George Lamming's "In the Castle of My Skin": Finding Promise in the Land

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SANDRA POUCHET PAQUET in her authoritative book on the novels of George Lamming analyzes *In the Castle of My Skin* as a sociological and political study of Barbados. She finds that the narrative reproduces the historical process whereby a feudal mercantilist economy gave way to a capitalist market economy. But in treating the novel as a sociological study, Pouchet Paquet ignores what is distinctive about the book: its ungainly style and its erratic narrative, aspects that longtime students of Caribbean literature no longer see but every undergraduate coming to *In the Castle of My Skin* for the first time notices.

The novel occupies a special place in the hearts of many early West Indian readers for whom it represents that greatest of miracles: the naming in literature of what had previously gone unnamed. In it, they saw their own experience given the dignity of literature for the first time. But a younger generation with access to a large and flourishing West Indian literature often compares Lamming's novel unfavourably with other, later texts. However, Lamming's pioneer work deserves to be studied and not with the condescension accorded lesser writers. Lamming's bulgy, ungainly style is not the work of an apprentice; it reveals the travail that gave birth to something new. This formless novel, raw in feel, is an ideal locus for studying the struggle that went into expressing the inchoate, into conceiving the hitherto unimagined.

The narrative that Pouchet Paquet identifies, the progress from a feudal to a capitalist economy, is evident only to the reader who has finished the book. But for the reader still reading, still not

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finished, the direction of the narrative is by no means clear. The text abjures all narrative hooks, all novelistic techniques that arouse the reader's interest in what happens next. The reader is not allowed to get interested in the personal story of any of the characters; rather, as soon as the reader's interest is piqued, the scene shifts and the characters he has met are dropped.

The text refuses to satisfy our traditional expectations of the narrative: the pleasurable build up and release of tension. There is something that can be identified as a beginning (the flood that marks the narrator's ninth birthday) and there is an end (the moment when the narrator at age eighteen makes ready to leave the island) but there is a puzzling lack of direction in the middle. The flood with which the book opens would in another book have been the climax, the moment when the waters of narrative tension, fed by swollen streams of unresolved conflict and torrents of water imagery, would burst through the restraining walls in a violent, cathartic release of emotion. Such a climax would overflow with significance and the reader would think of death and rebirth and baptism and regeneration, of *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. But Lamming puts this scene at the beginning of his novel when there are as yet no expectations demanding to be fulfilled and no pattern of imagery promising significance.

One episode that does produce narrative tension is the violent riot in town. The violence is reported to be coming to Creighton's Village; the villagers take refuge behind their barred doors; they come out and take a look around, scurry back behind their doors, peep out, see some suspicious characters, and pull back their heads. The build-up is drawn out to such a length that the scene almost becomes comic. And in the end, nothing happens: the only violence is to our expectations. A much older Lamming, looking back on his first novel, has said he should have had the white landlord killed at this point in the text (Introduction xiv), but his change of heart is based purely on political considerations and not on narrative exigencies. Presumably, he still has no qualms about the narrative slackness of the text.

The text introduces a first-person narrator, a young boy, whom rather mysteriously his friends call G, and who after the first two chapters disappears for a hundred pages or so, replaced by an

omniscient narrator who recounts what happened at the community school on Empire Day. It is not clear where the young boy, our original narrator, has gone to. He is presumably at school when the school inspector arrives, but we see nothing of him and it is not his consciousness that processes events. The narrative at this point tells us things the young boy could not possibly know, such as what is going on in the mind of the head teacher, who has discovered compromising photos of his wife in the possession of one of his subordinates.

But the narrative centre does not merely shift from first to omniscient third person. At one point in the long third chapter, set in the schoolyard, the omniscient narrator himself disappears. All narrative mediation is replaced by the dramatic presentation of a group of boys sent to wash off their bloodied schoolmate at a tap. In the dramatic dialogue, these boys are labelled First Boy, Second Boy, Third and Fourth Boys — as if they were secondary characters in a play. The boy narrator, G, or even the omniscient narrator, if either of them had recounted this scene, would surely have used the boys' names.

The young boy returns to his narrative duties just when we expect not to see more of this truant. (We never do see him at the school but we cannot be sure he was not there all the time.) The rest of the text continues the inconsistency established in chapter three. Some chapters are recounted by the boy G, sometimes he disappears altogether, and some chapters present the dramatic dialogue of an Old Man and an Old Woman who call each other Ma and Pa. The text is a veritable anthology of narrative modes. Late in the book, we are given excerpts from G's diary — as though Lamming had suddenly remembered a narrative mode that his encyclopedia did not yet include.

