"In the Cabinet": A Novelistic Rendition of Federation Politics

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GENERIC EXAMINATIONS of the West Indian novel have isolated some readily identifiable types: the autobiographical novel, the novel of childhood, the political novel, the yard novel, the rural or peasant novel. The novel of childhood continues to appear with regular persistence, but the peasant novel has probably passed its heyday. The West Indian political novel has developed significant sophistication while the autobiographical and biographical modes have yielded some highly successful results. As a biographical novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, and as an autobiographical novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* have displayed possibilities for complexity that the peasant novel or the yard novel seem not to provide. One genre that the West Indian novel has approached only obliquely is that of its Latin American relatives, the melange of magical realism in which history, fiction, fantasy, and biography are all mixed in combinations unique to each creation.

Some novels, of course, resist this sort of rudimentary categorization and insist upon standing in a class of their own. One such novel, as yet unpublished, is Phyllis Allfrey's *In the Cabinet*. Allfrey is generally known as the author of the early West Indian novel *The Orchid House*, a novel that combines old-fashioned narrative with elements of political commitment. Less simple than it appears to be upon a first or a hasty reading, it was one of the fine novels of the early fifties. In it, Allfrey assumed responsibility for a certain degree of autobiography, but her notion of autobiography in art was as an expression of a hidden self. She saw

the black nursemaid-narrator, Lally, as her persona — a persona who expressed Allfrey's desire to be counted among the accepted majority population of Afro-Caribbeans rather than among the rejected minority white Creoles of the West Indies. However, Lally functions more effectively as the traditional narrator who binds together the various threads of the novel than she does as the author's persona. The character of Joan, one of the three sisters who returns to L'Aromatique — the Orchid House — after expatriation overseas, provides, in fact, a closer approximation of the autobiographical elements in Allfrey's first novel. Joan, the political activist who organizes agricultural labourers into a trade union, mirrors Allfrey's own career as political activist, labour union founder, and finally, cabinet member of the West Indian Federation government that lasted from 1958 to 1962.

Now, thirty years later, Allfrey has come to a literary admission that it is indeed Joan rather than Lally who expresses her autobiographical presence in *The Orchid House*. Her admission takes the form of returning Joan to the literary scene of the Dominican landscape. Joan is both narrator and protagonist of *In the Cabinet*. She represents so close an expression of Allfrey's ideas that the reader is uneasy in identifying *In the Cabinet* as a novel in the usual sense of the genre. It seems, perhaps too much, to be an outlet for Allfrey's disillusionment over West Indian politics and over the sad turn her personal life has taken. A woman who has devoted her life to improving the lot of her fellow-Dominicans, she comes through in Joan's musings as a disillusioned idealist: not a cynic, not a sceptic, but a broken and defeated idealist.

There is much personal anguish behind the genesis of *In the Cabinet* as well as behind Allfrey's difficulty in completing it. One strong impulse is her desire to commemorate her daughter, Josephine Allfrey. While telling her own story of political activity in the West Indian Federation government, Allfrey has also produced a memorial to her steadfast husband, Robert, and to her beautiful daughter, Pheena, who died a violent death in Botswana. Pheena serves as a sort of alter-ego in the new novel,

asking the questions that Allfrey wishes to answer publicly. Because of Allfrey's mourning for the real Pheena, named Andrina in *In the Cabinet*, the world of the new novel becomes claustrophobically personal, quite unlike the outward-moving world of *The Orchid House*. Further, the fictionalization of Dominica into Anonica is as thinly veiled as the pseudonym suggests. There is no attempt to make Anonica the sort of composite West Indian island that John Hearne created in Cayuna or George Lamming created in San Cristobal. Anonica *is* Dominica, acquiring historic specificity at the very opening of the novel which is set in the immediate post-Hurricane David devastation of the island.

The devastation of Dominica is so much a correlative of the devastation of Joan's political ideals that it takes a very small stretch of the imagination to read Joan as a human embodiment of the island. This reading may be rejected by Caribbeanists who might prefer to see a woman of African ancestry as an embodiment of West Indian life, but here too history and biography invade the novel by way of Allfrey's belief that her West Indian heritage of over three hundred years makes her as authentically West Indian as the later arrivals from Africa. Whether or not this is a self-defensive position, as Kenneth Ramchand suggests in *The West Indian Novel and Its Background*,[1] the fact remains that autobiography is a form of history — personal history — and there are connections between personal history and national history. It is this recognition that invigorates the Latin American novels of magical realism; consequently, to a limited degree, *In the Cabinet* displays more hints of magical realism than do most of the West Indian novels of childhood, setting (yard), and class (peasant).

