BEACONS OF EXCELLENCE: THE EDGAR MITTELHOLZER MEMORIAL LECTURES

VOLUME 1: 1967-1971

Edited and with an Introduction by Andrew O. Lindsay

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BEACONS OF EXCELLENCE: THE EDGAR MITTELHOLZER MEMORIAL LECTURES

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The lectures would provide an apparatus whereby Guyanese writers and intellectuals abroad could be invited to come back home at a level of honour in order to serve the country by bringing new ideas to bear upon the community's inquiring minds. The annual publications of the texts of the lectures would add to our small but growing Guyana bibliography, and should help to make young intellectuals aware of their own heritage, and assist as a regular stimulus towards informed discussion of the nature of the development of the arts in Caribbean Society.

- A. J. Seymour on the founding of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures, 1967.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I became involved with the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures while helping to prepare *Denis Williams: A Life in Works. New and Collected Essays* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010) edited by his daughters Charlotte and Evelyn Williams. Williams himself delivered lectures in 1969 and 1984, Evelyn gave hers in 2009, and as I began to explore the others I was struck by how remarkable they were, and how little known. Early in 2010 I was speaking with Jeremy Poynting of the Leeds-based Peepal Tree Press and during the conversation he suggested that it would be a good idea if all of the Mittelholzer Lectures, most of which he had collected, could be brought together in a single volume. Like myself, Dr. Poynting regards the lectures as one of Guyana's great scholarly assets, and one that justly deserves to be celebrated. He was closely associated with setting up the Caribbean Press which was launched in Guyana at the end of February 2010, and when I mentioned the idea of a collection to its General Editor, Professor David Dabydeen and Guyana's Director of Culture, Professor James Rose they were both enthusiastic about the proposition, and this volume is the result. However it is principally to Jeremy Poynting that I owe my thanks for conceiving the idea, and very generously making material available to me. His Peepal Tree Press has done an enormous service to Guyanese authors, past and present, whose works would otherwise have remained out of print or never have been published at all.

I am indebted to Jacqueline Ward for her photograph of Edgar Mittelholzer which graces the covers of these volumes. I am grateful to Dr. Juanita Cox and Dr. Andrew Jefferson-Miles for reading through my draft and offering constructive advice. I am grateful to many people in Guyana for their enthusiasm and assistance. Jennifer Wishart of the Walter Roth Museum was instrumental in reviving the Memorial Lectures after a long hiatus, for which we should all be extremely grateful. She also provided me with new information about

Canon Bennett's lecture, and facilitated my liaison with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport in setting up this project. Dr. Joycelynne Loncke graciously afforded me a long interview and provided some very helpful insights and background information into the Lectures in general, and her own contribution in particular. To the Ministry I am grateful for their backing of the project and their granting of the necessary permissions. The book has been enhanced by a thoughtful Preface by Dr. Andrew Jefferson-Miles, Guyanese artist and author, who has provided an extremely thoughtful preamble, and whose insights at all stages have been creative and helpful. The staff at the University of Guyana's Caribbean Research Library, the National Library and the National Archive were unstinting in their help and patience in dealing with my endless requests and demands. Finally to Dr. Lynne Macedo at the University of Warwick for her patience and meticulous attention to detail in her preparation of my draft for publication. I cannot conclude without mentioning my partner Eve whose insights, suggestions and advice have been, as ever, of immense value.

Andrew O. Lindsay

NOTE

The lectures, together with any introductions, prefaces, references and footnotes, have been reproduced as they originally appeared. My editorial endnotes appear within square brackets to distinguish them from notes provided by the authors themselves. For the convenience of the reader, obvious mis-spellings, oversights or typesetting errors have been corrected without comment. To ensure consistency of stylistic convention within the texts of the lectures themselves, italics replace bold, underlined or capital letters to indicate titles of works, foreign or technical terms, or emphasis. Substantial citations within the texts have been set as indented block quotations. Where the authors, within the body of their texts, have provided extended bibliographical details about works from which they are quoting, I have placed these details in endnotes instead. The conventions for citation and reference have been standardised. The dates of the various lectures are as shown in the table of contents, but it should be noted that these are occasionally earlier than the year of actual publication, and any incorrect references and cross-references have therefore been rectified. Technically the spellings 'Guiana' and 'Guyana' hinge on 1966, the year of independence, but the authors' various choices of spelling have been retained because the contexts and intentions are clear.

PREFACE: THE MITTELHOLZER LECTURES IN CONTEXT

In July 2012, an exhibition entitled **'Drowned Landscapes'** presented the radar, sonar, ultra-sound, and thermal imaging from the North Sea, where explorations led by oil drilling companies have discovered a drowned world, a submerged, formerly-inhabited land, connecting Scotland to Denmark, of towns, cities, industries, and a population in the tens of thousands.

The exhibition cited above was founded on fifteen years of advanced imaging and exploration technologies. It is to be expected that a similar initiative in Guyana would demand a comparable horizon. Like Mesopotamia's cities, with which the whole of South America shares troubling similarities, Guyana's sunken cities would have been constructed with adobe bricks of local, baked mud, which local rivers supply aplenty. As in other such locations - in South and Central America, off the coast of Japan, in the Indian ocean, and under the sands of modern Iraq, near modern Baghdad - we would expect to find Guyana's sunken cities built on a megalithic foundation of stone blocks the weights exceeding 30 tonnes and quarried sometimes hundreds of miles away. Located on the low-lying coast, such cities would have been taken underwater in a gradual, or in a sudden deluge.

The flat, monotony of the Guyana coastline indicates the latter – a sudden great deluge. The former, now-drowned coast of Guyana is perhaps twelve to twenty kilometres in the Atlantic, ending likely where the continental shelf slopes to the ocean bed, twenty kilometres out at sea; since the now-continental shelf would have been, in an earlier era, former cliffs, overlooking lower land leading out to a lower-lying sea. Just as the cliffs of southern England, relative to the waters of the Channel below, constitute a highland called the South Downs, in Guyana, a former North Downs were submerged under the risen sea level and become the contours of the present sea floor now lying off-shore.

Such a site would have known an extended urbanization that the earliest antecedents of today's Amerindians will have recognised. Could a former inland lagoon, now under the sea-bed, be the true site of the El Dorado and his golden kingdom? Indeed there is a remnant of submerged cities in both Wapushani and Arawak legend.

And just like the legend, the evidence is that the Amerindians in Guyana are themselves a remnant. By the time Europe encountered them, it is as if they had become no more than the echo of a once-vocal exchange. Echoes presuppose the spoken, and the spoken presupposes conversation.

We may not know, at present, who transported the Amerindians to the Guianas, but we do infer that, like the latter-day Europeans, those who took them there organised them to run plantations and mines of industrial magnitude.

Such is the un-stated architecture of the house of Guyana: colonisation in the remote past by an unknown race, an introduced people still extant, sunken cities, a vanished record from far ago, and a recent wave of arrivals in the unconscious repetition of the same.

How is it significant to enquiries into the artistic culture of the new nation of Guyana? The significance is that the enquiries by definition take place against an *arrière-plan* of repeated colonisation; in their very happenstance, such arts are *de facto* vulnerable to an eventual and inevitable new colonisation.

It is a theme rounded on many times in these lectures. How do we deal with it? Perhaps we should address it *via* the reason of not why colonies begin, but why they end.

When colonisers leave, those who served them remain in the territory and continue in a kind of dilapidated economy. It is salient to note that colonial economies do not collapse for the reason of the colonisers leaving, but rather it is that the colonisers were forced to leave because their own economy in the colonized territory collapsed. We should recall that as early as 1921, three years following on the First World War, the Accounts posted to Westminster from the Governor General of Guiana admitted that the colony had been running at a deficit for many years and was not likely to become solvent ever again. The recommendation was to wind down in a

gradual fashion the British interest there. At the time of that communiqué independence remained some 45 years in the future, and when in 1966 independence did take place the ingrained model of the country had moved, from economic sickness, to the moribund. This is a fact seldom acknowledged by historians: entrepreneurs (the plantation owners) and their administration (the colonial civil service) do not abandon the profitable enterprise; instead, it is that the venture becomes loss-making and the financial failure forces them to leave.

Vulnerable to a future wave of new colonisation (which is distinct from freeing oneself from the old colonisation), and resident in a diseased economy, the leading question facing the Guyanese artist is one of how to grow a healthy art and thus keep control of the artistic enterprise of Guyana. The artist must ask how to imprint the currency of an art that will be sought after by the rest of the world.

Surely the impetus is that which great artists have always found themselves aligned: to create the very best literary and painted and musical art of which the world is capable; works that transcend nationality, and even cultural specificity. Greatness is a capital; and capital attracts capital. The message to the Guyanese artist is a simple one: be great!

The art of painting often possess a forecasting, figurative, and trans-figurative dimensions which could instruct and inform. In this guise, Amerindian art, a native art, born of the prior 'introduced species' to the Guianas, may offer insight as to the potential of the present peoples inhabiting the territory of Guyana.

The transposition may be straightforward - the painting of a jaguar has in its skin the integument of the flora and fauna, speaking to us of the interconnectedness and convertibility of living things.

However, the prognostics are often inadvertent, frequently removed from the subject-theme of the painting. Victor Captain (*The Hunter,* 2013) has lines of earth energy flowing from the huntsman's clothing, intonating the investment and investiture of the art-hunt in such energies. George Simon (*Tree Root 1*, 2013) is complex and arresting. The growths and protuberances pictured underground are also the legs and hooves of running horses, where the main stem

is both the torso and neck of these creatures of fable. The herds run not in a single direction but divergently; outwards, behind, to the fore. Significantly they race over parched ground - the thick oblates of dry mud of the savannah in drought. In the distance is a dust-storm, the tendrils of which are illuminated, pointing not to a celestial sun, but to a hypogeum as a solar city - to a sun that is buried in the earth itself, and the storm wind has blown away the soil to let the light out.

In collaboration with George Simon, Anil Roberts, a Makushi Indian artist from the threshold of the Rupununi, has now completed a number of public murals. To Anil Roberts's conscious mind, these are works to delight the passer-by at the National Stadium, or at the University of Guyana. In a parallel imaging field, the very existence of the works raises a velvet cord with Mexico and its art of the decorated wall, presenting a lien with a related civilization established not in the modern era, but, from the foregoing, in far antiquity.

The eventual reception accorded the poet, painter, sculptor, ceramicist, potter, architect, or composer has an origin in the creative life. At a manifest level it could be followed back to choices made at moments which, on retrospect, show themselves to have been determinative. Greek *Ate* or fate has to do with that which human decision can alter. They are choices that the artist recognises as they appear, and which the artist then makes in a highly individual manner.

John Peter Bennett was of Arawak birth. An inspirational encounter with a visiting writer from England became one of his determining moments. Significantly, it led him to begin and then complete a work of inestimable value: that of writing a definitive lexicon of Arawak words and their meaning in English. His *Arawak-English, English-Arawak Dictionary* opens the word-images of the leading people in Guyana's past.

One of many revelations emerging from Bennett's study is that the place names, river names, and landscape names, from the coast to 200 miles inland are all Arawak words, and all survived colonisation, intact and practically unaltered to this

day.

What does this say of the attitude of those of the modern era who first encountered the Arawak? It says that those who came from Europe to Guyana to establish commerce accepted that they were in borrowed territory and accepted that they would be guided in their nomenclature, and by implication, while they lived there, their structure of thought. Even if unconsciously made, it is not an astonishing admission?