In later scenes, the young boy is present but he might as well not be. Chapter Six presents the long philosophical discussions that the boy's friends, Trumper, Boy Blue, and Bob, engage in on the beach. The boy is present — we saw him arrive at the beach with Bob — but for dozens of pages he says not a word; not to his friends, not even to us, the readers. We have no idea what he thinks of Trumper's and Boy Blue's epistemological speculations. It is as though the G of the boy's name stood for Ghost: he hovers

around the scenes he describes, not taking part and even going unseen.

The formlessness of the novel requires explaining, and it can, I think, be explained. *In the Castle of My Skin* is balanced between two poles, the self and the community, which correspond to the two economic systems Pouchet Paquet finds are at work in the novel. The feudal world of the village seems to its members to have a wholeness; everything is in its proper place. This is a peaceful, ordered world based on paternalism: those in power protect and care for those who depend on them; those below work for and accord respect to those above. The hierarchy that characterizes the community (Mr. Creighton in the Great House at the top, the overseers below him, and the villagers below that) assures a stability and a comprehensible order. The symbol of this organic whole is the cherry tree that spreads out over the neighbours' fences in all directions: "The roots were in one yard, but its body bulged forth into another, and its branches struck out over three or four more" (16).

The reader will have no trouble judging the paternalistic ideology of Mr. Creighton; it is intended to mask and make tolerable the unjust relations between the classes. But there is something attractive about this feudal world nonetheless. There is an alternative father figure, the old man Pa, from whom the narrative does not withhold its admiration.

We have in this unself-conscious community part of the explanation for the inconsistency and the lack of direction of the text. Paul Ricoeur argues that narrative has validity as a mirror of human experience because we human agents emplot our experience in narrative. There is a hermeneutic circle whereby life is configured as narrative in art, artistic narrative is read and interpreted, and we readers then prefigure our own lived experience in the form of narrative. Ricoeur does not say, though we can conclude, that where people do not emplot their lives and do not see their lives in terms of narrative, no narrative can be told of them. A novel requires a narrative agent with a narrative project (a quest or an ambition or a hope or a fear) who self-consciously emplots his own narrative. He is not free to make his own life; on every side he must wrestle with a world that would frustrate his desire to be

author of his own life. But it is because he imagines himself as having a story that a story can be told of him. Creighton's Village, on the other hand, does not have its own narrative because the villagers do not conceive of themselves as narrative agents. A novel cannot be a valid configuration of lived experience where that experience is not emplotted in the sort of narrative one finds in novels.

In portraying the unself-conscious community of Creighton's Village, Lamming displays a disorienting lack of commitment to the characters and their unfolding stories. In the organic community where individuals are interchangeable — "Three, thirteen, thirty. It does not matter" (24) — there are no individuals to be the centre of narrative interest. Characters go unnamed because their individual selves are of no importance; they are just the head teacher or the shoemaker. The narrative takes up a character, establishes who he is, and then abruptly drops him. After seeing the head teacher agonizing over the evidence of his wife's infidelity, we do not see him again for another hundred pages and we never hear more of his relations with his wife. Despite the care with which he was described in the schoolyard scene, we learn that he is not of any real interest to the narrator and should not be to us.

Yet, *In the Castle of My Skin* has in the boy G a character as self-conscious as any anywhere. How can this extreme self-consciousness be accounted for, given the unself-conscious environment in which it finds itself? As Sandra Pouchet Paquet established, the village may appear stable, but change is coming. The strike of the dock workers and later the riots in town disturb the old order. Mr. Slime's Friendly Society and Penny Savings Bank marks the first, apparently beneficent, appearance of capitalism in this otherwise feudal world. The Friendly Society encourages a new attitude to wealth; wealth can be amassed as capital and invested. As capital, money becomes a source of power. The empowerment brought by new conceptions of wealth is a double-edged sword, however. Some are given power; some find themselves in the power of others. Capitalism brings with it a new attitude to the land. The land is no longer where one lives and what one works. In the feudal system, the land belonged to the owner but it was worked by the villagers and it was inconceivable that Mr. Creighton could ever

take the land from them. Under the new dispensation, land is a commodity to be bought and sold. Mr. Creighton sells to Mr. Slime with the result that the shoemaker and Mr. Foster are dispossessed and Pa is sent to the almshouse.

