

The Modernization of the Trinidadian Landscape in the Novels of Earl Lovelace

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IN THE FOUR PUBLISHED NOVELS of Earl Lovelace, the employment of a religious frame of reference and the stress placed on the sacred power of ritual to affirm cultural identity (by serving as a bridge to ancestral tradition), are two of the devices which have led readers to perceive a mythic patterning of the specifically West Indian subject matter. Lovelace's setting is Trinidad, rural and urban; his themes are universal, centring on the innate divinity of man and the need to preserve this against dehumanizing forces and inhuman values in modern society. Inevitably, then, physical locations in the novels suggest archetypal landscapes symbolic of states of spiritual development.

Commonly, rural landscape is interpreted according to the pastoral tradition and becomes a Biblical Eden, while the city (or its agents of "modernization") represents a kind of inferno where fallen man exists in a spiritual wasteland. In the West Indian context, the urban centre is associated with the oppression that has reduced people to slaves, indentured servants, colonials and workers in the service of the capitalist machine.

Some extracts may serve to flesh out these interpretations. *While Gods Are Falling*, Lovelace's first novel, is structured around a mental journey into his past by the protagonist, Walter Castle, in an attempt to comprehend why his life in a Port of Spain tenement has become a living hell. Walter's initial desire is escape to the countryside, which represents for him a more human existence. The paradisaical evocation is apparent:

In his mind he sees the countryside so quiet. The earth is wet, and the grass is green and glistens with dew and sunlight. The corn is

tall and the ears are long, and blonde hair hangs out from the tassels. Birds are singing in a mango-tree, the mist is disappearing . . . The cow is being milked and the potatoes are being hoed and there is a big pumpkin under the avocado-tree. Smoke comes from the wood fire and rises to the blue sky. The children bathe in the river and lie down on the bank and laugh. . . The wind rushes, trees lean and shake; the doves coo and walk on the ground, in pairs. (127)

Harmony and sufficiency in the natural world as well as the human are also the keynotes in the description of the isolated rural village in Lovelace's second novel *The Schoolmaster*:

Down on the flat and in the crotches of the land where the two rivers stagger through the blue stone so plentiful in Kumaca, the water is clear, and in places, ice cold. The soil is rich, deep and black. The immortelle holds its scarlet blossoms still, and on the stems of cocoa, which it shades pods have turned yellow or red and are waiting. It is time. The cocoa is ready for harvesting.

In the village the harvest is something to think of. (3)

The Wine of Astonishment is Lovelace's third novel, although the last published, and is also set in a rural village, Bonasse, focusing on the Spiritual Baptist congregation. Again, the pastoral mode operates:

watching the chickens scratching in the yard and the stripe butterflies zigzagging like kites that can't fly well over the hibiscus hedge where the flowers unfolding like red parasols and the bees rushing from flower to flower and listening to the hens cackle as the cocks strut and the wind blow. . . . (140)

Again, a sense of sustaining community informs the peasant lifestyle — though Lovelace neither sentimentalizes nor glosses over the hardships¹ — where the Church, at least initially, is a centre

where after the service finish the brethren could discuss together how the corn growing, how the children doing, for what price cocoa selling, and the men could know which brother they should lend a hand to the coming week, and the sisters could find out who sick from the congregation so we could go sit with her a little and help her out with the cooking for her children or the washing or the ironing. (33)

The Dragon Can't Dance, the fourth novel, situates its action primarily in a yard on Calvary Hill, a slum of the capital city,

whose inhabitants have migrated from rural areas. Although this yard sometimes echoes the physical closeness and hierarchial structuring of village society, the pastoral mode is confined to descriptions of the young Sylvia, a symbol of unspoilt innocence who is "ripening like a mango rose," moves in a "humming-bird blur . . . sweeping along with the sunshine dancing on her head" (23-26), distinguished by

a quality that had chosen her out with that sense of poetry by which oases rise up in deserts and the most delicate flowers select dung-hills for their blooming. . . . (30)