Martin Carter's true 'attunement' seems to have been the political rally in which agents of the government targeted him and left him near dead. His long convalescence and retreat from the political arena may have been facilitated by the recognition that fighting for change with anger will breed violence. The 'still, small voice' of the poet has proved far more enduring than the public demonstration, for more and more people in far-flung nations, never having visited Guyana, commend his poetry.

We recall how Wilson Harris had to reassess his plan to become a great poet when his poetry manuscript was returned to him by a prominent publishing house. Harris's response was to change his medium (the novel instead of poetry) and to invent a new literature that became 'the unfinished genesis of the imagination', in all the fruitfulness and joy that has captivated so many admirers.

For Denis Williams the choice-point seemed to have been ignited by the decorative or 'pinafore' function attributed to art, and how that seemed inseparable from the general inconsequence of the very society in which he had chosen to make his art flourish; a society which, tellingly, had already extended to him a measure of recognition. Williams's decision was to embark on an odyssey to find the origin of the soul of man, and he accomplished it in startlingly successful ways: through the experimental novel, African art history, redemptive painting, the education of the public, and in the archaeology of Guyana.

A.J. Seymour found himself in an ambassadorial position. Under colonialism, he was one of the few accepted as having a credible interface with the expatriate community in Guyana – not just the *ad hoc* British administration, but also a rough and ready community posted there for mining, usually

by Canadian corporations. Following Independence, Seymour became one of the natural representatives of Guyana's stake in high culture.

Thus it is that much of the explicit literary, artistic and cultural character of the new Guyana involved these five individuals and their creations. Indeed, four of the five were the earliest speakers.

The pictorial and depictorial arts of those who are now regarded as indigenous peoples (but who were deliberately transported and put to labour in the territory of Guyana, then, when the venture failed, found themselves as inheritors of the land) might be a drawing of the likely outcome of those living there. It unearths the congestion facing societies and the part the artist has to play – not in society, but in the promulgation of life itself.

In concert with their fellow brothers and sisters from the rest of the Caribbean, the sensational inroads made by Guyanese in the nineteen-forties, fifties and sixties muster a high water mark celebrated internationally. The deliberations of these lectures are, in a substantial part, the acknowledging of the art and the artists who have since become a legacy.

Andrew Jefferson-Miles

INTRODUCTION

Guyana under the British was a cultural prism of bold, lucid facets in a stern, unforgiving glass that divided and segregated the lights projected in it. It held the promise of the rainbow, without an appropriate, nurturing rain. It would be the Guyanese themselves who would have to show the courage to place their own hand upon the crystal of the glass and so unveil the illusion. Thus it was that the social suffrage begun in 1954 achieved its purpose in 1966 when Guyana declared itself a sovereign nation and republic.

Going into Independence Day, Georgetown hosted flourishing drama clubs, musical societies, concerts given by Georgetown's two symphony orchestras, poetry readings, theatrical and operatic performances. The subject-matter was invariably dictated by the fact that "*the definition of culture was narrowly limited to representations with a European bias.*"[1] It was therefore a vacuum in the sense that during centuries of commercial exploitation there had been no real place for the locally-based West Indian writer or artist working on local material.

There were a few notable exceptions. A. R. F. Webber, though Trinidadian by birth, spent much of his life in British Guiana, and his 1917 novel *Those That Be in Bondage* was published and is partly set in the colony. Until Selwyn Cudjoe produced an edition in 1988[2] there were only two copies in existence. Norman Cameron's *Guianese Poetry*[3] features work by twenty-nine writers, dating back as far as 1832, including a selection by Egbert Martin,[4] all, however, writing in a mannered Victorian English. Edgar Mittelholzer wrote his light-hearted *Creole Chips* in 1937, and published them at his own expense. Peter Kempadoo's *Guiana Boy*[5] appeared in 1960, and is the first work of fiction to describe life on the sugar estates. The Guianese Art Group, formed in 1944, tried to foster work on local themes by local artists. All the same, the prevailing climate was predominantly Eurocentric.

As John Hearne has observed, an oppressive colonial history had created "*a society unique in its inarticulate sterility.*"[6] In the visual arts, music and literature there were only the British models to follow, and any attempt at authentic self-expression was treated with a certain amount of condescension or disdain. A. J. Seymour – prolific poet, respected critic, tireless essayist and founder-editor of the literary periodical *Kyk-Over-Al* [7] – recalls that when, as a young man, he first declared his intention to write poetry he was greeted with anger and incredulity. He was made to feel that for a young Guyanese to have such an ambition was to make himself into an upstart.

No publishing house existed in Guyana to publish aspiring authors, because there no commercial incentive to sell books by home-grown authors to a population conditioned to believe that nothing local was worth reading.[8] The aspiring Guyanese writer was therefore not writing for a Guyanese or even a Caribbean audience, and his creativity was stultified by the need to ensure that his material would be comprehensible to British or North American readers. In short, the colonial 'masters' had created an inferiority complex on a national scale. Prem Misir has neatly summed up the situation as follows:

> The European imperialists believed their beliefs, values, norms, rules, laws, language, etc., were innately superior to the local cultural format; many locals in the colonies surrendered to, and assimilated the imperialist definitions and concepts. And the way to rise in social mobility was through recognition and acceptance of the imperialist culture; modernity, a target to which many people aspire, is akin to taking on a 'Western look'. Thus, the local culture is subject to a dual marginalization - Western imperialists' subordination of the locals' culture, and the locals themselves subordinating their culture to the imperialists' way of life.[9]

Writing in 1960, George Lamming remembered:

> This was the kind of atmosphere in which all of us grew up. On the one hand a mass of people who were either illiterate or if not, had no connection whatever to literature since the were too poor or too tired to read; and on the other hand a

> colonial middle class education, it seemed, for the specific purpose of sneering at anything that few or was made on native soil. [10]

It was in such an atmosphere that the young Mittelholzer began to try his hand at writing, meeting with endless rejections from British publishers. Like so many other writers or artists seeking recognition he had to find it outside British Guiana.

The same was so of art. In the British Guiana of the late 1940s, the paintings of Denis Williams were treated with a certain derision and hostility until they were praised by the London establishment and by the reviewer in *Time* magazine.

Recognition by the media is a measure of success. It also casts the artist into a cauldron of debate, for back home, in British Guiana, the implication of success stood in the way of what Seymour and his contemporaries saw as authentic Guyaneseness - the representation as well as the direct participation in the life and troubles of the Guyanese folk. Those abroad who achieved some acknowledgement as to the worth of their art would have been viewed with a degree of suspicion and an inevitable modicum of envy at home.

To compound matters, artists have had to contend with the reality that systems of education place little value on the Arts. Michael Gilkes has explained that:

> The major reason why our schools still do not actively encourage the Arts alongside the Sciences is that our school systems emerged from and were shaped by colonialism. Schools in the Colonies were designed to provide a level of basic educational competence among the poor as potential workers, but they were also designed to nurture a subservient educated class who could be groomed to become the captains of industry, judges in the courts of law, leaders of the organized Christian church and Heads of financial institutions while remaining loyal to the tenets of Empire. Our school systems still bear the marks of their colonial origins. The role of Art was never central to a colonial education, nor is it today, for very similar reasons.[11]

To sharpen the edge of debate, colonial rule deliberately fosters ethnic division:

> [...] it should be remembered that throughout Guyanese history the elements of race, because of religion and language, have been factors which the master class manipulated so that they worked against unity.[12]

Descendants of the black slave population in the colony knew of no other culture than the British one. As a means of keeping them in their place their ancestors had been coerced into Christianity by the colonisers. Links with their authentic past had been systematically and irrevocably severed and it was therefore inevitable that any of them wishing to venture into the field of the arts would have no option but to follow the British model, where such an enterprise was regarded as presumptuous.

When the Indian population began to arrive in the late 1830s[13] they brought and retained their religion, so the predations of Christian missionaries were largely unsuccessful. They also brought with them the richness and beauty of the *Bhagavat Gita*, the cherished traditions of *divali*, *phagwa* and other festivals, their ancient pantheon of divinities, their *jhandi* flags, their language,[14] and a rich heritage of drama, song, and the distinctive art that lay at the heart of their religion. This was their canon – fully formed and self-sufficient – and despite the ghastly privations of indentureship, it was not wrested from them. Theirs was a culture central to their daily lives, and naturally enough they held tenaciously to it. Why would they wish to embrace Eurocentric models of culture? Why would they set religion and tradition aside in order to emulate a culture much less sophisticated than their own?

As for the indigenous peoples of the interior, they might as well not have existed. They did not speak English, so what contribution could they possibly make to culture? It is salutary to remember that in the late nineteenth century, except for keeping a few villages intact as curiosities, there was earnest discussion about exterminating the Amerindians altogether.

For these reasons it was never going to be easy for a writer or an artist to be distinctively Guyanese, and it is not surprising that so much post-colonial literature in Guyana and the wider Caribbean deals with the question of identity: it is of course a preoccupation in the works of Mittelholzer, and a recurring theme in several of the Memorial Lectures that bear his name.

One of the first attempts to lift the dead hand of cultural imperialism was the establishment of History and Culture Weeks in the late 1950s. These had four main aims: to bring together people from rural and urban areas; to recognise the importance of cooperation between all ethnic groups to provide a better quality of life for all; to conserve the country's heritage; and to encourage creativity.

This bringing together of persons from rural and urban areas is particularly significant. At the time, about 70 percent of the population lived in the countryside, and were predominantly East Indian. Georgetown's population was largely African or mulatto.[15] So Seymour's vision testifies to his clear determination to break down barriers between ethnicities. It is worth reminding ourselves from the outset that these events were actively supported and encouraged by both Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham.

In a published, open letter of 1958 Denis Williams wrote:

> The week of Guianese History and Culture is a magnificent step forward. I sincerely hope it will have the desired effect […] On this level of thought I have recently come to believe that the time has come for a comprehensive publication of West Indian literature – the first fifteen years, say, 1943–1958. A tremendous amount has been done in this period, and I envisage something of the kind which used to come out of America. "Fifteen years of West Indian Literature" – whole novels and/or excerpts (800 – 1,000 pages), poems, essays, etc., accompanied by adequate biographical stuff. This would be our first cultural gesture at nationhood on the international level and we can sure put up a show to make the literary world sit up and listen.[16]

Implicit in any such "*cultural gesture at nationhood*" was a clear determination that the time had come to take issue with

unthinking deference to European norms, and to challenge the assumption that a developing Guyanese 'culture', in the widest sense of that word, would require a European *imprimatur*.

It was against this background – indeed because of it – that the idea for the Memorial Lectures took shape. Following on Independence, there were urgent moves to bring together Guyana's writers and artists. Inspired by idealism and optimism, there was much discussion about ways in which to promote and showcase Guyanese scholarship. Following Mittelholzer's death, Jan Carew had written to Burnham suggesting some kind of memorial plaque, but it was A. J. Seymour who wrote again and proposed the Lectures.

There was also strong support from the influential group of writers and artists who would go on to create and host the first Carifesta in 1972, with the theme 'The Artist in Society with Special Reference to the Third World'.[17] These were tireless advocates of a national identity defined and shaped in the arts.

On the death of Edgar Mittelholzer in 1965, the government instituted the Memorial Lectures in his honour on themes of contemporary Guyanese or Commonwealth Caribbean writing or aspects of the relationship between thought and history and the emergence of creative writing in the Caribbean area, in order to promote a sense of national pride and help keep Guyana in the forefront of the new nations.[18]

Thus in 1967 the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures were instituted under the auspices of the National History & Arts Council which had been set up two years earlier. Each speaker would address a number of public audiences over a period of several days, though there was no hard and fast rule about the number. The initial plan was to present a lecture every two years or so, and by and large this is what has happened, though there have been interims of longer than two years.