Colonizer and colonized in the feudal system never saw each other objectively and apart from their roles in the system, and there was something reassuring in those roles. Everyone had a place. The young boys and their teachers, however, feel differently. The fixed roles in an organic system do not provide security but are cages that threaten to imprison. To be seen by another is a threat. The boys and their teachers never meet each other's eyes; when one of them is seen,

> [d]eep down he felt uneasy. He had been seen by another. He had become part of the other's world, and therefore no longer in complete control of his own. The eye of another was a kind of cage. When it saw you the lid came down, and you were trapped. (65)

The boys' parents, living in a paternalistic feudal world, accept authority. However, the young boys live in a world that has altogether less stable foundations. The boys at school study the pennies they are given on Empire Day and wonder about the king's face on the coin. "Could you have a penny without a face?" Did the king sit while someone drew his face on each of the coins? "How would he find the time to sit till all those million pennies were done?" (45). Another boy throws all these suggestions in doubt by insisting that the king is never seen. The man that appears in newspapers or in newsreels is not the king but the king's shadow, a man whose duty it is to replace the king who can never be seen. Where is the authority that mints the pennies, that guarantees the currency on which everything in a capitalist economy depends? There is something unreal about money, and something unreal about the world. The boys cannot see the whole. They have no relation to the makers of their world; the world of authority, of money, of history, and of books is a shadowy unreal world. All that they can be sure of is the self.

Under the old dispensation, the community had a white father in Mr. Creighton and a black father in Pa. The young boys of the next generation are fatherless. G speaks of being fathered by his

mother, but that is as much as to say that he has not been fathered at all. His mother belongs to an unself-conscious, natural world that as far as he is concerned exists only to serve his needs. The boy recognizes no authority outside the self and no past with claims on him. The flood with which the novel opens wipes away the past and cleans the slate.

We might call this existential solipsism the "island self." Bob, in a scepticism worthy of Berkeley and Hume, denies that there is anything else in the world apart from Barbados (147-48). His father, a fisherman, has sailed far out to sea and has never seen other land. The scepticism is extended to include the whole of the world outside the self.

The community denied the possibility of history because it did not believe in change. What was and what would always be were the same. The island self too is timeless and outside change. Trumper and Boy Blue both have had an experience of leaving time behind them, which Trumper expresses thus:

> An' sometimes sittin' here or there or anywhere for that matter, I feel that where I sittin' now I was sittin' all the time, an' it seem I was sittin' since I can remember myself. 'Tis as if time like the clock itself stop, an' everything you tell yourself is all right. (114)

We have then two poles on which the text is strung. The island self is highly conscious, and alienated from others. Community is unreflective and based on interpersonal relations. Self is locked within the castle of its skin; community is anchored by the Great House. Community is represented by the organic image of the tree; self is an individual on the shore facing the sea.

What the two poles have in common is that they are both anti-historical and anti-narrative. Narrative involves a narrative agent acting on and being acted upon by his world. It involves interaction. But in Lamming's Barbados, we have either a fixed world without distinct selves or selves that are cut off from the world outside. Narrative is impossible.

Patricia Tobin has called the principle of order and continuity represented by the progression from father to son "the genealogical imperative" (5). In narrative, the plot, that is, the linear succession of events from a first cause, corresponds to the genealogical

imperative and guarantees the proper respect for authority. Where the genealogical imperative has been subverted, as it has been among the boys in Lamming's novel, narrative progression, too, is derailed. Lamming presents two worlds: one a world with a father but no son — the static world of Pa and Ma — and the other the fatherless existence of G and his friends.

Patricia Tobin admires modernist novels that subvert linear plot and with it the patriarchal authority of the genealogical imperative. Lamming's subversion of narrative puts him in good company. But Lamming is not a postmodernist playing clever games with narrative expectations because he is out to subvert the cheerful, unthinking acceptance of authority that those expectations imply. When postmodernists subvert narrative sequence and with it causality and connection, they draw attention away from story, character, and theme, focussing it on the words themselves. This does not describe Lamming's novel. Lamming's text is repetitious. He can never say anything once, but must repeat it a dozen times in words that vary only slightly. But this is not the repetition of images, themes, and words that by setting up rhythms and establishing patterns allows the text to acquire a surfeit of meaning. Repetition in Lamming's novel does the reverse. Rather than suggest meaning, it drains everything of meaning. The novel seems to mean less than it says. Postmodernist texts demand reading — readers believe that if only they reread the text one more time they would be vouchsafed the significance that the text both promises and denies. Readers of *In the Castle of My Skin* do not have the same sense that they are missing something that another reading might deliver.

