

Saying Goodbye To Sam Selvon

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IN APRIL OF 1994, an obituary appeared in a newspaper in Calgary, Canada. It began as follows: "Calgary lost one of its best-loved and most outstanding authors on Saturday when Samuel Selvon, who lived in this city for the past sixteen years, died of a heart attack while visiting his native Trinidad. Selvon, 70, was travelling to the airport to return to Canada following a two-month illness when he suffered the heart attack—his second—and, subsequently, died in hospital." The article mentioned that Victor J. Ramraj, an English professor at the University of Calgary, and one of Selvon's close friends, had spoken with the author by telephone after his first heart attack; Selvon was then in high spirits and looking forward to returning home to Calgary. Then it noted that Selvon had moved to Calgary in 1978, after living twenty-eight years in England, mostly in London, where he had long since established himself as a writer. It identified Selvon as the author of seventeen books and as one of those celebrated West Indian expatriate writers—among them George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Edgar Mittelholzer, and Wilson Harris—who surfaced after the Second World War ("Samuel Dickson Selvon" A10).

This obituary, which I wrote myself, continued at some length; but it remained squarely within the conventions of Canadian newspapering and did not begin to do justice to my feelings about Sam Selvon, much less the literary debt I owe him. The fact is that Selvon contributed in significant ways to my second novel, *Calypso Warrior*. He not only pointed me towards the novel's controlling metaphor—that of the Calypso War—but he him-

self provided a real-life model for Emmanuel Tolbert, an important character in that novel.

Before going further, I would like to note that for me a large part of Selvon's attractiveness was his man-of-the-people quality—his absolute lack of pretension. Despite numerous temporary teaching appointments and even honorary doctorates, Selvon had little of the aloof academic about him. He taught himself to write by working as a journalist, and when he emigrated to England in 1950, he hoped to find work writing for a newspaper. He found himself doing a myriad of so-called lesser jobs, everything from sweeping floors to working in factories. "When I lived in England I lived like an ordinary immigrant," he once said. "I never lived like a writer, on a different plane" (Roberts and Thakur 8). Later, when literary critics became interested in his work, Selvon said: "it was really something that I wasn't really quite equipped or prepared for, but I guess I just got into it" (6).

I celebrated Selvon's man-of-the-people quality in a profile I wrote on him after our first meeting, in 1985:

Three years ago, Samuel Selvon found himself running short of cash. He scanned the want ads, saw that the University of Calgary was looking for a janitor and applied for the job. He got it, and for the next four months, Selvon worked from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. cleaning blackboards, washing floors and generally doing the things janitors do. Nothing odd in this, except that Selvon is an internationally known author. ("Samuel Selvon" 7)

In this article, I rehearsed Selvon's literary track record, citing book titles and Guggenheim Fellowships, then returned to my theme:

The year after he moved here (to Canada) with his family, Selvon taught creative writing as a visiting professor at the University of Victoria. When that appointment ended and the bills kept rolling in, he took the janitorial job at the University of Calgary. "It didn't bother me to work as a janitor for a few months, you know," Selvon says. "In fact, I rather enjoyed it. And if I needed money tomorrow, I'd do the same thing. Or I'd go and dig ditches, and I'd do it without any qualms. That's part of who I am. I wouldn't go to the unemployment office and say, 'I want a job as a writer.' I'd take anything I could get." (7)

Now, obviously I am not the only one who finds sentiments like these—notable for their absence of writerly pretension—both

healthy and disarming. Certainly I was captivated. And though I hesitate to make grandiose claims, given that Sam Selvon is such an important literary figure, the truth is that, over the next few years, he and I became friends. We met frequently for lunch—sometimes with the excuse of me gathering information for a column (as literary editor of the *Calgary Herald*), other times just for the pleasure of it. Now and then, I would invite Selvon to review books for the newspaper, but he did so only reluctantly, two or three times, and finally I stopped badgering him and just enjoyed his company.