To date there have been fifteen Lectures and fourteen speakers (Denis Williams spoke twice). Each speaker gave three or four presentations which, collectively, have yielded over forty individual papers.

It is to the credit of the Guyanese government that each lecture was published soon after it was delivered. Copies were often printed in limited edition and now many are no longer readily accessible[19]. A few a still to be found on websites specialising in rare books, where they command high prices. It is for this reason that they have been assembled in a single volume: these lectures are so important that they should be made wider known and shared by all those with a passion for the arts, whichever the world stage.

Arthur James Seymour held senior posts in important government establishments, such as the Department of Culture, the National Trust, and as Literary Coordinator for the first Carifesta.

Seymour was a shaper who worked tirelessly in a host of cultural institutions, so that there were very few aspects of the arts in the newly independent Guyana with which he was not actively involved. As Ian McDonald wrote on the occasion of Seymour's seventieth birthday: "*His head, full of new ideas and blazing with more poems, will not stay still long enough to put a crown on it*". Posthumously, Seymour was awarded the Cacique Crown of Honour (CCH) in 1988 and the Arrow of Achievement (AA) in the following year. And it was Seymour who delivered the first lectures. He has been called "*a literary giant*" by his successors.[20] His editorship of an anthology of West Indian poetry in 1957 provided an early platform for, among others, the future Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott. The foundation of *Kyk-Over-Al* in 1945 was a major and lasting achievement, and that literary journal went on to publish works by most major Caribbean authors.

A glance at the card index in the National Library will give some indication of the scope of Seymour's interests and the range of his publications; however, as Al Creighton has remarked,

> It is ironic that this man of letters, who spent half a century launching, nurturing and developing the careers of some of the greatest writers in the Caribbean and of Caribbean literature, never published a substantial volume of his own work.[21]

Thus more critical attention to Seymour is called for. Dr. McDonald has done Guyana a great service in editing *AJS at 70*[22], a volume which includes fifteen poems by Seymour, and the more recent *Collected Poems*.[23] 'Sonny' Ramphal's tribute catches the true human essence of Guyana's *de facto* Poet Laureate;[23] as does the poignant account of Seymour's last days by his friend and colleague Ian McDonald.[25] It is to be hoped that some future Mittelholzer lecturer will do for AJS what Joycelynne Loncke has done for Norman Cameron, and give Guyana a proper account of a remarkable personality whose achievements deserve the fullest possible measure of grateful recognition.

The Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures have proved to be Seymour's most enduring legacy. In his four essays, Seymour demonstrates his erudition, his devotion to literature, his humanity, and his vision for the future of his nation, and it was fitting that he should have chosen as his subject *Edgar Mittelholzer – The Man and his Work*.[26] He had the perfect credentials. As Celeste Dolphin said of him in her prefatory remarks, "*[…] he knew Mittelholzer so well for so long and to my mind has qualifications exceeding those of anyone else I know to initiate this series and interpret the creative mind of Mittelholzer to Guyanese readers.*"

His first lecture has an original and delightful beginning. He tells his audience that Edgar Mittelholzer had appeared to him in a dream, highly enthusiastic about meeting Friedrich Nietzsche and George Bernard Shaw in the afterlife, and greatly entertained by the idea of Seymour giving a talk about him. Engagingly, Seymour recounts the dream in the form of a letter to him, from Mittelholzer, then gives an account of Mittelholzer's life, from the modest beginnings in New Amsterdam to its end in England, drawing on personal reminiscences and personal letters.

Undaunted by endless rejections, Mittelholzer persevered for eleven years in what Seymour describes as "*his long and tireless assault upon the publishing world of London.*" He lived in Trinidad, Barbados, Montreal and latterly in England where, in 1965, suffering from "*a growing sense of scepticism bordering on nihilism*" he took his own life.

The second lecture examines how Mittelholzer interacted with the Guyana of his imagination, and analyses how, through the medium of the characters he created, he dealt with personal anguish. The character of Milton Copps in *The Life and Death of Sylvia*, argues Seymour, is a "*thinly disguised self-portrait of the novelist*" while *Corentyne Thunder* "*ushered in the beginning of our Guyanese imaginative literature*." *The Life and Death of Sylvia* is set in Georgetown, and traces the downfall of the young, unfortunate woman, at the mercy of what Seymour, echoing Mittelholzer, calls the "*tangled cliques and clans and sub-cliques and sub-clans that [...] constitute a bitter truth in the Georgetown world.*" He describes the shocked response by the Georgetown middle class when the novel reached the country, stemming from discomfort – "*the beginning of the rage of people who see their image, like Caliban's in a mirror, and don't like what they see.*"

The remainder of the lecture considers the *Kaywana* trilogy, which, according to Seymour invites a comparison with Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*.

> [...] the Kaywana series is a chronicle of the tradition of strength running through three and a half centuries of Guyanese history, showing the truth of the motto "the van Groenwegels never run". I take the view that in a very special sense the preparation and composition of these three novels completed Edgar. He was able to allow his own love of the Mittelholzer ancestry to run coincidental with the history of Guyana, and in this manner he was able successfully to project the image of his nation. In the series, Edgar and Guyana are more nearly identified here than anywhere else and so this series puts him fully in the national tradition.

The third lecture traces Mittelholzer's experiences in Trinidad, Barbados and England and explains how these helped to shape the creative process. His stay in Barbados seems to have been a particularly happy and productive time for him, but then came the move to England for the last novels. These are very different from what has gone before. Seymour explains that they are:

> ...a group of morality sermons and experiments in the novel of ideas. It is surprising how much he related to English social conditions and how much he was disturbed by them, especially thuggery and hooliganism […] The later novels seems to have been created under a crisis and a withering away of the belief in the ability of the group to keep the beasts under control.

In his final reading, Seymour touches on Mittelholzer's tastes in music and his fondness for satire, particularly in the *"humorous and delightful" Tinkling in the Twilight* in which the central character is able to travel forwards into the future to the year 2039, and describe the ludicrous forms of art and music that have developed. Seymour turns next to the inner compulsions that make people want to write, and questions whether it is best for a Guyanese author to remain at home, where direct experience is on hand, or to travel abroad as Mittelholzer did, and rely on memory.

In his closing remarks he declares that a nation must free itself of doubt. He speaks of the challenges that must be faced if the nation is to have any kind of cultural future – the need for books by Caribbean authors in school, the need for scholarships and grants, and above all the need for a national publishing house. He considers that the main tenet Mittelholzer passed down to us was "*the value of strength, energy and persistence and the quality of dedication.*" He turns finally to a brief review of Mittelholzer's most memorable characters, and concludes with a summation of the author's achievement; demonstrating how artistic integrity could set a writer against the whole apparatus of his nation, and the extent of the personal toll that this could exact.

Thus was concluded the inaugural lectures, a weighty and serious undertaking with a total of over thirty thousand words. It set the standard for those which would follow. Seymour's connection with the Memorial Lectures continued for several years during which he acted as chairman as well as providing forewords to the printed editions.

Denis Williams delivered the Second Lecture in 1969. Having obtained the first British Council scholarship in Art to be awarded in British Guiana, Williams had gone to

study in London as a young man. He achieved a considerable reputation as a teacher and an artist: he exhibited in prestigious galleries; his work was admired by Salvador Dali and featured in *Time* magazine. He then moved to Africa where he lectured in Art in Sudan, Uganda and Nigeria, working for a time as an archaeological draughtsman. During this period he produced his first novel *Other Leopards* [27] which was described by Derek Walcott as *"the pivotal one about race"*, as well as a major archaeological text *Icon and Image: A study of Sacred and Secular Forms of African Classical Art.*[28] While in Africa he maintained contact with his friend A. J. Seymour and always anticipated returning to an independent Guyana.

In 1966 he did return and took up residence at Issano for a while before moving to Georgetown. He became the country's first Director of Art, founded the Burrowes School of Art and became its first Principal. He founded the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology in 1974, and was closely associated with it for the remainder of his life. Archaeology became increasingly important to him, leading to his hugely influential *Prehistoric Guiana*[29] which was published posthumously. He was the recipient of the Arrow of Achievement (AA), the Cacique Crown of Honour (CCH) and an honorary doctorate from the University of the West Indies. His painting *Human World* (1950) was purchased by British Guiana as the first piece of artwork for the newly established National Collection, and his mural *Memorabilia II* (1976) can be seen in the foyer of the National Cultural Centre in Georgetown. Together with A. J. Seymour and Lynette Dolphin he was to become closely involved with selecting future speakers for the Memorial Lectures.

Williams's lecture examines the difficult issues facing the artist in the post-colonial context of a young nation seeking to define and establish a distinctive identity it can call its own. There were four lectures in all, published together as *Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana.*[30] The first was entitled 'The Concept of the Ancestor.' In his foreword, A. J. Seymour describes how Williams *"dealt with the concepts of miscegenation and racial purity and the way in which what might be a socially divisive element, can be creative in a cultural sense."* An

obsession with miscegenation lies at the heart of much of Mittelholzer's fiction,[31] and this provides Williams with a starting point as he remembers how, on his return to Guyana after a prolonged absence, he had experienced

> […] a feeling almost of shock when confronted, for the first time in twenty years, with the West Indian mass in the dining-saloon. Shock yes, and confusion and alarm and even paradoxically, repulsion. This polyglot mass, this composite, this hybrid, this mongrel – who were these people? I suspect that the answer to this question keeps many a reflective West Indian abroad.

Arising from this came the inevitable question of identity and self-worth:

> One has imbibed the most self-annihilating of fallacies; this is that the mongrel, lacking 'purity' of blood, *ipso facto* also lacks the virtues inherent in purity of blood: cultural integrity, wholeness of soul. I suspect this to be the seat of much of Edgar Mittelholzer's sense of cosmic wrong – the wrong of a man not born whole.

He went on to describe the "*militantly filialistic elements*" that may have had some purpose in a colonial situation, but lack a creative function in the realities of nationhood where the relationship that binds the New World man to his Old World ancestry is ultimately doomed to failure:

> Strive as we may to maintain the image of such a relationship we can never again become Indians or Africans or Chinese or Europeans, *etcetera*; we are peoples of the New World […]. So long as we ideally relate to the racial ancestor, or racial ancestors, of our several origins we inhibit awareness of our uniqueness and to this degree deny the possibilities which this uniqueness offers for conceiving an autonomous self-image; we inhibit the growth of this self-image in our works and our achievements, particularly in those achievements of culture and the intellect which all nations value above the individual life.[32]

He was well qualified to reach such a judgement, having lived for several years in Africa where he realised that

> [they] do not like the word Black, Coloured, Negro, etc. Especially the last. […] They do not consider myself a Negro. There is a special word for people like me in Arabic, literally 'green' signifying neither white nor black.[33]

Williams examines the *Kaywana* trilogy in some detail, focusing particularly on Mittelholzer's portrayal in fiction of the turmoil arising from the loss of 'pure' blood. However Williams concludes that despite the fact that New World people cannot possibly be native to the land they occupy, this plethora of different ancestries may nevertheless create an opportunity for creative potential.

Mittelholzer's van Groenwegels, says Williams, represent "*his mechanism of revolt against the colonial circumstance*." The revolt was doomed to fail because it ultimately depended on a filialistic relationship to the Old World, symbolised in Dutch blood forever tainted. The lecture concludes with yet another reminder that whereas melting pots tend to produce an amorphous fusion of disparate elements, a far better model for the New World is that of a crucible, providing New World man with "*the focus for the release of his original energies*."