But it is the city-Inferno that dominates *The Dragon Can't Dance*. Port of Spain's landscape is "stretched to bursting with a thousand narrow streets and alleys and lanes and traces and holes" (10); it is dirt, it is neglect, it is poverty and it stinks. Here,

the sun set on starvation and rise on potholed roads, thrones for stray dogs that you could play banjo on their rib bones, holding garbage piled high like a cathedral spire, sparkling with flies buzzing like torpedoes; and if you want to pass from your yard to the road you have to be a high-jumper to jump over the gutter full up with dirty water, and hold your nose. Is noise whole day. (9)

The cityscape in *Gods* differs little. As in *Dragon*, urban squalor coexists with impressive public buildings which, as I've pointed out in "*The Lovelace 'Prologue'*" (2-3), symbolize the ruling powers which authorize substandard conditions for the majority. The focus is on the slum, the tenement yard, in the tradition of Roger Mais's *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, Orlando Patterson's *The Children of Sisyphus* and C. L. R. James's *Minty Alley*.

Worse than the physical conditions are their effects on sensibility; a plague, "something dark, poisonous and stinking," has spread from the slums to infect the social climate. As Norval Edwards points out, degradation of place serves as metaphor for the dehumanization of person (1) so that Port of Spain breeds nihilism in the dispossessed and life "has no significance beyond the primary struggles for a bed to sleep in, something to quiet the intestines, and moments of sexual gratification" (*Gods* 8). Labour entails no fulfilment: whether as office-boy (*Gods* 50-52) or truck loader (*Dragon* 49), finding and keeping a job involves being

exploited and humiliated. But income is essential for, as Walter discovers in *Gods*, "if you don't have, you don't count" (73), and so passive endurance and an "Uncle Tom" strategy are practiced by most.

In *Schoolmaster* and *Wine*, Port of Spain represents a frightening negation of rural values:

the people living a life every man for himself, the town life where you have to be smart, to lie and dodge and peep and cut your brother throat and watch your brother cut your own. (*Wine* 78)

All the novels associate city life with violence and crime and frustration.

The fictions also detail a movement from the state of innocence to the alienation of the infernal city. *Schoolmaster*, for example, reads like a modern "Paradise Lost," complete with tripartite structure and scriptural parallels. Into the garden of Eden comes the serpent, the schoolmaster, imbued with the evil of the urban centre, and once the villagers have tasted of the tree of knowledge their community is ravished. As in *Wine* (28-9) the road which marks the encroachment of industrialization comes even closer, so that inevitably the hell-on-earth that is Port of Spain will spread its contagion throughout the island.

Several critics clearly perceive this motif in the earlier novels. Helen Pyne-Timothy (61) feels that Lovelace is ambivalent about progress and

seems to yearn for an earlier, simpler time when men were more sure of themselves and of their role in society. He seems to associate change, dissatisfaction, frustration and loneliness with the city.²

Certainly the community of Kumaca illustrates "an earlier, simpler" Trinidad, envisioned as a protected natural paradise following a traditional way of life in harmony with the cyclic pattern of the seasons³ (Ramchand, "Kumaca" 9-15), as do those of Nuggle in *Gods* and Bonasse in *Wine*, before the arrival of agents of change. Even the speech of these communities, ritualized in *Schoolmaster* and articulated in a communal narrative in *Wine*, cater to communal expectations of the way things are done.

Eden is never so lovely as before the fall, and there is a nostalgic tone in the evocation of Kumaca's splendour before the tragedy

(*Schoolmaster* 103). Progress comes via the increasing technology of industrialization which outmodes peasant means of production — hence, government control of the forest industry throws the men of Nuggle out of work and significantly, Walter's father is crushed by a machine (a tractor), becoming a bitter, impotent cripple. Another vehicle for progress is academic education based on the colonial pattern, which serves to teach contempt for the old ways and, as in the case of Ivan Morton in *Wine*, to alienate students from their past.³ Educated outsiders like the politicians in Nuggle have little understanding of or respect for the rural community, but seek to mold it to their own purpose. By their criteria ("better jobs and more jobs and better amenities and more amenities") Nuggle as it exists is "this crude nothing that you have" (*Gods* 106). They import into it the city's tainted logic, a point made by authorial mouthpiece Mr. Reggie: with knowledge (of "advancement, better amenities") comes awareness of their lack ("you begin to see your nakedness and to curse it" 111) and desire, which in turn leads to frustration, so that contentment is forever lost.