I never analyzed our friendship or wondered about its psychological underpinnings until I undertook to write this testimonial. At that point, I picked up a book called *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, edited by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, which included an interview with Selvon. In the introduction to that book, the editors quote a passage from Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd's *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*: "Cultures designated as minorities have certain shared experiences by virtue of their similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture, which seeks to marginalize them all" (qtd. in Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 18).

I was struck by these words. Why? Here I must explain that anybody who troubled to categorize me as an author (I have published three books, two of them novels) would identify me as a Canadian writer. And rightly. More specifically, however, I am an English-speaking expatriate Quebecer. I grew up in a predominantly French-speaking town on the outskirts of Montreal where, though I am one-quarter French Canadian, I was very much part of a minority that has a difficult relationship with a dominant culture: French-speaking. This disjunction is a major theme of *Calypso Warrior*—and a situation I shared, though I had never thought about it, with Selvon. Perhaps it was a psychological affinity. One reason Selvon and I were drawn to each other, I now believe, is that we were both shaped by the predicament of marginality—and responded to this complex, shaping experience in similar ways.

I would like first to document a few specific ways in which Selvon, expatriate West Indian author, contributed to *Calypso*

Warrior, though he did not live to read the book. I think initially of the “spirit” that informs the novel. For me, Selvon embodied the spirit of calypso—a spirit of, among other things, spontaneity, irreverence, and topicality, of eclecticism and open-hearted inclusiveness. It is a spirit that has as well a certain satirical edge, as the fictional Tolbert suggests in *Calypso Warrior* when he describes calypso music as “Blues with a political dimension” (93).

Tolbert, the best friend and sometime business partner of the novel’s protagonist, David Nelligan, is a composite figure, whose models include a Trinidadian I knew in high school, who immigrated to Canada with his older brother and eventually became a medical doctor; and a Barbadian, with whom I studied journalism and political philosophy in Toronto, and who, last I heard, was running a Barbadian consulate in Europe. Mainly, however, I modelled Tolbert on the real-life Sam Selvon. In the first article I wrote about Selvon, for example, after describing him as “a tall, slim, unassuming man who laughs easily and speaks still in the lilting cadences of the West Indies,” I went on to say: “Selvon drew my attention to his lapel pin (a Canadian flag). He’d become a Canadian citizen, he told me, in 1981, on the very day he became eligible: ‘Not just me, all of us,’ he said, alluding to his wife and three children, now young adults. ‘In twenty-eight years, I never wanted to take out British citizenship.’” (“Samuel Selvon” 7). Later in the article, I mentioned that Selvon had been writing for forty years. He had begun selling short stories to the British Broadcasting Corporation while he was still living in Trinidad, working on a newspaper, and I quoted his explanation as to why he emigrated to England in the 1950s: “I felt I was too young to fall into a contented way of life—parties and drinking rum and going to the beach on Sundays” (7).

I worked all of this into *Calypso Warrior*. Halfway through the novel, which is set mostly in the culturally-divided city of Montreal, Tolbert introduces Nelligan to calypso music.

“Blues with a political dimension,” he called it, crossing his ankles on a wooden crate that served as both footstool and coffee table in that dinky little apartment on Aylmer Street. Spring, 1975. The summer before, Tolbert had visited Trinidad for the first time as an adult, boasting as he departed (Montreal) that he might never come back.