The theme of blood and ancestry is taken a stage further in his second lecture, 'The Complex Womb', a title borrowed from a concept of Wilson Harris. He finds it "*incredible*" that the "*tangle of ancestry*" which is such a prominent fact in Guyanese society has not had a deeper influence on artistic and literary expression. The person of mixed blood and ancestry is a living symbol of the process of cultural catalysis though our cultural affiliations tend to remain discrete:

> Collectively we are a people without a myth, without the unified consciousness of the indwelling of a common ancestor, without any charter whatsoever for a destiny, since in what forms, in what racial skin our issue will present down the generations we have no means of knowing. In the immigrant societies of the Americas one hardly expect matters to be any different: we are not of the soil, our archaic kings are not buried here: we have chipped our stone celts and fashioned our stone gods and built our shrines to them elsewhere: each racial unit in our country remains a stranger among strangers in an alien land.

Mittelholzer's van Groenwegels are in a "*simple bad-luck situation*" because their struggles are not on a cosmic scale – they are concerned with the dictates of inheritance rather than the wider, immutable problems of heritage.

The colonial subject-individual is "*insulated from all that is humanly problematical, all that is problematically human.*" No filialistic culture in the Guyana, or indeed the Caribbean, has evolved its own idioms of expression based on the old heritage, though each racial group, by its existence, "*qualifies, and diminishes, the self-image of the other.*" The result of this, argues Williams, has been a historical lack of self-confidence in West Indians arising from a lack of a unified self-image and no clear idea of a destiny. For this reason Guyanese can have no idea of what their society will be like in generations to come, though it seems likely that polarity will continue to be a feature of it. Williams does not believe that there will ever be an art in Guyana which is East Indian, Chinese or African. The only hope is that catalysis will result in "*a re-interpretation of the present*" that may conceivably bring about "*a creative art assessed in our own critical terms.*"

The third lecture – 'Image and Idea in African and Caribbean Literature' – draws parallels between Africa and the Caribbean, a useful exercise because in these two regions literature had emerged relatively recently as a new art form and had already yielded up a substantial number of important titles. Williams speaks with particular authority because during ten years in Africa he had become personally acquainted with most of the authors he mentions, had published a novel of his own, and so was well placed to comment on the Guyanese situation.

The final lecture, 'Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana', explores the question of how a Guyanese self-image might develop in future, and leads to an analysis of the work of his friend Wilson Harris, who delivered his own Mittelholzer Lectures the following year.

Born in New Amsterdam in 1921, and resident in England since 1959, **Sir Wilson Harris** began life as a government surveyor before embarking on a literary career. He has produced a rich and varied *corpus* of works, ranging from poetry to novels, beginning in 1960 with *Palace of the Peacock*,

the first in the series of four novels that would became *The Guyana Quartet*. His experience of life in Guyana's interior; the nature of its ever-changing and complex landscapes and their relationship to the human psyche led him to reject realism, and his work is characterised by allegory, dense metaphor and non-linear narrative structure, together with a fusion of past and present, and the creation of a world of many dimensions in which the power of the imagination becomes an interactive influence in the author's portrayal of a 'reality' where existence and non-existence often coexist.[34] This form of writing was later described by novelist Vanna Bonta[35] as 'quantum fiction', which she defined as "*the realm of all possibilities*." Harris' highly nuanced and poetic prose style can be challenging to the reader, though extremely rewarding, and he has inspired later authors such as Mark McWatt who specifically acknowledges his influence in *Suspended Sentences* (2005), which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2006. Harris has firmly established himself as one of the foremost literary innovators of his generation. He has twice been awarded the Guyana Prize for literature; he is the recipient of a number of honorary doctorates and awards, and for his services to literature he was awarded a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II in her 2010 Birthday Honours list.

The Third Lecture (1970) comprised three public addresses collectively entitled *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*. The first reading, which adopts the same title, has an introduction by A. J. Seymour, who sets the scene with a quotation from that lecture:

> The act of the artist or philosopher is free but not motiveless. Their freedom [...] consists in appropriating a *de facto* situation by endowing it with a figurative meaning beyond its real one.

Harris begins by examining the objections of the black philosopher J. J. Thomas to the theories of the nineteenth-century English historian J. A. Froude, who believed that systems and societies that fortuitously "*worked*" – like West Indian colonialism – should be left alone, and not subjected to change. He expressed these sentiments in *The English in the*

West Indies (1888) which argues for the continuation of white supremacy as determined by law. In *Froudacity: West Indian Fables* (1889), Thomas counters what he viewed as a flawed racist philosophy, and claims instead that any historical law that does not adapt to circumstances and admit change will ultimately degenerate to nothing more than a defence of white power and privilege. However both men shared a suspicion of 'primitive' practices, described as "*significant vestiges of the subconscious imagination which they needed to explore if they were to begin to apprehend a figurative meaning beyond the real or apparently real world.*" Harris regards this as an "*art of the imagination*" that cannot be ignored, and he equates imagination with fable and myth that still exist as important undercurrents in the Caribbean. *Limbo* dancing is not politically subversive, as was once thought, but originated from the cramped conditions on the Middle Passage, and symbolises the transition into slavery, traversing a gateway into a new world:

> The *limbo* dance therefore implies, I believe, a profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes (note again the high stilted legs of some of the performers and the spider-Anancy masks of others running close to the ground) and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods. And that re-assembly which issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth – and to point to the necessity for a new kind of drama, novel and poem – is a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates.

In a parallel development, Haitian *vodun* accommodates aspects of Catholicism within a more ancient belief system. Both *vodun* and *limbo* point to the possibility of a renascence of the imagination based on these archetypal resonances that also enjoy a *rapport* with local Amerindian myth. Such facts have not been grasped by historians and critics who, like Gerald Moore, believe that the West Indies have "*no genuine inner cohesion whatever*", and "*no common interests*". He quotes Denis Williams' 1969 lecture:

> Yet in the Caribbean and in Guyana we think and behave as though we have no past, no history, no culture. And where we do come to take notice of our history it is often in the light of biases adopted from one thoroughbred culture or another, of the Old World.

Harris understands that Haitian *vodun* is a "*creative fulfilment*" of its original African version, with the same 'possession trances'. He defines it as

> a highly condensed feature of inspiration and hallucination within which 'space' itself becomes the sole expression and recollection of the dance – as if 'space' is the character of the dance – since the celebrants themselves are soon turned into 'objects' – into an architecture of movement like "deathless' flesh, wood or stone. And such deathless flesh, wood or stone (symbolic of the dance of creation) subsists – in the very protean reality of space – on its own losses (symbolic decapitation of wood, symbolic truncation of stone) so that the very void of sensation in which the dancer begins to move, like an authentic spectre or structure of fiction, makes him or her insensible to all conventional props of habit and responsive only to a grain of frailty or light support.

Both *vodun* and *limbo* point to "*sleeping possibilities of drama and horizons of poetry, epic and novel, sculpture and painting*" which could potentially prove hugely beneficial for Caribbean man. But the "*void of history which haunts the black man*" may never be filled unless a deliberate act of imagination opens gateways between civilisations, just as the *Aeneid* stands as "*one of the first epics of migration and resettlement.*"

In the second lecture, 'The Amerindian Legacy', he points out that for the Amerindian peoples there was an even greater cleavage between history and art. Until comparatively recently they were dismissed as unimportant, and their sophisticated culture blithely denounced as "*gross superstition*" by missionaries who came to the New World looking for "*ready-made black devils*" to be converted to Christianity. Aubrey Williams, says Harris, has done much as a "*painter of renascence*" in reconstituting the Amerindian muse. Carib cannibalism, condemned as "*notorious*" by the missionaries, was, suggests Michael Swan, actually the practice of "*transubstantiation in*

reverse", something that the Spanish Catholic psyche was unable to comprehend. Nor could they understand the bush baby syndrome – the immortal, archetypal child of dreams best understood in terms of alchemical symbolism and rooted in subconscious notions of conquest and defeat:

> Thus, in effect, the Carib or Carnival 'immortal child' was an inner omen which diverged from the immediate realism of the day. Such a divergence exposed latencies or sleeping resources. Those resources of inner divergence need to be converted in our age, I feel, into an original threshold in a West Indian architecture of consciousness so that we may begin to cope within ourselves with the overburden or sheer raw material of life lived which has been our blanket realism for centuries in these parts.

For the Caribs, one-time conquerors, the crowning indignity was that they were reduced to being mercenaries or jungle police. They were virtually extinct at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The role of the shaman was to nurture a "*subsistence of memory*" in order to feed a future imagination. Moving to *zeme*, or iconic figures, Harris leads us to

> an architecture of consciousness or re-constitution of spaces in the West Indian psyche running through Negro *limbo* and *vodun* into sculptures or spaces equivalent to rooms of an Arawak cosmos

In marked contrast to the politician or lawmaker who cannot conceive of landscape as anything other than that which forms constituency boundaries. Gabriel García Márquez declared:

> I am a realist writer because I believe that in Latin-America everything is possible, everything is real. There is a technical problem in that the writer finds difficulty in transcribing real events in Latin-America because no one would believe them in a book. We live surrounded by these fantastic and extraordinary things and still some writers insist on recounting to us immediate realities of no real importance. I believe that we have to work, investigating language and the

> technical forms of narration so that the entire fantastic reality of Latin-America might form part of our books, and so that Latin-American Literature might in fact correspond to Latin-American life where the most extraordinary things happen every day.

The final lecture, 'Continuity and Discontinuity', sums up what has already been said with the simple observation that the West Indies are a materialistic adjunct of imperialism where "*there does not exist a philosophy of history in the Caribbean correlative to the arts of the imagination.*" He is interested in cultural gateways rather than any linear evolution, "*the missing links, as it were, between cultures rather than a hard continuous dividing wall*," so that we shall have to create "*a new intuitive logic and design that diverges from the prison of the past, or which speaks through us towards the past and the future in a manner that also subtly diverges from the prison of the present and, may I add, from popular prejudice.*" This is not the way in which a materialist views matters, and any artist working at an intuitive or subconscious level may have to rely on the appraisal of later critics who will appreciate the breakthrough as a drama of imaginative consciousness – where the real life of art resides. Brathwaite, says Harris, successfully explores an area of overlap between Africa and the West Indies "*which invokes a speaking oracular voice as well as an imagistic intelligence*", though historical convention has no place for this "*subtle storm of reality,*" focusing obsessively and claustrophobically on irreconcilable differences and rigidly structured catalogues of deeds in "*dead time*" within "*deterministic horizons*." Native consciousness is overlooked:

> Caribbean man is involved in a civilisation-making process (whether he likes it or not) and until this creative authority becomes intimate to his perspectives, he will continue to find himself embalmed in his deprivations – embalmed as a derivative tool-making, fence-making animal. As such his dialectic will remain a frozen round of protest.

The reaction of West Indian society to the "*old heritage of slavery*" actually stultifies possible development, since it has become a politically "*embalmed posture*" in need of a new

anthropology that can properly assess distances and divergences from the strict lines drawn by historians: that *"black/white rigidity"* that *"encircles the imagination*." It is Harris' view that

> […] the subtle key to a philosophy of history is embedded in the misunderstood arts of the Caribbean which we have traced through Negro *limbo,* Haitian *vodun,* Carib bush baby, Arawak *zemi* as well as through Latin and English inheritances and the intuitive logic of a few Caribbean poets, painters, novelists, etc.

