

*"A Greatness And A Vastness":
The Search for God
in the Fiction of Sam Selvon*

WAYNE BROWN

I

I HARDLY KNEW Sam Selvon, but I knew of course his reputation. The most "regular" of our writers, a consummate "limer," a real "Trini," who could "bat with the best," Selvon's reputation preceded and diminished him. By chance, I was never required either to study or to teach his books; and this ambiguous luxury, combined with his "nice-guy" reputation, set him apart in my mind. Selvon, alone of his generation of West Indian writers, I read "for pleasure." I read him standing mentally at ease.

I took from his books their love and laughter, their author's delight in his characters and their foibles. Yet, as the years passed, I found I remembered them for something quite different: for the note they often struck, a pervasive longing and sadness. This longing, this sadness, I glossed as their "poetry," meaning by that term what is popularly meant: a vague apprehension of something indefinable and momentous. It was hard to square that poetry with the Trini who "batted with the best." But then there was no need to try.

West Indian critics too talked about Selvon's "poetry," but most meant his supple wielding of the dialect. This they praised as validating the language of black folk. As for the longing, they forced that part into staunch sociological moulds, relating it to exile, Black oppression, British racism, capitalist exploitation, and so on. (To an extent that ought one day to be documented, West Indian literary criticism has comprised elaborations of simple racial distress. A propos of Selvon, the least racially-distressed writer of his generation, this has been particularly distorting.)

The reflexive assumption that attends reading on the run is that what one reads was likewise written on the run. And in sum,

subconsciously combining all these—the legend, the longing, my lackadaisical reading, the critics' sociological stuff—I saw Selvon as a worldly writer occasionally dogged by more sombre apprehensions of the soul: someone not averse to taking a short cut through metaphysical terrain en route to playing All Fours with the boys.

It took his death—and perhaps also the pastoral setting of Virginia, not unlike the Trinidad he grew up in, where I reread *Ways of Sunlight* and *The Lonely Londoners*, after many years—for the deep sensibility upholding those books to break surface for me. And then I was startled to find myself squarely and seriously in the country of T. S. Eliot—the Eliot (a kissing cousin of D. H. Lawrence's, after all) who harks back in bereavement and bitterness to the Romantics.

Eliot: Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn . . .
(“The Waste Land”)

Selvon: One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city . . . (*The Lonely Londoners* 7)

Eliot: There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: “Stetson! You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout?” (“The Waste Land”)

Selvon: And sometimes they might spot somebody they know: “Aye, Watson! What the hell you doing in Brit'n boy? Why you didn't write me you was coming?” And they would start big old talk, finding out what happening . . .
(*Lonely Londoners* 10)

Eliot: . . . there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands . . .
(“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”)

Selvon: There is a face you have for sitting at home and talking, there is a face you have for working in the office, there is a face, a bearing, a demeanour for each time and place. There is above all a face for travelling . . . (“My Girl” 184)

The correspondences are everywhere:

Eliot: Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song.
 . . . But at my back in a cold blast I hear
 The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from
 ear to ear. ("The Waste Land")

Selvon: The old Moses, standing on the banks of the Thames.

(This line, incidentally, which comes near the end of the "ballad" of *The Lonely Londoners* [125], is the novel's iconographic moment, the image it was written to release.) But Moses is thinking, and the paragraph goes on: "Under the kiff-kiff laughter"—a close-fitting creole synonym of Eliot's "chuckle"—it was "as if a forlorn shadow of doom fall on all the spades in the country."

The point is not the Trinidadian's debt to the Anglo-American; for the features swimming up like a watermark through the pages of Selvon are not really Eliot's, after all. They are the features of the man in whose name the young Eliot in turn flashed and raged (though he later turned against him). They are Wordsworth's features.