The colonial world depicted in the novel knows only an unthinking trust in a known world or a radical doubt that corrodes all possibility of knowing. There is no possibility of acting on the world or of making one's own world. This paralysis is reflected in the text's own unaccountability. Mr. Slime represents the new forces associated with capitalism. But for the larger part of the novel he is regarded sympathetically; he is the young man who cuckolds his superior; he is the energetic one who awakens the village from its slumber and calls it to self-determination. Lamming disdains the development of character: Mr. Slime the adulterer

becomes Mr. Slime the hero who becomes Mr. Slime the villain — all without any concern for consistency or narrative logic. The radical changes we are supposed to make in our judgement of him are not prepared for: we have an infuriating sense that the author uses Mr. Slime only to fulfil whatever function his political intention requires at the moment. In the end, his Friendly Society is revealed to have evil consequences, but because Mr. Slime is never presented directly we cannot be sure if he has been corrupted by the ready profits he could make or if he was always a scheming, dangerous capitalist. We have real difficulty in judging him, in spite of his name that promises easy judgement.

Mr. Slime's name, with its Dickensian or Trollopian overtones, invites mistrust of him, and Sandra Pouchet Paquet does find him sinister. His name associates him with such Victorian characters as Chevy Slyme, Uriah Heap, and the Rev. Obadiah Slope, but paradoxically he has none of the oiliness of his precursors. This is yet another example of Lamming somehow meaning less than he says; there are also a Mr. Foster, a Boy Blue, and a Trumper, whose names are merely names, with no deeper significance. Lamming's colonial society is full of imported signs that do not operate as signs do elsewhere, promising a richness of significance that always finally eludes the reader. In another world, perhaps in the world of a Victorian novel, these signs would belong and fit into a larger pattern of significance. In *Barchester Towers*, Trollope introduces his Mr. Slope as the lineal descendant of Laurence Sterne's Dr. Slop (22). Mr. Slope was conceived within a literary tradition. Trollope's novels are not faithful mirrors of absolute reality—they advertise their fictional nature. However, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, their imaginative wholeness is a mirror of the wholeness with which the society which produced them has itself been imagined. Trollope and his readers have their imaginations shaped by a literary tradition; their understanding of the world they live in and their reading of novels are alike shaped by this tradition. Nor is it too far-fetched to imagine that a branch of Slope's family emigrated to America and became the Snopeses of Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner, too, has created a whole fictional world that testifies to the fullness that America has in its own imagination.

Lamming's Mr. Slime, in spite of his name, is not related by blood or its literary equivalent, intertextuality, to any of these. He is a black colonial, the descendant of slaves. His name has been arbitrarily given him and does not identify him in the same way that Flem Snopes's name identifies him. Rather than locate him in a literary tradition and in a thoroughly imagined world, Mr. Slime's name reveals his lack of connection and the hollowness of his world.

Signs in Lamming's novel do not expand by emitting rays of infinite significance; they are black holes that absorb meaning and do not let any of it escape. The colonial society Lamming writes about lacks imaginative wholeness: it was created by others and never had the reality in the imagination of its members that England had in the imagination of the English, or Dixie had in the minds of Southerners. The Little Englanders in *In the Castle of My Skin* have no conception of a history they are making, so Lamming cannot tell their story. Their landscape has not been endowed with significance, so Lamming cannot describe it. And they have not imagined themselves and each other sufficiently, so Lamming has trouble naming them.

The novel may have no direction and no narrative thrust, but, as I said above, it does have an end, and an end that seems to make narrative sense of the whole. In the final pages of the novel, G meets Trumper who has returned from America. Trumper has renounced all his ideas of the existential loneliness of the self; he has found a political purpose. Trumper has lost his debilitating self-consciousness and now sees that he has been shaped by the world and can only understand himself by understanding the world. He identifies with others of his race and class. And he is ready to act on the world that has made him. He has a narrative project he is engaged in. He now has a story.

Suddenly, at the end of the novel, Trumper's name, which had seemed vaguely comical but without significance, is revealed to have meaning. So too at the end of the book Mr. Slime's name, which had not really identified him in any final way, proves to have held his fate. He is a money-grubbing capitalist related to Flem Snopes after all. The capitalism which Mr. Slime represents will integrate Barbados into a world economy. So, too, *In the Castle of*

My Skin, the text in which Mr. Slime is represented, integrates Barbados into a world literature.

Trumper has recognized the connections that in the modern world bind human beings together and bind some hand and foot. His response is a political one. He will resist the narrative imposed by others and he will make his own narrative. By giving Trumper the final word, the novel implicitly agrees with Trumper's vision. The novel's close validates a point of view that condemns most of the text itself. G is told to wake up and not lose himself in such introspection as pervades the novel. The novel stands self-condemned of sterility and paralysis, but in the end it affirms that the West Indies stands ready to make its own narrative.

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