Martin Carter (1927—1997) delivered the Fourth Lecture in 1971, entitled *Man and Making – Victim and Vehicle*. He was, like W. B. Yeats, closely involved with emergent nationhood. He is now considered to be the greatest of Guyanese poets, writing as he did against a turbulent political background, deeply immersed in the politics of struggle and rebellion against the colonial authorities. He sidestepped university and took work for a time with the Post Office. His political career started when he joined Cheddi Jagan's fledgling PPP in 1950. Three years later the British government declared a state of emergency and suspended the constitution, and Carter was detained at Timehri for *"spreading dissention."* In 1954 his book *Poems of Resistance from British Guiana* was published in the UK, a very significant achievement for a Caribbean author. A month later he was imprisoned again for taking part in a political procession. In 1956 he was expelled from the PPP for being too left-wing and he went to work for the British Council and later for Bookers. When Guyana gained its independence he joined Burnham's PNC and became Guyana's delegate to the UN, but he quickly resigned because of his increasing disillusionment with the PNC, and returned to Bookers for eight years before taking up a post at the University of Guyana. His anger at the PNC's refusal to hold elections led to his participation in a demonstration held in 1978, during the course of which he was badly beaten up. He largely withdrew from politics and devoted himself to writing until an incapacitating stroke in 1993. He died in 1997.

Carter never sought fame or recognition, and it was only after his death that critics have come to recognise his full stature. Many of his poems are now regarded as classic examples of socialist literature and have gained world-wide recognition as well as being translated into many other languages. But ultimately he was Guyanese, writing about Guyana. He expressed what Stewart Brown has called *"the conscience of a nation":*

> Carter's poetry offers its readers the chronicle of a life — in its many facets — committed to being, in Guyana, and traces the evolution of his commitment to the notion of social justice, beyond the contagions of racial politics, through the tumultuous period his seventy or so years spanned. The poems witness to the fundamental integrity that characterised so much of his practice as both a man-in-society and a writer. They provide a kind of record of that fiercely intelligent, sternly poetic sensibility responding not only to the political turmoil but also to the personal and domestic claims on his emotions and energy — he wrote several beautiful love poems through his career — as well as to the spiritual and the elemental dimensions of life in Guyana.[36]

Carter asserts that identity is an open-ended thing; a process and a becoming, in which even without a conscious intention on the part of the human agent the objective world is humanised and the human world objectivised. To Carter, identity is determined by what we actually do rather than where we come from, or what we may yet discover. The essence of what it is to be human can only be explained in terms of culture, and this poses the question of whether there is indeed any such thing as a West Indian culture, a theme to which Carter would return in a later essay.[37] If, as John Hearne believes, colonialism *"generated a society unique in its inarticulate sterility"* where are we now, in human terms? We cannot make decisions based on differences between African and Indian historical antecedents (slave/non-slave), since, when the Indians arrived, they were immediately forced by the British 'masters' into a confined space within an already well-established social and psychological order, thereby

creating what has become a commonality of legacy. In such circumstances, according to Mircea Eliade, modern man is denied everything "*except the freedom to make history by making himself*." This presupposes individuals who will lead creatively, and by implication a society or audience prepared to embrace their vision, thus paving the way for the creation of an authentic identity.

In 'The Victim Identified', given that the quest for identity is a central Caribbean preoccupation, Carter examines the themes that pervade Caribbean fiction. He begins with a telling quotation from A. J. Seymour:

> What are the themes of these novels? Personal identity, autobiography, the urge to set one's story on record, and also national discovery, the history of the environment and of the nation – how did we come here and who are we? There is a full range of social classes involved in the great themes of up from slavery, poverty, emancipation and its associate of colour prejudice, sometimes working in family relationships as well as in community relationships. The lower middle and upper classes take their stand. Do we want sex, migration, religion? Mittelholzer and Lamming will rise to the call and show us how people live and move and worship. Do we want to poke fun at those most serious and tragic figures, the politicians? Naipaul will do so for us […] Do we want to see how the large Asiatic group, the East Indians, are living as islands in the midst of the African based communities? Selvon and Naipaul and Kempadoo will show us in the sociology of fiction and we will see the Indian philosophy – way of life. Have the novelists caught the racy rhythms of country peasants? Reid has done so, Selvon has done so and Carew and Mais have shown the differences in Jamaican urban and rural, Trinidad and Guyanese country dialects.

These are the themes. But what of audience? Carter acknowledges that the people of the Caribbean "*are not great readers*" and bemoans the fact that there are no local publishing houses to cater for the needs of creative writers, who are therefore obliged to write intelligibly for a non-Caribbean audience, and are therefore "*forced, as it were, to make concessions which invariably weaken the structure of [their] work and dilute the content of it*." A typical writer, says Carter,

would suffer from a "*divided selfhood*." Living in a poor country riven with economic and racial divisions, he would be educated to assimilate the values and aesthetics inherent in the English language. Realising that his aspirations could never be realised in a philistine, subsistence-based society, he would travel abroad where he might gain intellectual and social freedom, but be constantly reminded of an audience that, as Lamming put it, was *"not of his person*." Thus the writer becomes a victim of a cruel dichotomy. If he stays at home and writes about his immediate surroundings and circumstances he will not be published, or at least will fail to gain an appreciative readership; if he moves to a new environment and writes for his new audience he may face serious criticism at home for failing to represent the reality of life there. Carter views personal identity as the *raison d'être* not only of the Caribbean novel, but of all Caribbean creative activity which, in the broadest historical context, means regarding and portraying ourselves as victims. Even the politician portrays himself as a victim in order to find a short-cut through history, just as the obeahman portrays himself as a victim to find a short-cut through reality. All of them are articulate, and make themselves recognisable "*in forms which are intelligible or at least perceptible to a significant section of fellow victims."*

'Victim as Vehicle' moves forward from Carter's assertion that we are all victims, actively or passively. Given that identity in the Caribbean is a cultural concept, what are the common characteristics of the "*active victims"* – the artists, politician and obeahmen who were preceded by the *"passive victims?*" Our field of enquiry is narrowed to "*consciousness*" which is a function of human power and an essential element in self-identification:

> And if we apply these considerations to Commonwealth Caribbean history we are bound to see that we are caught between our slave past with its denial of choice and therefore freedom, and the future which will bring to bear upon us assaults of a nature which we can hardly comprehend living as we do in a present which, while consistent with the past, is spiritually incapable precisely because of that very consistency. Our history has not prepared us for the encounter with the modern world and this is one reason why discontinuity is the only continuity we know.

There is a distinction to be drawn here. The politician imposes his personal beliefs and motivations on others and the obeahman seeks to dupe his clients with his pretended domination of nature, whereas the artist makes a victim of himself, inviting the rejection of society – a rejection which will only be reviewed if the artist receives the approbation of a society considered to be culturally superior[38] – and he is therefore a vehicle in rather a different sense. As Carter explains:

> [W]e have seen how the political leader who was once himself a victim can become a maker of victims; how the obeahman (as charlatan) who was once himself a victim, can too, become a maker of victims. And how the artist who was once himself victim can be further victimised by the society of which he himself is a part. In the case of the political leader and the obeahman (as charlatan), we can see how the social and psychological history of the society in which they have their being can be self-sufficient and capable. On the other hand, in the case of the artist we can see how this self-sufficient and capable social and psychological history can bring about the alienation of the artist in such a way that the possibility of his disalienation comes to depend upon the sanctions of individuals or institutions who or which do not participate in his original society either as victim or victimisers.

During the three centuries of colonisation "*when the West Indian thought nothing, created nothing and explored nothing,*" says Carter, "*we can rest assured that during those years, the obeahman was a very busy person indeed.*" He possessed powers beyond those of the slave owner. He could provide succour and support, and he was *"the living repository of the beliefs, the hopes and the fears of his community."* Yet this power also gave him the potential to be a victimiser, a power that has now been taken over by the political leader, who is "*to a great extent cut from the same fabric of beliefs, fears and hopes.*" As for the artist, he concludes, he

> […] makes a victim of himself in that it is his own consciousness, a function of his power as a human being which he exploits in order to produce. The selection and combination

> of themes and the sponsorship of certain values in his work reveal the character of his self-victimisation, and furnish for our inspection and enquiry, intimations of the extent of his plumbing of his own identity and intimations of the nature of the freedom he seeks.

The Fifth Lecture was delivered by **Michael Gilkes** in 1975 as *Racial Identity and Individual Consciousness in the Caribbean Novel.*

> As we in Guyana and the Caribbean move from out of the shadow of the past into the blossoming age of our political independence, we realise more and more clearly that what has been one of the unforgivable legacies of our history is the damage done to our view and appreciation of ourselves.

So begins Seymour's introduction to the Series, in which Dr. Gilkes probes the psychological undercurrents and motivations in the works of Edgar Mittelholzer and Wilson Harris. Professor Gilkes was born in 1935 and has had a long and distinguished academic career. He taught at the University of Guyana, was a Reader in English at the University of the West Indies in Barbados, and has held senior posts in St Lucia and Virginia. His play *A Pleasant Career* (1992) is based on the life and fiction of Edgar Mittelholzer, and ends with a trial during which the author is compelled to defend his creations:

> *(Almost jauntily)* You know, I have never concerned myself with being fashionable. If my philosophy of life seems disturbing to others then so be it! That's the worst thing you put up with when you decide, as I did, to make writing a pleasant career.

This play won the Guyana Prize for Drama in 1992. He won the Guyana Prize on two subsequent occasions: in 2002 for the best book of poetry, *Jonestown and Other Poems*, and in 2006 for his play *The Last of the Redmen*, a one-man *tour-de-force* about the positive and negative aspects of growing up in a colonial milieu. He has been involved with the theatre all his life as

author, actor and director, and views theatre as a critically important feature of society. In a 2009 interview with Ameena Gafoor he explained:

> The theatre arts can offer perhaps the most inclusive community experience. A live performance is usually a small cross section of the society on stage enacting a drama for an audience that is a larger cross section of the population drawn from the society at large. Here we have a community performing a community experience for a community audience. The ancient Greeks valued Theatre as a community builder. Citizens were required to attend the Festival of Dionysus, given time off from work, and had their tickets paid for by the government. Attendance was a civic duty.[39]

His critical works include *The Literate Imagination* (1989) and *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (1975).

In his opening lecture, 'The Divided Consciousness', Dr. Gilkes accepts that the question of identity has become a virtual cliché because of the disorientation that inevitably mirrors the Caribbean condition where there are no "*social, political, religious or cultural traditions"* to provide and preserve a sense of individual stability. The majority of Caribbean writers working abroad draw on remembered Caribbean material. It was Mittelholzer who first drew on the idea of heredity which lies behind the Caribbean writer's psychological need to define a cultural and racial identity, and he was the first to tackle questions which would only be resolved much later by Wilson Harris, so taken together these two authors represent the "*racial and cultural schizophrenia of the Caribbean."* Mittelholzer – the "*swarthy boy*" who was such a disappointment to his father – was preoccupied with his Germanic "*parent stock*" which represented strength, as opposed to West Indian weakness. This genetic approach to his dual identity is an *idée fixe* in his fiction; it expresses a conflict that he is ultimately unable to resolve, and his sense of genetic damage widened from an *"inherent psychic division into an irreparable gulf."* This quest for psychic wholeness, an inescapable feature of the colonial condition, was a potent influence on later authors such as Lamming and Naipaul. Dr. Gilkes argues that

Mittelholzer may have equated his racial 'impurity' with a lack of psychic integrity, and he quotes Denis Williams who observed in 1969 how

> [a]ttuned to an Old World culture, one has come to view one's own condition as mongrel, one's own being, in fact, the most self-annihilating of fallacies; this is that the mongrel, lacking 'purity' of blood, *ipso facto* also lacks the virtues inherent in purity of blood: cultural integrity, wholeness of soul.