The actual disorientation of life in Dominica immediately following Hurricane David (August 1979) is well imitated by the air of chaos surrounding Joan as she begins her recollections. Seated atop a rock in Anonica, she looks upon the physical devastation all around her. Joan, practical woman that she is, identifies the situation as one of immediate survival. How will she and Robert eat, how will they shelter themselves, how, in sum, will

they survive? While the words are "how will we survive," the subtextual question seems to be "is it worthwhile surviving?" More explicitly, this sentiment is translated into the opening chapter title: "Why Are We Alive?" The deep depression with which Allfrey started writing *In the Cabinet* is reflected in that question. It was also reflected in the original ending that she planned for the novel: Joan and Robert, believing that they could not survive long enough for Anonica to restore itself sufficiently to produce food and shelter for humans, embark upon a suicide swim in the direction of the small neighbouring island of Marie Galante.

Only recently has Allfrey been able to conceive a less pessimistic ending for her novel. She is trying to write an ending that will depict Joan and Robert, already embarked upon their suicidal swim, picked up by a Carib canoe. This fascinating turn is, perhaps, Allfrey's creative imagination acknowledging the peoples who inhabited the island before either Europeans *or* Africans arrived. Or, it may be her plea for inter-racial co-operation. It is, too, a possible allusion to the long-distant Carib elements of her own heritage. Ever since Allfrey was old enough to appreciate the cultural implications of her forefather's liaison with Mme. Ouvenarde, the Carib subject of Pere Labat's Memoirs of 1693-1705, she has been alert to the intersection of Amerindian and European factors in West Indian history. So, the ostensibly European woman who serves as representative of Dominica/Anonica in *In the Cabinet* embodies a long and complex history of inter-racial West Indian life.

Now that I've referred to the beginning and the projected ending of the novel, I should address, according to Aristotle's prescription, the middle. Here the critic is on more problematic ground. The post-hurricane setting is periodically re-introduced to hold together the flashbacks that Joan sees in her mind's eye while she and Robert try to reconstruct the shelter that resembles the Allfreys' small house two miles outside Roseau. Somehow, and perhaps this is a planned artistic subtlety, the concerns of the political arena portrayed in the flashbacks appear trivial in contrast to the primordial world of the frame. Joan's recollections of

Federal House dinners, her dress on certain official occasions, fragments of conversations with Federal Government officials, are obviously direct inclusions from Allfrey's own memory of the political events of the late 1950's. The moments of contemporary events are, in my opinion, superior to the flashbacks because the material of recollection becomes too insistently autobiographical to mesh smoothly with the apocalyptic setting established. However, in a period characterized by the art of dislocation, readers familiar with intentional fragmentation in films, novels, and paintings may find acceptable the disjunction between Joan's two worlds.

Having critiqued, perhaps too severely, the manner of the middle, I should refer more concretely to the matter of the middle, since the novel is not yet available. The matter of *In the Cabinet* relates directly to the tensions between industrialized nations and Third World countries. The matter is without question fascinating, especially to those curious about West Indian politics in practice. Just how picayune the inside workings of politics can be is revealed in the picture of micro-state machinations. The positioning for the best office space, best hotel rooms, most prestigious seats at government functions, are aspects of the power play that Joan learns to ignore. Acutely aware of her sexual and racial minority status, she expects the evidences of discrimination to which she is sometimes subjected. She is not a *naïve*. But she is an idealist, and she sees her own popular election as a sign of Anonican repudiation of old biases toward sex and new biases toward race. Armed with her sense of Anonican support, she aspires to work for the ideals of the entire association of federated states. In recollection she examines herself: "Did I really believe what I said at those times? Was I deceiving a multitude or — more pitiful — deceiving myself? The answer is that I *did* believe them. I did believe that the quavering little Federation, so poor that Port of Spain City Council had more money to spend in one year than the near-nation was allotted, would surpass in its capacity to blend in harmony and beat down the follies of prejudice, the rancours of historical injustice, and the stale false doctrine of race superiority, any other land" (p. 53).

Joan's vision of West Indian Federation is not a dead issue and it has supporters and opponents, even today. For example, Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson supports Federation in his Harvard University courses, although his definition of Federation is different from the Pan-West Indian ideal of the 1950's. The new Federation that Patterson proposes excludes Jamaica and Trinidad, which he views as powerful enough to exist as independent island nations. But he believes that all the smaller islands of the English-speaking Caribbean must band together in order to be an economically viable entity. Dominican Prime Minister Eugenia Charles, on the other hand, believes that such a co-operative endeavour will not be seen in her lifetime. She explains that individual islands have now achieved recognition as independent nations, and that the political fruits for each island are too intoxicating to surrender to a superior authority. When asked to explain the collapse of the original Federation, Prime Minister Charles expressed the conviction that the Federation failed because it was not an authentic West Indian political movement but a structure urged by Great Britain.