The real speaker of Selvon's lyrical essay, "My Girl and the City," is a most curious—but, in my view, successful—hybrid character comprising, first, Eliot's nerve-racked Prufrock:

Sitting in one of those places—choose one, and choose a time—where it is possible to escape for a brief spell from Christ and the cup of tea, I have know a great frustration and weariness. All these things, said, have been said before, the river seen, the skirt pressed against the swelling thigh noted, the lunch hour eating apples in the sphinx's lap under Cleopatra's Needle observed and duly registered; even to talk of the frustration is a repetition. What am I to do, am I to take each circumstance, each thing seen, noted, and mill them in my mind and spit out something entirely different? [Perhaps "the butt-ends of (his) days and ways"?] (185)

Second, the elate Wordsworth of the *circa* 1800 sonnets ("The World is Too Much with Us" and "Westminster Bridge"):

When we get to Westminster Bridge, the sky is marvellously clear with a few stray patches of beautiful cloud among which stars sparkle. The moon stands over Waterloo Bridge, above the Houses of Parliament sharply outlined, and it throws gold on the waters of the Thames. The Embankment is quiet. . . . A man sleeps on a bench. . . . Going back to that same spot about five o'clock in the evening, there

was absolutely nothing to recall the atmosphere of the early morning hours. Life had taken over completely, and there was nothing but people. . . . They come pouring out of offices and they bob up and down as they walk across the bridge. [Compare with Eliot, in "The Waste Land": "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many."] (186)

And third, Keats:

My girl, she is beautiful to look at. I have seen her in sunlight and in moonlight, and her face carves an exquisite shape in darkness. . . . Suddenly we are kissing and I wish I could die there and then and there's an end to everything, to all the Jesus-Christ thoughts. . . . (188)

But mainly Wordsworth, for, like the English Romantic, Selvon was Nature's poet.

II

In the 1940s, several West Indians—among them the young Selvon—were engaged in writing fiction and verse. A generation later, Caribbean academicians would derogate a good half of their offerings as "nature poetry," derivative of the English Romantics and irresponsibly irrelevant to the Anti-Colonial Struggle. The criticism was justified to the extent that it referred to mindless mimicry, by the less intense writers, of nineteenth-century British versification and diction. But it was overlaid by "ideological" intolerance (really, the jumpy pugnacity of racial distress) and the tendency to apply it across the board to dismiss the "un-militant" literature of the period—those young poets, mostly in Jamaica, who sang the praises of the "Negro Aroused" were exempted—reflected nothing so much as incomprehension of the nature of creativity, of the wellsprings and dawning of delight.

The same academicians heralded the mature Selvon, of course, for his skillful use of dialect and vivid depictions of the West Indian diaspora. But in giving short shrift to the "nature poetry" with which his stories are rife, they could hardly help but miss the deep impulse at work behind his fiction. Thus, they readily identified—and interpreted in more or less Black-socialist terms—the chronic tension in Selvon's work between

the individual and the community, and—a natural extension—between the exploiter and the oppressed. But that was by and large the limit of their interest, and they stopped there (and so tended to bracket Selvon with Lamming). They failed to see that among West Indian writers Selvon's true companion was Roger Mais. They failed to see that—as with the older Jamaican—the essential impulse propelling his fiction was the search for God.

It is a large phrase, "the search for God." Yet, whether one construes it as the effort to redeem the individual by committing him to the tapestry of Eternity (which can be compared with Wordsworth's "we come / From God, who is our home," or his "shadowy recollections," which "have power to make / Our noisy years seem moments in the being / of the eternal Silence") or as Eliot's correlating struggle "to apprehend / the point of intersection of the timeless / with time," it is startling to realize how closely Selvon's intimations approximate those of the English Romantics.

There is no way, for example, it seems to me, to discuss the young Trinidadian's essay, "The Life of a Day" (collected in *Foreday Morning*, but first published in the *Evening News* [*sic!*] of 10 May 1947) without relating it to Wordsworth:

Man grows older, and the strain and stress of life is marked on his face, but the stars reflect the wisdom of age. Through the very darkness there creeps mysteriously a great sense of knowledge and understanding;¹ the velvet sky is a playground for jewels of thought. Human emotion is inexplicably mingled with the day—but the silent tear; the bitter-sweet of love; the surging sweetness of untrammelled liberty—all these are reflected by the twinkling stars. . . . (35-36)

There is no way to read this passage and not hear its parallels with Wordsworth's "sense of something far more deeply interfused," his "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," and his opposition (in "The World Is Too Much with Us") between the dayworld of spurious emotion and "The sea that bares her bosom to the moon"—apprehensions which in turn should prepare us to see that Selvon means the phrase "untrammelled liberty" not in the historical but in the religious sense, of Eliot's "escape from personality," from what Wordsworth meant by "shades of the prison house," and Keats called "my sole self."