In his diaries he is clearly alert to his tendency to morbidity, and in his fiction his characters are at war with themselves, their 'strong' intellects locked in a hopeless struggle with the 'weakness' of emotion and sensuality. In *Corentyne Thunder*, for example, Kattree and Beena represent noble savages – the physical vitality of the natural world – while Geoffry, despite being drawn to Kattree's sexuality, longs for London and symphony concerts. The need to address this conflict between flesh and spirit is the driving force behind at least six Mittelholzer novels, and is clearly seen in the sense of *Zweideutigkeit* (two-ness) felt by the hero of *Uncle Paul* (1963), highlighting the "*constant tension between a life-instinct and a death-wish.*"

The Life and Death of Sylvia (1953) is an early novel; its eponymous heroine was born with the same handicap of "*black blood*" as her creator, and her tragedy stems not only from her rejection by Georgetown society, but, more importantly, from an inner division. She is "*torn between an obsessive desire for sexual experience and an instinctive chastity:*" in other words, the same deadly dualism of flesh and spirit. Dr. Gilkes ends his lecture by concluding that "*Mittelholzer's attempts at a creative art never quite survive the undermining effect of the psychic disorientation – the 'two-ness' – which was always present in the author's own divided consciousness.*"

The second lecture, 'The Associative Attempt', begins by noting how Denis Williams had affirmed in 1969 that Mittelholzer's *magnum opus*, the *Kaywana* Trilogy, was "*supremely the one which, for this nation, had to be written*". Here Williams was highlighting the psychological and archetypal values of the text, rather than judging it on its artistic merit.

Mittelholzer suffered from a psychological malaise arising on his own inner conflict between 'strong' and 'weak' and he projected this on to the events of the Guyanese past with its burden of violence and sexual guilt, *The Harrowing of Hubertus* is the central novel of the trilogy, and Mittelholzer had confided in Seymour that Hubertus was "*a projection of a facet of my personality.*" Hubertus is aware of his own divided self: the struggle between 'low urges' and 'high principles' but there is also a much deeper archetypal conflict between the Ego and the Unconscious. The 'harrowing' allows him to retain a 'precarious balance' between his two selves. Hubertus understands that both his animal and spiritual sides are equally important to his psychic health, but Mittelholzer fails to pursue this by conducting a rigorous psychological enquiry into the process of reconciliation.

In the trilogy, this inner conflict mirrors the conflict between white and black, master and slave, and is therefore a *"prodigious, pioneering attempt to examine the cultural and emotional ambivalence which is a heritage of the Caribbean past.*" The attempt to reconcile the disparate elements of psychic division is what Dr. Gilkes refers to as "*the associative effort*", and in some of his novels Mittelholzer does achieve a degree of success: these including *A Morning at the Office* (1950).

This novel illustrates the 'associative attempt', and does rather more than what the author himself described as challenging

> [...]certain fallacies held by people in Northern Regions about the people in the West Indies, especially the fallacy that makes us out to be backward half-civilized people, it is really a grand tract nicely dressed up.

The novel delivers a critical appraisal of the hierarchical Trinidadian society with its rigid echelons, and while Mittelholzer urges integration he is quite clear that personal integrity is essential to the process. In the novel's sub-plot the spirit 'Jen' becomes a symbol for the controlled release of the repressed creative urge, allowing Mittelholzer to create a temporary wholeness from the fragmented West Indian situation.

Dr. Gilkes moves on to consider *Shadows Move Among Them* in which the plantation of Berkelhoost is like "*a tropical Utopia*" in which Gregory Hawke learns to find inner peace, although the location is also imbued with the psychic resonances of the 1763 insurrection. The associative attempt is clear from the free and uninhibited character of the twelve-year-old Olivia against which we have to consider Hawke's nervous condition resulting from his former marriage to a superior, dominating woman which has left him struggling to "*achieve harmony between spirit and fevered flesh*." On the plantation

> [...] beneath all the liberalism and naturalness, the idyllic atmosphere of freedom and creative expression, lies a disturbingly perverse element of cruelty and sadism. The Utopia freedom of Berkelhoost permits an extreme looseness of behaviour, which is clearly compensated for by an equally extreme code of discipline. The whole novel reflects the author's equivocal attitude towards the regenerative nature of the interior.

The Mad MacMullochs is set in Barbados, and describes an isolated community where people live without sexual constraint, cut of from the hypocrisy and corruption of the world outside, and as in *Shadows*, Mittelholzer explores the psychology of the 'divided man' seeking to achieve a state of inner integration, and the principal character Ronald is a thinly disguised self-portrait of the author. Both the MacMulloch and the Berkelhoost societies are ambiguous in the way they advocate individual freedom but impose harsh disciplinary restraints and promote the ideal of personal and social integrity. The ever-present theme of dualism is a clear feature in *Uncle Paul* (1963). Mankay is part Jewish and part German and, forced to accept the 'bad' Jewish side of his nature, has to live with an insoluble conflict within himself where the associative attempt to internalise the 'badness' of genetic taint – the *Zweideutigkeit* – is ultimately destructive: once again a revealing portrait of the author.

The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham (1965) was begun in Barbados and in its initial Caribbean setting the heroine learns to be herself – alone but happy. The final version, set in

England, has a hectoring and moralizing tone, and expresses the author's *"extreme views on crime, politics, sex, religion and English society."* The associative attempt had failed.

> Instinctively hating and respecting authority, rebelling against any attack on his status as an individual, Mittelholzer, in his frequent, hysterical attacks against the 'effete' state of English society was expressing both his fierce individualism and his disappointment in a society that was finally too liberal, too left-wing, to function as the authoritarian parent-figure he hated but found necessary for his psychic well-being. Rejection by English society and the publishing world meant a rejection of himself as an individual by a parent-culture; and Mittelholzer's psychic condition, always precarious, doubtless contributed to his final, tragic self-destruction.

Having dealt with the theme of psychic division, Dr. Gilkes moves on in his third and final lecture to consider 'The New Caribbean Novel'. At the outset he concedes that *"the continuing obsession with identity, with individual and personal status, is a part of West Indian life"*, as is evident from the title of George Lamming's classic, semi-autobiographical *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953). The cultural presence of the Old World – the colonisers – is something that has to be confronted. This is particularly true in the case of V. S. Naipaul in whose fiction a feeling of rootlessness is frequently symbolised by failure to get a home, and so the house that Mr Biswas wishes to build is more than just a place to stay, it is what Gordon Rohlehr has described as *"his personality symbolised, the private individuality which he must both build and maintain against the rest of the world."* Naipaul's perception of 'taint' in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), mirrors that of Mittelholzer, while in *The Mimic Men* (1967) Ralph Singh, *"is almost solely concerned with the preservation of what remains of his identity"* just as for Naipaul the Caribbean is nothing but *"a rubbish heap of broken cultures"* though he is also unable to identify with either Europe or India.

In moving on to consider the mulatto Derek Walcott, Dr. Gilkes notes that he makes *"creative use of his schizophrenia"* as a basis for his art, making a strength of his ambivalent

heritage, a new state of consciousness which also forms the theme of Wilson Harris's work, embodying "*the imaginative daring which has always refused to accept fixed or static literary, cultural, racial, political or geographical boundaries.*" In pursuing 'psychic reintegration' Harris moves away from the preoccupations of Mittelholzer, Lamming and Naipaul to create a completely new and original associative art. Dr. Gilkes recognises that it would take something more than a lecture to do justice to Harris whose works, though 'difficult', are imaginative explorations in which 'one-ness' is sought through the deployment of symbols, metaphors and myths. Significantly it was Harris who considered the paintings of Denis Williams as freeing the observer from preconceptions about art. "*The importance of Harris's work*," says Dr. Gilkes, "*lies in the fact that it suggests the possibility of a response to the West Indian cultural and historical reality which is neither a revolt against, nor a passive acceptance of, a divisive situation.*" His art moves far beyond consideration of the 'taint' and inner division that tormented Mittelholzer: it is at once liberating and healing, and ultimately serves to redress the balance of the Caribbean schizophrenia.

The Sixth Lecture was entitled *Calypso and Caribbean Culture* and it was delivered in 1977 by Professor Gordon Rohlehr who would go on to write his definitive *Calypso and Society in Pre-independence Trinidad* in 1990. Joycelynne Lonke, who attended the lecture, recalls that it was highly animated, and illustrated with many recordings. Professor Rohlehr spoke again on this subject at Castellani House during a visit to Guyana in 2009, and deployed the same technique – a most compelling and informative performance. Calypso, as he saw it, concerned itself with:

> [...] those areas of time and space where ethnicities make contact, over-lap or interpenetrate. These are the points of attrition, erosion, uncertainty, loss and gain; and are generally characterised by self-defensive aggressiveness, acerbity and violence of tongue or fist.

It is satirical, and frequently subversive, articulating societal angst, and its recent offshoots, rap and soca, often fulfil the same function. Unfortunately Professor Rohlehr did not

prepare any notes for his Mittelholzer lecture, having delivered it entirely *verbatim*, so it has not been possible to reproduce it in these volumes. However some important references to Guyana – notably Bill Rogers and The Mighty Sparrow – are made in his book, which must be recommended as a comprehensive overview of a persistently relevant Caribbean phenomenon.

At the time of her lecture series **Dr. Jocelynne Loncke** was Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Guyana, where she currently lectures in the School of Languages and Social Studies. She has had a remarkable career spanning some fifty years. In 1960 she won the Guyana Scholarship to study for her first degree in Jamaica, went on to study at the Sorbonne in Paris and then at the University of Oxford in the UK. In addition to an impressive career as a linguist, she became a Fellow of the Trinity College of Music in London, and emerged as one of Guyana's foremost concert pianists, with many recitals and several recordings to her credit. In 1974 the French government honoured her as *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, and this was followed in Guyana by AA in 1980 and CCH in 1987. In recognition of her distinguished service to the University she was made Professor Emeritus in November 2010.

Loncke's lecture, the Seventh, was given in 1979, and devoted itself to a detailed biography of Norman E. Cameron, teacher, poet, essayist and dramatist. It was given in the premises of the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society, the parent body of the Guiana Museum, and her distinguished audience included A. J. Seymour, Denis Williams, and Norman Cameron himself.

After the lectures, Dr. Loncke worked closely and carefully with Denis Williams on the draft designs and editorial refinements for the published version which, unlike other lectures, appeared as a book two years later in 1981. At her own request, the front cover and the general layout have been reproduced here. The four chapters correspond to the four lectures. The text was accompanied by illustrations, but unfortunately they were badly reproduced, and the lack of original photographs has made it impossible to include all of them here.

In 1983 **Roy Heath** gave the Eighth lecture, entitled *Art and Experience*. He was born in Georgetown in 1926, and after some time working as a clerk he left Guyana in 1951 and settled in the UK where he trained as a teacher and a lawyer. He revisited the land of his birth on a number of occasions but although he never returned permanently he would write exclusively about his homeland. In an obituary in *The Independent*, John Mair described him as 'intensely Guyanese', and observed that although he left Guyana "*it never left him.*"[40]

His novel *The Murderer* won the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1978, and he went on to produce *The Armstrong Trilogy*: *From the Heat of the Day* (1979), *One Generation* (1980) and *Genetha* (1981). His memoir *Shadows Round the Moon: Caribbean Memoirs* (1990) gives unforgettable insights into Guyana's post-colonial society in the throes of a transition to independence.