On his return, he'd taken to wearing a lapel-pin on his favorite bomber jacket: a small Canadian flag. "Back home was nothing but parties and drinking rum and going to the beach on Sundays, mon," he'd say with a wink. "Me, I'm heavy into Protestant Work Ethic."
(93)

I emphasized Tolbert's staunch Canadian-ness, and I realize that some readers may find this hard to credit. Anyone who cares to check, however, will find that Selvon often spoke of his delight at having become a Canadian, as I indicated in a profile that appeared in my book *Canada's Undeclared War: Fighting Words From The Literary Trenches*:

Selvon said he has "much more freedom here" to write. "It's much more difficult to earn a living in England. They don't have very many resident-writer appointments, for one thing. And the whole cultural upheaval in Canada. I feel part of it. You don't get that sort of thing in England. I find it so exciting, the feeling about writing that exists here." Selvon doesn't miss England. "Canadians are much easier (than the English) to get along with," he says. "I find Canadians warm, tolerant and friendly. They're more relaxed and open-minded. We've all found this. Certainly there's prejudice, and it needs watching. But compared with England, it's like nothing."
(168)

Early in 1986, Selvon's novel *The Plains of Caroni*, which he wrote in 1970, was reprinted in Canada. This, of course, was an occasion for lunch. Afterwards, I wrote a column in which I described the book as "a literary calypso"—a description, I knew, that better suited certain of Selvon's other works. But I wanted to quote the author at length on the subject of calypso, and *The Plains of Caroni* was my excuse. Here's how the column began:

"Calypso as I know it is spontaneous, intuitive," author Sam Selvon said the other day. "Usually it reflects the thoughts of the man in the street. Often a calypso is about current affairs: either on the island (Trinidad) or in the wider world. That's how spontaneity comes into it.

"If the prime minister is suspected of having an affair, that's material for a calypso. You get a lot of sexual undertones. The man-woman relationship is always grist for the mill. A calypso might be about a guy in a motel room trying to sleep, and he'll hear the bed creaking in the next room. But it can also be serious: if there's a water shortage, or if the telephone system is breaking down every other day, you can get a calypso built around that." ("Author's Work" F6)

Later in that piece, I quoted Selvon to the effect that calypso is rooted in black tribal life:

“It started with slaves brought over from Africa, and their singing and chanting songs in the cane fields.” The African influence is also apparent, Selvon said, “in the dancing that accompanies the music.” (F6)

Tolbert echoes these ideas:

Now, with a cigarette in one hand, a bottle of beer in the other, Tolbert held forth while introducing a pirated cassette tape a cousin had sent him from Trinidad: golden-age Calypso from the nineteen thirties and forties. Dig the vitality, he told David—the tongue-in-cheek macho, the rhythmic richness. Born in Trinidad, he said, Calypso harked back to drum-crazy Africa. Forget this tightass European approach, one rhythm per song: straight ahead, gentlemen, steady as she goes. Calypsos could feature two, three, even four different rhythms. (93)

On the cassette tape, the golden-age Calypsonians Attila the Hun and Roaring Lion begin trading verses about an epic boxing match. And Tolbert-Selvon says:

“Dialogues like this one . . . grew out of the drumming and chanting that accompanied traditional stick fights. They outlawed the fighting, eventually, but the music evolved into duets and dramas and full-scale Calypso Wars—protracted battles in which singers argued and traded insults.” (93)

Continuing to draw on my discussion with Selvon, I have Tolbert rave then about “the strutting, tongue-in-cheek macho of the pseudonyms” that golden-age Calypsonians gave themselves, and the king-sized personae they created: The Destroyer, Lord Executor, Sir Lancelot. Tolbert playfully dubs David Nelligan, who is a shameless equivocator, “The Mighty Hamlet.” Then Tolbert turns, again echoing Selvon, to the eclecticism of calypso. Like his real-life model, he extols the way a singer could explore anything from water shortages to the state of the telephone system. He observes that one calypsonian eulogized the Trinidad government’s latest five-year plan, while another lamented the abdication of King Edward the Eighth of England.

“Nothing about Quebec separatism?”

“They’ve left that to The Mighty Hamlet. But you do see my point. In Calypso, anything goes—from Shakespeare to separatism.”

Again Tolbert gestured for silence and a passionate anti-colonialist called Lord Invader began complaining bitterly about a lost love: "She told me plainly, she loved Yankee money, / And, she said, Lord - Invader, money for to find rum and coca-cola, / So don't bother, if you know you ain't got no Yankee dollar."