Changes then, as Daryl Dance puts it, though "designed to benefit the village, only serve to bring the evil and destruction that inevitably accompany the encroachment of urban society into secure rural Edens" (278). The schoolmaster, in W. J. Igoe's terminology "a townsman conditioned to take the main chance, making money, 'making' a woman" (20), rapes Christiana (as the American occupation prostitutes Eulalie in *Wine*) and despoils the villagers' world. He is destroyed, but modernization in unremitting:

when the road came in . . . Tractors would come up, and men with axes and canthooks and saws, and trucks with winches would come up to reel up the logs and transport them. Then there would not be so much greenness and not so much rain, and the parrots would cross in another sky. (*Schoolmaster* 168)

If *Schoolmaster* (and much of *Wine*) chronicles the corruption of innocence, the loss of paradise, *Gods* demonstrates the impossibility of trying to regain it and initiates the learning process, explored more fully in *Dragon*, whereby individuals are tried in the purgatorial city and the victorious emerge with a new wisdom

from the experience, a wisdom that seems to be the prerequisite (in Lovelace's "creed") for salvation — of self and of community. Here, it is possible to recognize another archetypal motif, a type of quest-journey from innocence, through bitter experience, to a hard-won perspicacity.

Again, critics have picked up on this motif. Marjorie Thorpe, for example, notes that each of Lovelace's hero figures suffers a prolonged crisis of faith but contends that the "period of abasement is critical to the[ir] development . . . because it constitutes the testing ground which discovers both to themselves and to their community the superior quality of their faith" (12-13). The "testing ground" need not, of course, be the physical cityscape, but involves confrontation with the degraded ethos the city represents. Such degradation, as Pyne-Timothy (65) points out, is associated with marginalization of the urban dweller in an "anarchic and lonely" society. Norval Edwards goes further. For him, the "degraded context" attempts the reification of people by the negation of all meaningful values and the substitution of a crude materialism as the criterion of worth (xi-xii). The attempt to restore the sacred to human life becomes, in this context, a vital undertaking for the triumph of good over evil.

Pariag, the "country Indian" in *Dragon*, and Walter Castle in *Gods*, make the journey from their rural backwaters to the city in search of a fuller life, only to find here that man is a slave to the economy, "chartered" as in Blake's "London" by poverty and amoral materialism. The alienated Walter's disembodied walk through the nightmare streets of Port of Spain (*Gods* 190-8) and Pariag's invisibility in his own yard (*Dragon*, ch. 5), suggest that their ordeal is in some way a struggle not to achieve a fuller life but to *become* a human being in their own eyes and the eyes of others.

Both characters win a tentative victory eventually through self-sacrifice, Walter by commitment to the "hooligans" he'd formerly despised and Pariag by recognising the egotism of his efforts to integrate while ignoring his wife's inner life. Others, however, never transcend the city-experience: for Fisheye in *Dragon*, knowledge that his labour is considered senseless robs him of self-worth, "for now that he had this wisdom he couldn't be a fool again, and without being that kinda fool there was nothing to do with him-

self" (49-50). Like the disillusioned inhabitants of "the Hill of Accommodation," all he does in the way of change is "to make peace with [his] condition, to surrender" (166). Unlike Walter and Pariag, he learns nothing.

Myth and archetypes necessitate polarities, but limiting Lovelace's depiction of urban and rural landscape to such opposed symbolic value systems as inferno and paradise, experience and innocence, is too simplistic. For paradise, even as we encounter it in the texts, is in *process* of change; further, modernization is generally agreed to be inevitable and, by many, desirable. As Ramchand asserts, Lovelace does not imply that social change should be resisted ("Kumaca" 10). What emerges as undesirable is the unquestioning trust of the innocent villagers in the values and motives which prompt the agents of progress.

Real change involves participation, not unthinking surrender to and imitation of external models, especially where these are founded on false values — for example, the conferring of status according to possession of material goods. Ramchand has also pointed out the irony of such a value system being adopted by those who are themselves the descendants of slaves and indentured servants (owned chattels), and argues that only a philosophy which evaluates self in terms of non-ownership can be truly liberating in the Caribbean (Introd. to "Earl Lovelace: Readings").