He won the Guyana Prize for Literature in 1989 for his eighth novel *The Shadow Bride*. He participated in a memorable 'Diaspora Dialogue' with Wilson Harris in May 2002. When news of his death reached Guyana in 2008, Ameena Gafoor noted:

> Whereas, covertly, he appears to ignore history, Heath is in fact attempting to chronicle a sense of history that is mired in colonialism while charting an alternative vision/a new order of society, one that embraces traditional values of community and family and a renewed sense of self. Heath cautions: "*A proper understanding of ourselves as individuals depends on our relationship to our community. If that relationship is lost, we are lost.*"[41]

The first Lecture, 'The Sources of Fiction', looks at story-telling. From an early view of man as part of the animal world, the focus came to be on the hero, seen as the protagonist in narrations that re-enacted historical events, thereby creating an oral tradition much like the Homeric epics. The story-telling art was manipulated by male story-tellers, and the advent of printing brought about censorship by church authorities which helped to ensure that fiction was 'acceptable'. Free of such constraining influence, West African stories are frequently brutal and terrifying. From such

a multiplicity of generic offshoots grew the novel, beginning in Japan and developing later in Europe and China, where it *"chartered the course of middle-class aspiration and achievement"* and increasingly took an interest in women as being more than the 'appendages' of men. Even so, children and old people tend to figure far less prominently, showing that the art of story-telling still has some way to go.

The sources of fiction lie in individual experiences, as is clear in the work of Mittelholzer, and childhood memories provide a wealth of material which often explains the autobiographical nature of many first novels, although fiction is also moulded by prevailing socio-economic conditions and a keen observation of detail. Heath concludes this short lecture with an examination of the Old Testament story of Joseph, which *"boasts qualities that most contemporary fiction might well emulate."*

The second Lecture, 'Art and History' draws attention to African painting, and how the sign-painter might also be the painter-artist. From this, we could draw lessons that are *"particularly important to people of the Caribbean and the Americas, for, having lost much of their heritage in the trauma of invasion or slavery they are in danger of accepting norms which may be suitable for a certain culture or a certain historical time, but entirely unsuitable to their own experience."* Rock-paintings depict hunting scenes and were largely done by men who regarded this as the only activity worth recording. With the advent of pottery, women came into their own, and their art initially gives a gentler view of the world, though a later preoccupation with animals reflects a mythic symbolism deriving from the piaiman's ritual bargaining negotiations with the Master of the Animals.

According to Heath, art

> […] is in the grip of history and […] the individual creates within the conventions of a culture and a historical time. When this is firmly grasped the dangers of copying slavishly conventions and attitudes of another culture will become evident. Art is akin to myth and the function of myth is to heighten a culture's awareness of its position in the world.

At a later period, the foundation of large states led to the development of monumental art under the direction of oligarchies dominated by a priest caste, and Egyptian painting evokes everyday life in extraordinary detail, while the animal motif persists both in the artwork and mummified remains. In modern industrial societies, the artists' "*flight into Cubism, surrealism and finally abstract painting is like the flight of someone who crosses one desert, only to find himself on the edge of another,*" and he concludes by warning that artists must chose models that are relevant to their immediate experience.

In 'The Artist and his Work' Heath begins by questioning what motivates artists in the first place, and moves on, with 'reluctance', to a consideration of his own work. Like several previous Lecturers he bemoans the lack of a proper Caribbean press for aspiring authors, and the need for the writer to seek publishers abroad, with all of the constraints that follow from such a requirement.

In his first Lecture Series in 1969, **Denis Williams** had devoted his attention to the problems facing the creative artist in breaking away from the constraints of colonial values, concluding that an authentic cultural identity, to which the rôle of the artist was central, could not be predicated on fractured and conflicting ties with the Old World. Now, fifteen years later, he directed his focus on the original inhabitants of these shores in the millennia before the advent of European settlers and the importation of slave and indentured labour. Beneath his name on the title page he has added 'Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology', the institution he had founded ten years previously, and which was now occupying most of his attention. In 1969 he had been speaking principally as an artist, but in this Lecture Series he speaks primarily as an archaeologist and anthropologist, as is very clear from his introductory Preface. However these two areas of expertise were not mutually exclusive. Prior to Guyanese independence he had done work as an archaeological draughtsman in Africa over a period of ten years, culminating in the publication of *Icon and Image: A Study of Sacred and Secular Forms of African Classical Art* (1974). The same draughtsmanship is evident in the minute detail with which he recorded his findings during his investigations into petroglyphs and the

excavation of shell mounds, and all of his skills came together in *Prehistoric Guiana,* his *magnum opus* published posthumously in 2003.

It was the decision of the Department of Culture that Williams should be invited to deliver this Lecture Series. They also determined that the proceedings should be brought together as a book rather than a pamphlet, and the result was *Ancient Guyana*. It was published in 1985 with a substantial Foreword by recently-appointed President Desmond Hoyte who, as Prime Minister, had chaired the first Lecture.

The book is a summary of much of the research on which Williams had been engaged for ten years. His scholarship is meticulous and fully referenced, so that a project that started out as a monograph has metamorphosed into a valuable textbook with notes and references. Unfortunately the greyscale illustrations were of very poor quality, and it has not been possible to reproduce them here, though all captions are given in endnotes. Although his subject matter is very specialised, he writes with simplicity and clarity

'The Tidal Swamps of the North West and Pomeroon Districts', describes the creation of shell mounds, and how changes in the water table, and resultant brackishness, determined the contents of the mounds. He describes the diet of the earliest settlers, including the sourcing of carbohydrates to supplement the edible snails which were the basic food source. He moves to the tools and materials the settlers must have used to create weapons, adzes for chipping wood or stone, arrowheads, and fish hooks. The advent of pottery revolutionised the possibilities for boiling, baking and stewing. Annatto dye was used for body painting, and a prophylactic against biting insects. As for housing, wax found congealed in the remains of thatched shelters show that the floors were frequently wet. The longevity of small settlements suggests that "*equilibrium was consciously maintained between population size and available natural resources.*" The settlement at Barabina was abandoned as the sea level reached it maximum around 6,000 years ago, when an initial abundance of oysters, clams and conches was followed by their complete disappearance, and fluctuations in climate, salinity and the availability of potable water were a continuing factors in determining food supply.

Settlers at Hosororo creek were notable for their pottery-making skills, suggesting that their protein intake may have had a vegetal source, like two-thirds of the world's population at present, rather than relying on shellfish. Williams goes into some detail about the technical factors involved in the development of ceramic technology, including the establishment of clay quarries, some at a considerable distance.

He concludes his Lecture with an examination of the secondary burial rituals where the body, having been left to decompose, is retrieved and reburied, often under the floor of the living quarters. Bundles of bones were often buried in a flexed position, with the heads pointing towards the west, suggesting a belief in an afterlife.

'Intercontinental Hunters and Gatherers in the Rupununi Savannas' describes the landscape as 'visibly ancient', where the remains of settlers include rock engravings, or petroglyphs that provide us with a valuable illustration of their subsistence strategies. Meso-Indian culture was established in this region in around 5,500 BC, and is evidenced by beautifully flaked projectile points, and similar artifacts found at old camp sites along the major rivers of Guyana suggest that the hunters took part in extensive forays, travelling by water. Petroglyphs are widely distributed throughout the area, providing us with "*a unique record of human adaptation in a given environment*." The Aishalton typse appear in two forms: geometric, formed of simple shapes, and biomorphic, representing animals and humans. These settlers fashioned stone tools, and their pollisoirs were often found on the petroglyph boulders themselves, pointing to a variety of tool shapes and sizes, while projectile points were formed by flint-knapping. The manufacture of petroglyphs point to Archaic man's knowledge of the various types of rock, and the ways in which they tend to weather in various environments.

> Tools needed for petroglyph imposition were manufactured in situ by a craftsman or two seated beside the boulder. The most commonly employed technique of imposition, known as pecking and abrasion, required a kit comprising four contrasting tool types: scribes, gouges, groovers and polishers.

Williams details the way in which the various tools were used, and notes that the resulting petroglyphs serve to illustrate the ingenious types of fish traps that had been devised over a period of time.

Settlements such as Aishalton were commonly within a short distance of the forest, allowing for exploitation of both savanna and forest resources, and Makatau mountain with its network of caves, must have been a centre of considerable social importance.

Geometric petroglyphs, often in conjunction with representations of animals or humans, are clearly a convention of enumeration. There are other signs that, to date, defy interpretation, and Williams devotes some time to a consideration of the conventions underlying the enumeration process. It was, he argues, "*a permanent expression of a symbiotic relationship held to exist between man and the animals of his environment.*" The function of the *piaiman* was to barter the souls of the dead with the Master of Animals, thereby ensuring the future supply of game. The relationship between men and animals persisted in ritual dances and in songs that can no longer be understood. A distinctive petroglyph punctation recorded in California has been dated at between 5,000–3,000 BC so it is unlikely that the Rupununi petroglyphs are earlier. If the abandonment of the ceremonial centre at Makatau took place because of one or other of the 'dry' periods known elsewhere in northern Amazonia, then "*a terminal date for the Aishalton petroglyph type in the South Savannas would be 4,000 years ago or 2,000 years ago.*"

'Climate, Stress and Subsistence Options in the Tropical Forest' concerns the location in which different groups of hunter-gatherers took refuge during the dry periods mentioned above. It is not known whether these groups interacted, and at any rate their subsistence strategies would have been very different. The folk on the Oronoque and New rivers were hunters and gatherers, those on the Kassikaityu were fishers and collectors who specialised in hunting and trapping terrestrial game. They had constructed fish ponds and developed fish traps with a remarkable degree of sophistication, and indeed some varieties are still in use at the present time. Elsewhere a contrasting production system

is evident on rock outcrops in the beds and on the banks of various rivers and creeks where there was a reliance on a staple of vegetal foods, as evidenced by the proliferation of polissoirs and grinding surfaces. These give an indication of the types of tool that were being produced, whence it is possible to infer how people lived, developing the use of tools, and the basketry skills needed to make fish traps.

Williams's fourth and final paper is 'The Specialised Coastal Adaptations of Horticulturalist'. Around 2,000 years ago the Timehri petroglyph type was migrating into the Antilles from Arawaks in the northeastern coast of South America, though in Guyana occurrences are found only on the Berbice and Corentyne river where it is associated with Saladoid pottery dating to around 50 AD. Movement may have been southwards into a region currently uninhabited and largely unexplored, which explains why we shall have to await archaeological confirmation.

The Central Guiana Coastal Plain was peopled at an early stage by Orinocan pottery-makers and by 300 AD they has populated most of the coast as far as the Essequibo. Williams goes to some lengths in describing the climate and geology of the area and how this affected the vegetation and rich faunal variety which would have proved so attractive to settlers. Soils permit sustained yield cropping, so settlements there enjoyed *"an incomparably higher level of permanency than those in the hinterland."* In addition the discovery of manioc pollen shows that they must have constructed raised garden plots, since manioc does not tolerate wet conditions, and remains show that they ate deer, fish and cayman together with the abundant wildfowl. Extensive raised platforms were constructed to segregate living and farming areas, and raised horticultural plots extended over a considerable area, suggesting some centralized control of labour forces. Archaeological finds confirm that population size depended on building or extending sufficient of these raised plots, and so sand reefs, already elevated, were increasingly brought into use. Communities developed trading links. Clay and bone featured in their industry, and bead manufacture was an early trait of these pioneers, who constructed wattle-and-daub houses which to make available relatively permanent accommodation. There

was a standard suite of ceramic techniques that characterise what has become known as the Abary phase, and parallel finds in Trinidad suggest cultural contact as late as the seventeenth century. Other features of the Abary sites include urn burial. Coastal swamp dwellers seems to have enjoyed a high level of village permanency, denoting a successful adaptive strategy.