Tolbert said: "That sense of engagement? That defiant topicality? That's unique to Calypso."

"What about Blues?"

"Blues doesn't wrestle with political issues. It hasn't got the range. Calypso is Blues with a political dimension."

"Okay, I'm sold."

"It's the voice of the man in the street crying, 'Look, mon! The emperor's mistress has no clothes!'" (94)

Having realized that I was seriously interested in calypso and that I wanted somehow to incorporate it into a novel I had conceived, Selvon lent me a couple of well-thumbed books out of his personal library. One of these, I remember, was a large-format hardcover with a tattered blue slip jacket called *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate For A National Theatre*, by Errol Hill. I drew on that and Selvon's other books for much of what I wrote about calypso in my novel.

I am not going to try to cite every contribution Selvon made to *Calypso Warrior*. I think I have established the pattern of influence. And I want now to return to this question of marginality—to explore certain more general affinities I feel with Selvon, affinities that encouraged me to identify with him, and which manifest themselves, I believe, between the lines in *Calypso Warrior*. My purpose is not to suggest that my novel bears comparison with Selvon's pioneering works, but rather to underline something too often overlooked: that an English-speaking individual of European heritage (in my case, Irish and French, Dutch and Acadian) can also be marginalized by a dominant culture, and so develop a philosophy or attitude similar to that of a writer who clearly belongs to the "postcolonial world."

In his book, *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming hailed Selvon as a pioneer for his willingness to deal in his work with multi-racial situations. Asked about this in the 1980s, Selvon responded: "Well, it's true; what else have I got to deal with? That is the problem that we have. So, you know, I can't turn blind eyes

to it. In fact, the thing with me is that I am so much Westernized, so much Creolized, that it's the only element that I think that I am really strongest in" (Interview 112). Later in that interview, Selvon identified the source of his attitude: "A lot of my friends in my neighborhood and in my school in the town that I grew up in were mixed blacks and Indians" (113).

This, of course, is a shaping experience. And I cannot help feeling that the linguistic and cultural differences that confronted me as a boy, and that figure in *Calypto Warrior*, are psychologically analogous: in Quebec, the cultural divide between French Roman Catholics and English Protestants is just as wide as that between Caribbean blacks and Indians who speak the same language. The majority culture of Quebec is French-speaking. Growing up Anglophone in this context generates a certain sense of self—one more like Sam Selvon's, I would suggest, than like that, say of Canadian novelists Robertson Davies or W. O. Mitchell, who grew up in an English milieu as part of a dominant culture.

Sam Selvon became an expatriate writer. He spent most of his life (forty-four years) in England and Canada—and despite his love for the latter, he always identified himself as a Caribbean expatriate and felt most comfortable writing about West Indians. "I know people from the Caribbean," he said once. "I was born there. I know how they would react in any given situation. So that when I write about them, I epitomize the area and the people. I know I can do that, and I can still do it without any feeling that I have moved away from that, have moved out of my element into something else. I know these people. I know how they behave. I know how they think" (Roberts and Thakur 7). In *Calypto Warrior*, Nelligan develops a love-hate relationship with the majority, French-speaking culture. He finds himself at odds with its strain of ethnic nationalism. Yet he refuses to become an expatriate. He chooses instead to stay and fight—and pays a terrible price. I myself made the other choice—the Selvon choice. Faced with repressive language laws and so with shrinking job opportunities, I moved across the continent with my family in 1979. If I did not leave my native country, exactly, I left a psychological island whose dominant culture marginalized me.