On closer reading then, it is possible to find much that is discordant in paradise. Significantly, after Lovelace's two earlier novels the country is less often the subject of lyrical elegy, and more attention is paid to the adversities of rural life. Jeremy Poynting's illuminating study of Indo-Caribbean fiction discovers that most writers depict the sugar estate, with its disturbing links to indentured servitude, as something to be escaped from, and the villages, repositories of traditional Indian culture up to the 1930s-40s, as "backward anachronisms, misconceived and 'impossible' attempts to preserve what had to vanish" (9). Bertram Clasp's review of *Gods* (20) extends the validity of this view beyond Indo-Caribbean writing, claiming that West Indian literature between 1945 and 1960 associated the country with ignorance, superstition and stagnation, "a place from which the ambitious and the intelligent escape to come to the city which offers excitement and oppor-

tunity." Clasp's point is that *Gods* departs from this tradition in presenting what is of value in the rural way of life. However, I maintain that in the corpus of his fiction Lovelace becomes less interested in portraying the peasant's world as idealized pastoral, and more with showing its limitations.

As Walter enters Nuggle, there are echoes of Goldsmith:

the streets were deserted and the crude wooden houses covered with carrat leaves stood off the road like some terrible brown animals that had invaded the village and had either swallowed the human inhabitants or had chased them off to the forest that stood tall and silent on all sides. (*Gods* 78-9)

The sense of the wilderness reclaiming this temporarily humanized spot is dispelled when the villagers return from their labour in the forest but when, soon after, their livelihood is threatened, the process of urban drift begins in earnest.

In any case, the lure of the city is strong. As Poynting mentions, rural one-crop economies couldn't support an increasing population hence the presence of "idling, decultured village youth eager to move to the towns" (15), and this is borne out in Lovelace's novels. In *Gods*, wood becomes scarce "and fellows began to remain idle at the junction" (82); in *Schoolmaster*, "there are those among the young men who are itching to travel to that big, fast and terrible city that is Port-of-Spain" (3-4); Eva, in *Wine* considers the plot where her husband works "seven of the toughest acres of land in creation" (56) and understands why her child wishes to leave for the city: "What we have here to keep him?" (57); similarly, Aldrick's grandfather clings to "the five acres of mountain and stone that had exhausted its substance" (37) but his children leave for the city, just as Pariag rejects the "virile embrace to the sugarcane estate to which his grandfather had been the first to be indentured" (78) to seek the "bigger world" of the capital.

Apart from the backbreaking demands of subsistence or estate cultivation, the village lacks basic necessities — Robert, in *Schoolmaster*, languishes in a dark hut with polio for lack of medical attention and the nearest secondary school to Nuggle is 29½ miles away (*Gods* 105). Above all, the peasants' ignorance of the way of the world makes them easy prey for exploiters: the golden promises

of the politicians for Nuggle turn to ashes, and the damage done by the head teacher (*Schoolmaster*) and the "Yankee" occupation (*Wine*) is almost passively accepted by the villagers who reverence the sophisticated and the urban. It is to prevent this acquiescence in their own manipulation by those with access to power ("To them we is just clowns digging the ground to grow food for them to eat, milking the cows to get milk for them to drink" [*Wine* 132]) that the village must enter the larger world. For all its positives, rural society is associated with a lack of consciousness, a torpor that keeps people in a state of limbo. What Walter's wife asserts of the Nuggle population seems true: they live for the moment, "they don't think of tomorrow or yesterday" (103).

As Paulaine Dandrade in *Schoolmaster* ponders why Kumaca should enter the (modern) world, he poses an existentialist question: "a man can ask why he in the world at all" (39). The answer presumably entails self-definition and development within that world, as it is. But in 20th century rural Trinidad, such a career seems impossible; Eva gropes towards this conclusion in her attempts to understand Ivan Morton's⁴ rejection of his village community:

Maybe because his manness was so important to him and because we didn't, don't have no world, no world with power where he could be a man in . . . seeing that the church was illegal and we didn't have no school to educate him in . . . (*Wine* 135)

The resolution of *Wine*, like that of *Gods* and *Schoolmaster*, makes explicit the futility of the option of regaining paradise. When Walter "closes the book" on his Nuggle sojourn (131), Lovelace perhaps undercuts the pastoral by reminding us that it was an artificial construct, an escapist fantasy of sunlit bliss which never really exists anywhere.

