions and ceremonies which are publicly promoted are imposed from without, alien to the majority of the people. They merely ape those traditions with ignorant awe, though sometimes the children mimic them with deliberate irreverence. The novel also depicts a process by which, beginning with the questioning of the boys, the society revolts against the old order, in an attempt to find a new order, one that is more genuine, true

to the time and the place. The novel leaves us in some doubt as to whether that order and a truly homogeneous society will ever be achieved. But the account of G.'s mother preparing the cuckoo is a crystallizing image of the deep and secret moral and spiritual strength of the people, of their creative potential, and a symbolic vision of what the new order might be.

NOTES

This paper was read at the University of Guelph in October 1975.

[1]George Lamming, *In The Castle of My Skin* (1953; London: Longman Caribbean, 1970), p. 303. All subsequent references cite this edition.

[2]Louis James, "The Sad Initiation of Lamming's 'G' and other Green Caribbean Tales," in *Common Wealth*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 1971), p. 141.

[3]Barbara Hardy, "Food and Ceremony in *Great Expectations*," in *Charles Dickens*, ed. Stephen Wall (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 478.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 478.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 479.