

Clement H. Wyke. *Sam Selvon's Dialectal Style and Fictional Strategy* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1991). pp. 144. \$39.95.

In 1988, Three Continents Press (Washington, D.C.) published *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, a collection of essays, edited by Susheila Nastra. *Sam Selvon's Dialectal Style and Fictional Strategy*—the first book-length study of Selvon's work—is offered as “a literary analysis of [Selvon's] style that borrows selectively from some of the principles of linguistics and at the same time tries to avoid heavy dependence on either the technical terminology or the rigorous apparatus of the language specialist” (3). Though it also discusses other (interconnected) features in Selvon's work—such as characterization, the recurrent pursuit of a dream, the sense of place—the main emphasis of the book is a detailed examination of Selvon's language and, in particular, of what Clement Wyke argues is Selvon's changing relationship to creole (though Wyke prefers to say dialect).

Selvon uses language as a means of defining Trinidadian identity, of reflecting his thematic vision as a writer, of manipulating his point of view, of conveying a lyricism in prose that is deceptively hidden behind the easy colloquialism and local idioms of his style. Selvon's early works, in the main, contain a pure and unpretentious use of the Trinidad Creole dialect; later works reflect a distancing from, and a modification of, this primary, naked freshness of language, and the later stage of his career shows evidence of the increasing impact of the standard language, a merging of dialectal and standard forms, and a waning of original local patterns. (23)

The background is established in Chapter One (Introduction) with discussion of certain terms (such as thematic vision, lyricism, and dialect), some hints that changes in Selvon's work may partly be explained by his prolonged absence from the Caribbean, and a survey of scholarship on Standard Trinidad English and Trinidad Creole English (TCE). In particular, Wyke summarizes “some of the important phonological, grammatical, and lexical features of TCE . . . to suggest some of the options open to a writer like Selvon” (13).

Wyke tends to require that usage be either standard or TCE, or show cause why it is mixed. Though noting that “[a]t times . . . Selvon . . . can merge standard and creolized forms to provide a complementary function between the two” (41), he seems less than comfortable with the mesolect. Unless he can identify some literary justification (beyond the fact some of us talk like dat), he is inclined to deem it *inauthentic*. For example, Wyke says:

The narrator begins with the Standard English of “If you are one of the hustlers on Route 12 I don't know how you could fail to notice Eraser”; then he abruptly shifts to “he such a cheerful conductor”—a phrase which by its nonreliance on the copula marks it as a typical creole structure. Again we shift from the standard form. “To Londoners a bus is a bus,” and “Eraser had a different feeling about them” to the almost creole form, “Like how a sailor love his ship, so Eraser

love his bus." Authentic Trinidad Creole would use "he" for "his" in this last statement. (42)

But would it, always? And can we not often find, within a discourse that is tonally creole, sentences that look like Standard English?

With its constant inspection of detail, the book encourages this sort of dialogue. In chapters on The Early Period, The Middle Period, and The Late Period, it looks closely at something in each and every book. Like Maureen Warner-Lewis—who wears her learning more lightly (see, for example, her article on *Moses Ascending* in *Caribbean Quarterly*, Volume 28, Number 4)—Wyke demonstrates that a knowledge of linguistics can deepen our understanding of Selvon's skills. He seems to me more persuasive in readings of what he admires—*A Brighter Sun*, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*—than in analysis of what he thinks has failed.

He sometimes overdoes the linguistics as in his comment on the following sentence from *The Lonely Londoners*: "When Moses sit down and pay his fare he take out a white handkerchief and blow his nose." The sentence, writes Wyke (37),

reveals the first sign of the dialectal pattern through the use of what is in TCE an invariable form of the verb "sit." The morphological Standard English counterpart of this verb would have the terminal -s morpheme to express present tense in the third person; the TCE form of the verb, however, can signify past time, particularly since the tense of the verb in the immediately preceding sentence . . . is past ("a fellar was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train"). Thus, "sit down," in the grammatical context being examined, may mean "sat down" in Standard English (SE).

*May* mean? It so definitely *does* mean "sat down" that one actively resists Wyke's suggestion that the narrative voice may be shifting to the historic present.

The book has many errors, including transcription errors. The proof-reading is inadequate. "Fowler 1971" (cited on page 4) is missing from the Bibliography; *English as a World Language* turns up twice, assigned to each of its editors. In "where men know what it is to hustle a pound to pay the rent when Friday come" (*The Lonely Londoners*), "hustle a pound" does not mean "obtain a pound quickly" (66). In a discussion of *Moses Migrating*, we are told (119) that "the local Indian taxi driver's language is standard when it more naturally should be dialectal"; but the sentence quoted is actually spoken by Moses.

Clement Wyke's stimulating book invites us to consider in detail the work of an important, innovative writer. Read it.