Benn tells the priest in *Schoolmaster* that "A man has need of his temptations. . . . How else is a man a man if he is not tempted? If he is not proved?" (29). Lovelace is in many ways a humanist writer, and humanism is tied to the concept of perfection of the species through a learning process, associated with culture and civilization. In order for his characters to achieve full personhood in their contemporary contexts, it is necessary to wake from the

dreamy rural landscape, to be, in Pariag's term, "more than country" and to engage the wider world of contingencies in order to prove one's rectitude and sharpen one's vision towards the implementation of a modern society that is at once progressive and humane. For these characters, as for most West Indians today, the scene of this encounter is the urban centre.

And just as the Edenic myth may gloss over the limiting qualities of the rural "state of innocence" drawn in the novels, so the vision of the city as wasteland must be deconstructed to reveal that in this hell lie the *positive* seeds of the future.⁵ This is not to deny that the urban slums of *Gods* and *Dragon* and the "progressive" values appurtenant to the city point up the spiritual barrenness of the majority of Mammon worshippers in the capital. And yet one is affected by the sheer energy of Lovelace's portrayal of the cityscape, the sense of power and potential, misdirected or apathetically untapped, but undeniably there. His crowded canvas in the opening "prologue" to *Gods* may serve as an example:

At night, too, from these very areas, young men, angry and evil, arm themselves with knives, iron bolts, cutlasses and revolvers, and chop and smash and shoot and riot, and sometimes somebody is killed. . . . Four corbeaux hunched like judges on the drooping branches of the solitary coconut-tree in the yard look at the dry river swollen with water and boiling with tin cans, old boots, strips of wood and other unassorted debris. (9)

There's almost a contradiction between the pile-up of violent or squalid images and the vitality of the prose; the prologue to *Dragon* strengthens this impression:

Laughter is not laughter; it is a groan coming from the bosom of these houses — no — not houses, shacks that leap out of the red dirt and stone, thin like smoke, fragile like kite paper, balancing on their rickety pillars as broomsticks on the edge of a juggler's nose. (9)

The somewhat fanciful references to smoke, kite paper, juggler and the transformation from "groan" to "leap" suggests fragility and precariousness, but also the power to soar. And it *is* power that lies dormant here.

Walter feels it on arrival: "how happy he felt to get a job there in the city, to be there, walking, part of the huge creature with

thousands of pairs of swinging hands and lifted feet and bent elbows and crooked knees" (*Gods* 133). During Carnival, this power transforms Calvary Hill from infernal to sanctified landscape, where

the steelband tent will become a cathedral, and these young men priests . . . these women, in this season . . . as if they were earth priestesses heralding a new spring . . . its fumes rise like incense proper to these streets. (*Dragon* 12-13)

Similarly, once Walter initiates community involvement in Webber Street, power is directed towards positive action, visible in "the set of their shoulders and the swing of their hands and the way they hold their heads" as the people stride towards their first group meeting (*Gods* 255).

And of course, it's in the city that Aldrick and Walter learn "to fight the world as it is" and ultimately, to affirm not only their integrity but to assume compassionate responsibility for the destinies of others. Similarly, by enduring and transcending "the levers of power that moved people" (*Dragon* 61) which are linked with the metropolis, Bee (in *Wine*) and Kumaca (*Schoolmaster*) assume almost heroic stature, so that we get a sense of their ability to face the future.

The recurring point is that self-definition is still a crucial agenda for the newly independent West Indian and while the location of this quest isn't important, the level of consciousness is. Passive, ignorant virtue (symbolized by idyllic Kumaca, Nuggle, Bonasse) evading the challenge of the imperfect world (represented in the city with its pot pourri of races, classes, political and ideological orientations to be selected from) can never achieve greatness. For Pariag to reject the stereotype he is fated to be in New Lands Estate (he "saw himself, middle-aged, with two cows and nine children and the sugarcane field around him" [*Dragon* 79]), he must risk the city — that is, move into a state of consciousness where change is an option so that the frightening process of *becoming* can occur. Harold Barratt (62-73) has demonstrated that the issue is a national, even a regional one: Kumaca's movement into national life is the necessary entrance of independent Trinidad into contemporary global politics, and out of the insigni-

ficance of colonial neglect. Again, Roger Bromley's review of *Wine* (4-9) maintains that its theme is the reconstruction of passive objects into political subjects. For him, the process is a *positive* movement from alienated colonial acceptance of impotence *vis a vis* the "outside world" (a state he calls "religious and secular fatalism"), to a hard-won determination to enter the political process beginning with new criteria for leader-led relationships.