Prime Minister Charles' explanation for Federation failure is at odds with the more generally held explanation of inter-island rivalries. She believes that the Federation was prompted into action and undertaken with haste under the urgings of England — a mother country looking forward to separation from her colonies. Charles believes that the West Indian Federation could not succeed because it was of metropolitan origin, and she further believes that future attempts at West Indian Federation are unlikely to succeed.

Franklin W. Knight in *The Caribbean: Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* maintains that the Federation's failure "stemmed from the essential conflict between competing forms of nationalism, or rather, more specifically between the incipient *patriachiquismo* of Trinidad and Jamaica, and the nationalism or internationalism of the included units as a whole."[2] Other offered explanations for the collapse of the Federation include, according to Knight, "insular political squabbling among the politicians, the weakness of the constitutional structure, the great

distance between the islands, and the inability of West Indians to rule themselves."

Charles' and Knight's explanations for Federation failure are both suggested in Allfrey's novel in a conversation overheard by Joan while in residence at Federation headquarters in Trinidad. In the conversation, Allfrey illustrates the malice entertained by large island representatives towards the Federation Prime Minister.[3]

> Tuesday was Council of State day. Normally on Tuesdays, instead of going to the Ministry, I would telephone to find out if there were any urgent matters for me to deal with, and if not, Nicholas would call for me in his yellow taxi and drive me straight to the Governor General's House. On this day I summoned Nicholas early and we drove to the Ministerial Buildings, then known as Federal House. He deposited me and my portfolio, which already felt like a sack of stones, in the narrow alleyway which served as a parking place. Two members of the Federal Parliament were standing in the sunshine beside a car, with their backs turned; as I moved into the shadow of a doorway I heard the Prime Minister's name spoken low, and something in the tone of the speaker, some note of derision held me there. I heard the M.P. say:
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> "Yes, he recovered. It would have been sordid to die of a bad foot." The other M.P. said: "Next time it might be a proper thrombosis." "Oh come, come," said the first Member. "You mustn't wish sudden death even to a Colonial office stooge." The other parried, "All I want is to see this tomfool weakling Government crack up. As it will, soon. I don't care how." (pp. 54-55)

The Prime Minister himself, he of the bad foot, elicits Joan's affectionate support. She paints him as a weathered Afro-Caribbean who lives above the petty jealousies of the two governments (Trinidad and Federation). Allfrey's most effective descriptions of Federation politicians relate to the Prime Minister. One particularly engaging note follows:

> Universal love: the Prime Minister. I could not even see his house through the bois flot leaves nor hear his identifiable voice above the birdsong. I used to imitate his accent unconsciously at Cabinet meetings. One day he leaned over the table, and said (wearing the foxiest of smiles): "Look out de wind doan change and you doan tark dat way forever." (p. 45)

Such glimpses into the corridors of power are arresting because the reader feels confident that he is reading actuality: a political autobiography presented as a novel. Sometimes, however, the narrator (who soon throws away any effort at disguise) becomes what she hopes not to become: "And if I ever become an old woman reduced to name-calling, I'll simply flip those diaries' pages, and out will fall the names of those whom I entertained so simply, or who met me by request: the Habibs, Princess Mary the Queen's aunt, Lily Pons, Reg Sorensen, Lord Dundonald, Vidia Naipaul. There was the year when Churchill came. . . . There was the time when Macmillan came" (pp. 73-74). It is not difficult to understand why Allfrey, living as she does in abject poverty, surviving her own children, put to pasture by the new wave of island politics, seeks solace in some name-dropping. Ideally, she might develop the middle section of *In the Cabinet* to include even more details of that small slice of West Indian history in which she figured so centrally. I feel inclined to join Andrina in urging her mother to continue her discussions: "Tell me — quickly before the Federation fades into halflit history — what you believe you have achieved" (p. 79).

The uncompleted manuscript leaves off at this point in its writing with Joan's return to Anonica after the collapse of Federation. How much Allfrey will write about the internal politics leading up through the objectionable career of Dominican Prime Minister Patrick John to the current leadership of the West Indies' first female Prime Minister, I cannot say. What I can leave you with, however, is Allfrey's poem that prefaces the novel:

> In the cabinet of life
> poverty, achievement, strife
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> In the cabinet of heart
> embedded deep a nuclear dart
>
> Cabinet of politics:
> noble aims and dirty tricks
>
> Cabinet of eternity:
> I and I and You and me.

NOTES

[1] Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), chapter 13.

[2] Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 205-06.

[3] Grantley Adams of Barbados, the father of Tom Adams, the recently deceased Prime Minister of Barbados.

We are saddened to learn of the death this February of Phyllis Shand Allfrey in Dominica, after a life of hard work for Dominicans.