It is worth noticing, incidentally, that “the silent tear,” “the bittersweet of love,” and “the surging sweetness of untrammelled liberty” comprise a progression. It is the same progression—from human loneliness to the equivocal and transient release of sexual love, to the unequivocal “surging” surrender of the individual soul to God—which occurs at the end of that early, slight but charming story, “Passing Cloud”:

She looked at me with depth. She shrugged. ‘What is happiness?’ We were both silent for a long time, leaning there on the bridge and gazing in the water. And then just like that, she said, ‘Goodbye, Dan,’ and she slipped her hand from mine and walked out of my life. I stood there until dark came, and candle-flies.² (103)

Indeed, it is not dissimilar to the progressions that occur in “My Girl and the City” and *The Lonely Londoners*. Though short story and novel both culminate in explicit references to the creative process, it is clear (and we shall come to this) that Selvon sees the latter as grounded in eternity—“The old Moses, standing on the banks of the Thames”—and the writer as someone summoning speech (in God’s name?) from the place of “dark(ness) . . . and candle-flies.”

“The Life of a Day” is fascinating in its hungry corralling of a whole herd of images reflecting Eliot’s “point[s] of intersection of the timeless / With time” (“The Dry Salvages”). The sun and the moon in their eternal rounds; dawn smoke rising from chimneys; a moored boat stationary in current; the lives of peasants “flow(ing, yet) . . . with no progress” (33); a convoy of ships briefly backlit by a sunset; a windmill; immemorial night in the Botanical Gardens; a “lonely lane” progressing between (those images of a promiscuous and tossing stasis): “the sea on one side and whispering canefields on the other” (35).

It should be read in its entirety in relation to “The Simplon Pass”:

. . . The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls . . .
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them . . .
The unfettered clouds, and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light. . . . (625-36)

These, Wordsworth writes (and it is the climax of his thought and the summation of his faith):

Were all like workings of one mind, the features
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,
 The types and symbols of Eternity,
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (637-41)

That, too, in a word, was Selvon's faith. (At one point in "The Life of a Day," the young Trinidadian tries amateurishly—though not, I think, unseriously—to render the same sense of inclusivity, synonymity, and eternity which the English poet affirms, by means of an alliterative sequence echoing with the Hindu OM: "So many minute murmurs musically mingling in merry-making melody" [36]).

My point is that, notwithstanding the reputation of the man and the sociologically-oriented canon of criticism surrounding his work, Selvon was essentially a religious writer. In the many passages of "nature poetry" which distinguish his fiction—and which have usually been glossed by critics intent on claiming him as a champion of their historical cause—he expressed a religious philosophy surprisingly and seriously identical to Wordsworth's. And this was not mimicry, but fundamentally a reflection of the fact that Nature, not history, was for both men the touchstone of their sensibilities. We may speculate why this should have been so—and in the process unearth perhaps several striking, to date unremarked, similarities between Wordsworth's England and post-World War II Trinidad, as well as—interestingly!—the fact that, for different reasons and in different ways, these two very different men nonetheless stood in almost exactly the same relationship to their societies. But that line of inquiry leads beyond the scope of this note.

Selvon's religious philosophy, moreover, was not extrinsic to his work. The "nature poetry" that appears everywhere in his books is not the flower of his fiction but its root. That criticism of life which his stories comprise—as all fiction does—and the ideal human society they imply, as a negative implies a print, are as consistent with his philosophy, and grow as naturally out of it, as Wordsworth's poems were and did. If his critique of the

London of the West Indian migrants strikes a startling echo off an unlikely source—the Eliot of “Prufrock” and “Preludes,” of “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” and “The Waste Land”—that is because Eliot, in turn, was engaged in excoriating a civilization which in the meantime had come to unhealthy fruition as the dark side of Wordsworth’s moon.

In due course, Eliot found redemption in the notion of history as “a pattern / Of timeless moments”; so that, “while the light fails / On a winter’s afternoon, in a secluded chapel / History is now and England” (“Little Gidding” 234-37). But that from the very beginning was and remained the central dialectic in Selvon’s work. Motion and motionlessness. Time and Eternity.