Lovelace chooses the urban slum as the setting for such a revolution of consciousness because it is here that degradation is most apparent, so that resistance to degradation and the affirmation of the sacred in man is at once most difficult and most heroic. Obviously, we are beyond *actual* landscape. Yet critics like Eric Roach place *Schoolmaster* because of its setting firmly in the peasant or "folk tradition begun by C. L. R. James's *La Divina Pastora*, Selvon's *Brighter Sun* and continued in Michael Anthony's rural novels" (16). And I have glibly lumped *Gods* and *Dragon* with other works of "yard literature." But Lovelace himself dislikes labels, even that of "Third World Writer" (Lovelace, "Finding" 56), and perhaps attempting to place his fictions according to landscape within established traditions of Caribbean literature is as limiting as trying to decipher definite mythological constructs as the shaping patterns of particular novels.

Generally speaking, the urban slum, as portrayed by Mais and Patterson and James, is a vortex of negativity into which all who do not escape are drawn, destroyed by poverty and internecine violence, ignored by the secular or divine authorities. Clearly, Lovelace's Calvary Hill and Webber Street are atypical. And the symbolic evocation of rural landscape as a powerful entity by writers like Wynter, Mittelholzer and Salkey in their "peasant novels" (Lamming 26) is neither Lovelace's method nor aim in his treatment of the countryside.

It may be that in extending the scope of his novels beyond the conventional associations of rural and urban settings, Lovelace is making an oblique commentary on the assumptions underlying such conventions — either that it is to the unspoilt folk that the West Indian writer must turn for inspiration, or that modern urban society inexorably cripples and stunts the derelicts trapped within. Reality for him is too complex for these simplifications; but it is in

this bewildering flux of modern life that the creative resources reside which, properly directed into an imaginative vision of connectedness and compassion, have the power to transform that reality. The onus is on the individual to cease "looking for the priests or the politicians to give us something. . . . We have to do something for ourselves" (*Gods* 188). And if the often painful process of coming to terms with the forces of modernization and progress is a trial to be faced in the achievement of this goal, then we may ask with Benn, "lead me to my test, and let me pass my test" (*Schoolmaster* 29).

NOTES

- ¹ Lovelace himself worked as a Forest Ranger in Valencia (1957-8) and, in the late 1970s, lived and farmed in the remote village of Matura (also in eastern Trinidad) so that experience clearly informs his portrayal of rural life.
- ² Writing on *The Schoolmaster*, W. J. Igoe also suggests that "Kumaca is something like Eden. Original Sin touches us gently. Some drink too much, some gamble too much" but despite minor flaws, the novel is "an elegy for a way of life Lovelace has known in parts of his country which the white man has not yet commercially 'improved'" (20). A. S. Byatt's rather facile review of the novel similarly places it in the pastoral mode, referring to the way of life as "a kind of golden hedonistic innocence" (15).
- ³ The alienated intellectual is humorously portrayed elsewhere in *Wine*: "Crosby sacrifice and send his son to school in England. The boy come back home for a few days holiday, see some crabs Crosby have in a barrel. This is the son: 'Dad, what are those thangs there?' Talking like Englishman. Crosby ain't tell him nothing. When he poke his finger in the barrel and the crab catch hold of him, he bawl: 'Pa! The crab! The Crab!' A well educated boy, yes. Lawyer, economist or something" (14).
- ⁴ Note that Ivan's father is another casualty of the estate, crippled in a work-related accident and never "getting a cent compensation from Mr. Richardson though he work on the estate from since he was eleven" (*Wine* 39).
- ⁵ For Lovelace has voiced the opinion, in an interview with Victor Questel (15), that art is not merely mimetic but a means of projecting a *future* for the society.

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