This brings us to politics. Selvon is sometimes considered an apolitical writer, and certainly he provided some evidence for this interpretation. In *The Lonely Londoners*, for example, the protagonist, Moses, stands aloof when his friends begin to organize politically. In a 1994 interview, Selvon commented:

If you ask the majority of people, nobody wants to have anything to do with politics. They just want to be left alone, to have a nice job, a nice house, maybe a car to drive, and to live comfortably. These are universal desires. . . . At the same time, he (Moses) comes from that part of the world, so in point of fact what I am trying to bring out there is that although he keeps on saying it is his desire to be left alone, he cannot help it (getting involved), as he himself admits. He says, well, these are my people, and, you know, what can I do? If I've got to do anything, it's for them I've got to do it. (Roberts and Thakur 27)

All his life, Selvon championed the development of a multi-cultural, pan-Caribbean consciousness—one that included the various peoples of all the islands. His was an expansive, inclusive, and welcoming frame of mind. Discussing the development of a Caribbean consciousness, for example, he said of the Spanish-speaking islands: “They’re incorporating the English-speaking Caribbean with their arts festivals and things like that in Cuba and drawing them in. So I think we also should be doing some of that sort of thing” (Interview 114). And, again, while discussing Third World immigration in relation to Great Britain, Selvon observed:

They’ve got all those problems, and they are looking ahead and seeing how best they can use the situation to their advantage, and one of the things would be to accept that there are other cultures that would be coming into ours, and other artistic forms, writing, dancing, calypso music, whatever you like, reggae, or whatever, that would infiltrate into our society, that we have to take into account.

(Roberts and Thakur 16)

Such comments make me certain that Selvon would have welcomed my use of calypso as a controlling metaphor in a novel set mostly in Montreal. And, further, that he would have thoroughly approved of that novel’s allegorical attack on ethnic nationalism. This brings me back to the notion that writers who come of age in

a minority situation often bring a political dimension to their work.

Selvon said frequently that he considered himself a citizen of the world. And in 1979, addressing a conference at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, which celebrated the contributions of those of East Indian heritage, Selvon went further:

Another thing I heard—and I stand to be corrected—is that this conference is keeping a “low profile.” These new words and phrases don’t baffle an old Trinidadian like myself. You could construe your own meaning, but what that means to me is that we best hads don’t talk too loud before we antagonize the Black people and cause further botheration. If we feel that we are being oppressed and suppressed, all the more reason, I say, to blow our trumpet loud and fly our kite high. (*Foreday Morning* 224)

Now this, I note, is precisely the position that I have Nelligan take in *Calyпсо Warrior*. It is a position with which Tolbert identifies completely.

The last time I saw Selvon was at a gala soiree that drew several hundred people to the University of Calgary to celebrate a major bequest. Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje, who had recently won the Booker Prize, gave a delightful tongue-in-cheek talk about friendship and the writing life. Afterwards, everybody adjourned to eat canapes and drink wine. For a working journalist like myself, such occasions wear thin quickly—too many people seeking publicity—and I was making my escape when I spotted Selvon across the room, chatting with six or seven friends.

He had his back turned to me, and at first I just kept walking, figuring that I would catch him next time. Then, I do not know why, I spun on my heel and elbowed my way, as politely as I could, through a laughing crowd to say hello. Selvon had somehow appropriated an enormous plate of prawns and after greeting me insisted that I sample one. I thought then to tell him that I was finishing up a first draft of *Calyпсо Warrior*, and to ask him to read it and comment. But there were too many people around. Never mind. I would see Selvon again soon. We shook hands and promised to have lunch. Munching a prawn, I fled into the night—never dreaming that I would not see Selvon again. Later I would take comfort, foolish as it sounds, in knowing that I had

spun on my heel and elbowed my way through that laughing crowd to greet Selvon. That I had spoken, one last time, with my friend, and eaten a prawn he had given me. In a funny way, and almost despite myself, I had managed to say goodbye to Sam Selvon.¹

NOTE

- ¹ This article was presented in a slightly different form at a session in memory of Samuel Selvon, ACLALS Tenth Triennial Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 13-18 August 1995.

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