III

I think I understand as I rise from the grass and put the letter in my pocket. I am tempted to rush in to Nancy and tell her everything, but my thoughts are not collected yet. I lean against the mango tree for a while, but try as I might I cannot think clearly. Then as I look up to the hill, I see the church, still standing, and I call to Nancy, “Let’s go for a walk, I have something to tell you . . .”

(Selvon, “Echo in the Hills” 65)

The lines above are atypical; Selvon seldom related creative speech so nearly explicitly to apprehensions of a specifically religious nature. Yet, time and again in his stories, speech occurs as the surge-into-expressiveness of some eternal Silence, rather than as silence’s interruption or banishment.

Such speech comes, like the wind or like light, from afar. Sometimes it rises through the medium of mortal Earth, as in “The Story of a Tree”:

It was Dru who, in the simplicity of her heart, struggled for words when she saw the tree and heard (in its branches) the sound of waves. (27)

Similarly in “Poem in London”:

For a minute the moon peered from the window of a cloud then shook its head. And the birdsong continued, insisting on time, time to begin, to get a move on in life. Drunk and belittled by the valley and the first signs of light creeping into it, he stood up, a little man in a big country, and walked on gawky legs like a newborn calf, testing his new life.

It was then that the poem sang in his veins. (131)

In "Rhapsody in Red" (1947), on the other hand, speech is an antidote to Earth's attritions: "along comes Charles . . . I am all for treating him cold . . . but John reminds me Charles can tell a good story, and we don't know how long the rain will last" (66). In "These People are Fatalists," the debasement of that creative speech which is the voice of eternity into the totalitarian rhetoric of religiosity is rendered by ironic juxtaposition:

The [hymn] singing stops. The white-clad figure starts to point the way to heaven in a shrill, high voice. Meantime, "This is station WVDI, the voice of the American servicemen in Port of Spain, Trinidad. At the sound of the note the time will be exactly 10.30." (The gong sounds; the shrill, high voice still continues to shout immortality.)
(47)

(Here, incidentally, is a comic reversal or negation of that creative utterance which is the expression of Silence that occurs in the slight but hilarious short story, "Waiting for Auntie to Cough.")

Selvon's preoccupation with human creativity, however, as being but an (inadequate) instrument for the expression of God, is best seen in his most sustained piece of "poetic" prose, "My Girl and the City." The title is worth remarking. In Selvon's fiction, as in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the loved girl is almost always the darling, type and voice of her Earth. (Selvon's 1982 story "Her Achilles Heel" deals with the painful converse of this: the new disjuncture between a loved but jumpy Trinidadian woman and her land of "rain and pout and flaming immortelle" [186].) At one level, "My Girl and the City" represents an intense and triumphant effort to anneal the schism between countryside and city—or between the author's native land and adopted country, his faraway past and "luminous" present—by blanket-ing both with the light of divine illumination, Wordsworth's light that "cometh from afar" ("Intimations of Immortality").

The significant point, however, is that the real object or quarry of "My Girl and the City" is neither the narrator nor the narrator's girl, nor the city which is their backdrop. It is not the narrator's love of them. It is not even the author's "love of life"—though

here the distinction grows fine. (To a degree that set him apart from other writers of his generation, Selvon loved women and London and life.) It is *Love itself*, the *prime mobile*, the animating spirit, Wordsworth's "Being of the Eternal Silence."

"All these words that I hope to write . . ." ("My Girl and the City" 181). The narration is littered with references to speech; they lie around like errant arrows or corpses on a battlefield. Indeed, the poignancy of the narrative derives from its author's knowledge of the inability of creative speech adequately to express its infinite Engendered. "Writing all this now . . . it is lifeless and insipid and useless. Only at the time, there was something, a thought that propelled me. [Compare 'Tintern Abbey': 'And I have felt . . . / A motion and a spirit that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought'] Always in looking back there was something, and at the time I am aware of it, and *the creation goes on and on in my mind . . .*" (183; emphasis added). Later, he says:

Wooring my way towards, sometimes in our casual conversation we came near to great, fundamental truths, and it was a little frightening. . . . We scattered words on the green summer grass, under trees, on dry leaves in a wood of quivering aspens, and sometimes it was as if I was struck speechless with too much to say, and held my tongue between thoughts frightened of utterance. . . . (187)

The reader will have noticed that in "Wooring my way towards" the preposition is left hanging. Towards what? Towards That Which Cannot Be Spoken? No, not even though creative speech is Its offspring. What's art then but a child who, try as it might, cannot clearly recall its Father? This lament, which in "My Girl and the City" is nonetheless countered and overrun by joy—by the very animating Spirit, that is, which it despairs of expressing—is explicitly and soberly stated in the 1948 story, "He is Going to Die":

What I find difficult to reconcile myself to . . . is this fullness which I experience, for I know I am not capable of comprehending all the thoughts which go to make up that fullness. I grasp the significance of the universe without the details. The mystery of life is solved, but the solution is hazy. (38)

Like Rilke's virgin, bewildered by too much light, "My Girl and the City" drifts hither and thither, going nowhere in particular really; enthralled, benumbed by joy.

And this is of a piece with the chief dialectic in Selvon's fiction, which is between motion and motionlessness, time and eternity. However much he loved his adopted city, Selvon was an exile in it, and it was natural that his work should teem with images of motion ("There is above all a face for travelling" [184]): with buses and trains, rivers and roads, lovers going for walks, commuters hurrying; with wind whipping skirts and trees, while the tremendous night stalks the land.

Yet it continually also withdraws to contemplate the diurnal and the seasonal, the things that—like a moored boat in current—hold steady against devouring time, or that pass only to return. Time and again at their climacterics, his stories arrive in exhaustion and/or triumph at Eliot's "point of intersection of the timeless / with time": some point of immobility and equipoise—typically, a river bank or bridge—beyond the action, above the flow. Indeed, it might be a simplification but not an exaggeration to say that most everything this happy Trinidadian wrote, he wrote as a way of earning his right to that stilly-illuminated place.

Well, he is gone now; overtaken at the last by the "greatness and . . . vastness" he spent much of his life putting the question to; all given over, one chooses to believe, to "the surging sweetness of untrammelled liberty." We who remain, we cannot find him there (for the being of the eternal Silence, as he discovered, may sometimes permit us "the significance," but not "the solution") and so from the land of the living I imagine him instead, like Wordsworth, "from the uproar . . . retired / into a silent bay," or like Keats's Cortez, "silent on a peak in Darien":

The old Moses, standing on the banks of the Thames.

NOTES

¹ Here is an early, explicit version—since Selvon, writing in his own voice, is free to be more precise than Moses—of the "greatness and . . . vastness," which Moses feels at the end of *The Lonely Londoners*.

² Cf. Derek Walcott, thirty years later: "I try to forget what happiness was / And when that don't work, I study the stars" ("The Schooner *Flight*" 20).

WORKS CITED

- Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York: Scribner's, 1942.
- Selvon, Samuel. "Echo in the Hills." 1947. *Foreday Morning* 62-65.
- . *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986*. London: Longman, 1989.
- . "He is Going to Die." 1948. *Foreday Morning* 38-42.
- . "Her Achilles Heel." 1982. *Foreday Morning* 182-89.
- . "My Girl and the City." 1957. *Ways of Sunlight* 181-88.
- . "Passing Cloud." 1948. *Foreday Morning* 100-03.
- . "Poem in London." 1951. *Foreday Morning* 127-33.
- . "Rhapsody in Red." 1947. *Foreday Morning* 66-76.
- . "The Life of the Day." 1947. *Foreday Morning* 33-37.
- . *The Lonely Londoners*. 1956. Toronto: TSAR, 1991.
- . "The Story of a Tree." 1947. *Foreday Morning* 27-29.
- . "These People Are Fatalists." 1948. *Foreday Morning* 47-49.
- . "Waiting for Aunty to Cough." 1957. *Ways Of Sunlight* 139-45.
- . *Ways of Sunlight*. 1957. London: Longman, 1973.
- Walcott, Derek. "The Schooner *Flight*." *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. London: Cape, 1980.
3-20.