Dr. Williams concluded with a useful summary of his lecture which signals an interesting change of direction in subject matter, moving away from the broad themes of literature, culture and identity, and pointing instead to Guyana's authentic past as an avenue ready for exploration and study.

This was to continue in 1986, when **John Peter Bennett** delivered the Tenth Series: *The Arawak Language in Guyanese Culture.* Canon Bennett (b. 1914) is a Guyanese legend. He was born of Arawak parents at the Kabakaburi Anglican Mission on the Pomeroon, trained for the priesthood in Barbados and returned to work in Guyana, settling at the mission where he was born. He was made a Canon in 1974.

In addition to his pastoral work, he brought his unique understanding of the Arawak language to bear on the task of compiling a dictionary and a grammar, building on the work of the missionary William Henry Brett who had translated portions of the Bible into Arawak in the nineteenth century.[42] Bennett had always felt a concern that Arawak was under threat, and might eventually die out as an indigenous language. His successful promotion of the language and culture has been a remarkable accomplishment for which he was awarded the Arrow of Achievement (AA) in 1989. With Richard Hart, he published *Kabethechino: A Correspondence on Arawak* (Georgetown: Demerara Publishers, 1991). With the assistance of the UNESCO Part-Participation Programme he published *An Arawak-English Dictionary. With an English word-list* (Georgetown: Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology, 1989) with a second edition following in 1994. He went on to publish *Twenty-eight Lessons in Loko (Arawak): A Teaching Guide* (Georgetown: Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology, 1995).

There were two Lectures, brought together and published as one. They provide a treasure-trove of information about

the Arawak language and the way in which it has left an indelible mark on Guyanese place names, and goes on to describe how Arawaks interacted with their environment, underlining the remarkable sophistication and ingenuity of their adaptive strategies, and strongly suggesting that far from dismissing the autochthonous people of this land as curiosities we could profitably devote more time to considering their unique ways of life, lived out over many centuries, particularly in matters of conservation and ecology. Father Bennett does not go out of his way to pursue any political point, but concludes with the very pertinent question: "*What can we learn from them?*" The sheer volume of information he gives us speaks for itself and he has no need to labour the point – we have indeed much to learn from them, for they are the original custodians of Guyana. This Lecture follows on very naturally from the preceding one, and was prepared in collaboration with Denis Williams, who provided the foreword. It also paves the way for the one that followed.

George Mentore's 1987 Lecture, *The Relevance of Myth*, was revised and published as a single essay the following year. Dr. Mentore is the world's leading authority on the Waiwai people, and his lecture draws extensively on unique research carried out during extended periods spent living with them.

Following Canon Bennett's discussion of Arawak language and culture, Dr. Mentore examines mythic discourse in the context of Carib-speaking Waiwai society. He begins his closely argued thesis with a careful analysis of the relationships between words, meaning and communication. In particular he looks at the Waiwai concepts of time, kinship and society, and places his focus on the annual ritual of Shodewika, in which the re-enactment of mythic fable is bound up symbolically with the peoples' view of themselves and their relationships within a cyclical view of time. Such an approach, argues Dr. Mentore, is more complex than written or spoken language because in the process of re-enactment the actors are actively involved in repeating and rehearsing the various layers of symbol and allusion in order to reinforce their understanding of themselves and their relation to each other and the environment. Mentore leaves us in no doubt that in Guyana's hinterland there is a level of sophistication

underlying an ancient and totally different model of society which deserves much further study. In a subsequent research paper, Dr. Mentore, echoing Williams and Harris, went on to detail ways in which such a model could be applied in Guyana to eliminate racial division.[43] All of this exposes the blinkered arrogance of those who arrived here in historically recent times and have dismissed this rich but barely understood culture as 'primitive' and Amerindian belief systems as 'gross superstition'.[44]

These three readers – Williams, Bennett and Mentore – have done this country notable service by exploring the potentialities of a distinctive heritage that is not predicated on a relationship with Europe or India, looking instead at an authentic past that was and is totally *in situ*, originating in the territory of the Guianas. It is a sign of maturity in a new nation when it can direct its attention to its own native territory and analyse what it finds there, rather than cling to vestiges of cultures that have been imported, inherited or imposed. It was proving to be a major strength of the Lectures as they continued to evolve over the decades to offer a refreshing breadth of scope, permitting a searching exploration of many facets of a young, independent, evolving society.

Following Dr. Mentore's lecture there was a ten-year hiatus before the next one, as if the entire scheme had somehow lost momentum. There are several possible reasons for this, and we must digress briefly to consider what they might have been. Seymour had been intimately involved with organising the series since its inception, but he died in December 1989, leaving no clear successor. Denis Williams had always been closely associated with the lectures, but by the time of the 1992 elections he was turning away from the arts and immersing himself in archaeology instead; his former post of Director of Art no longer existed, and he died in 1998. Meanwhile the incoming government had to deal with a country in a state of crisis, and the Memorial Lectures may have been considered a low priority at a time when so many cuts had to be made in the public sector. In the midst of such flux, perhaps the Memorial Lectures were simply overlooked.

Dr. Dennis Craig referred optimistically to the "*revival of a tradition*" when he introduced **Richard Allsopp** in the 1997

Lecture, headed *Language and National Unity*.[45] No-one could have been better qualified to present his thoughts on the subject than Dr. Allsopp, whose monumental *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* had been published the year before.[46]

'Using Language: a Dangerous Tool' begins by posing a novel question: was Guiana in 1953 the supposedly 'unsinkable' *Titanic* of its day?

> The good Ship of State was put under the command of two respected men, Indo-Guyanese captain and Afro-Guyanese mate, with a euphoric crew and passengers. It seemed as if nothing could go wrong; and the language was again excessive. Some of you may remember – 'the sacred will of the people' was not to be 'sacrificed on the altar of colonialism' […] The power of language was being abused, but nobody – myself among them – let that bother us too much. Yet the abuse had misled everyone in Guyana; but not, notably, that arch-colonial master and warlord Winston Churchill […] So although our Ship of State had been grandly launched in England it was sailing on its maiden voyage straight into American waters where after a short flamboyant journey it struck the uncharted anti-communist iceberg and was stopped dead.

From this provocative beginning Allsopp goes on to dissect the words and phrases that we take for granted in our daily lives but which all too often serve to separate rather than unify. He considers the question: 'How can the Guyanese races *fully* respect each other?' He turns his lexicographer's eye on the languages of politics and religion which should, in theory, be able to offer answers to the question of respect, but instead have led to minds being "*entrenched for decades in what seem to be immovable belief systems*." He examines the language of the 'virtually toothless' Racial Hostility Act, of 1964 and concludes that only dialogue can free Guyana from the "*morass of ethno-political disunity*." There are some contentious, hard-hitting points in this lecture, and some home truths that remain as relevant as ever. However he moderates his criticisms with wit, good humour and a plea for respect, and offers some wise advice in conclusion:

> Language, the supreme tool that makes us human, is uniquely – divinely – the tool of such dialogue. But like all super tools it is dangerous when misused, as it is superbly effective when intelligently and faithfully used.

In 'Language and Class: the Feminist & Ebonics Issues' Allsopp begins with the premise that women have, historically, been discriminated against in a male-dominated world, and he looks into the way this is reflected in the domain of language. Why do women lose their names when they marry, while men do not? Why do words like 'wizard' and 'dog' not possess the negative connotations of their feminine forms 'witch' and 'bitch'? Why is the word 'woman' absent from idiomatic phrases like 'man in the street'? In fact, is English an 'anti-woman' language? He charts the rise of feminism, and the linguistic attempts – not always successful – at political correctness. However this is only part of the story:

> If women as a gender-class have a case, how much stronger must be that of Blacks, as a race-class? Consider such expressions as *blackleg, black sheep, blackmail, black spot, black day, black market, a black past/future, black as hell, blacken a character*, etc., etc. And can anyone effectively tackle that!

In a Caribbean context, the legacy of slavery has had its effect on the language of blackness, particularly as it refers to hair or skin. What connotational horrors lie behind the phrase 'good hair'? What exactly is 'fair skin'? Such usage should be discouraged, argues Allsopp, because it "*contributes to a mind-set derogatory especially of black women* in addition *to that of which international English may be accused of in regard to* all *women […]*" If such language were to be rejected it would be *"a great service to Caribbean national unity."* As far as the legacy of Europe is concerned the house-Negro who had children by her master would have a closer approach to his language, and her creolised English would therefore be an indicator of enhanced social status, which explains why mothers even today are particularly careful with their daughters' speech.

Ebonics, a fusion of 'ebony' and 'phonics', is a term used to describe the African-American equivalent of Creolese, both being valid systems of communication which have nothing to do with the intelligence of the speaker, but rather with *"history, environment and opportunity."* Allsopp shows the power of Creolese as a distinctive oral medium, rich with subtle intonations and inflexions for which western writing conventions are inadequate. He claims that as a language it has had a very positive contribution to Caribbean culture, not least in the dialogue in Mittelholzer's novels, and he ends by giving some entertaining examples of ways in which Creolese can offer ways around clumsy grammatical constructions that result from the strict rules imposed by Standard English.

To complete his lecture, he offered the audience 'Language for Togetherness: what can a Caribbean Dictionary do?' The answer to this is that it can be an astonishingly potent force in forging unity. While organisations like the EU and ASEAN have to contend with a multiplicity of different languages during their deliberations, the Caribbean has the advantage of being uniformly Anglophone, despite local variations. The oldest English-speaking country in the world is Britain, but the Caribbean region is second-oldest, with Drake and Raleigh having brought their language here years before the *Mayflower* sailed to Massachusetts, and centuries before settlements in Australia and Canada. The fact that Churchill omitted the Caribbean altogether from his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* tells us much about his attitude to the colonies. America, Canada and Australia all celebrated anniversaries of their independence by producing national dictionaries. Allsopp convincingly argues the view that his own *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* illuminates a unique cultural identity, based on "*deeper roots grown out of a longer history.*" He goes on:

> Looking around is making an *inventory*, memorising a checklist of our surroundings. Storing that list with thought and goodwill, and adding systematic enquiry, is making a *chronicle*. Inventory and chronicle, seriously undertaken, that is to say professionally, make a *dictionary.* And one that is particularly located in the environment and history of a nation.

At the 1996 CARICOM summit he presented autographed copies to all Heads of Government who attended but received no acknowledgement or comment from any of them. Allsopp characterises this as 'foolish abashment' – a lingering relic of the colonial notion that the Caribbean had nothing to offer, and declares:

> You must *understand* that Creolese and its sister Caribbean Creoles were new languages *created* by the brains of our ancestors, under severe repression, out of the forced mating of their native African language concepts with those of the languages of Europe; you must remember too that our East Indian fellow-labourers adopted and jointly maintained this new language […] and that out of that universal folk language grew the more educated language we speak today […]. When you *understand* all this the logical emotion that will result can only be amazement and full admiration […].

Above all the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* will foster self-respect, respect for other territories, and respect for other races, all of whom can find their distinctive vocabularies included in its pages. For example:

> The expansion of the Indic sub-culture in the mainstream of Caribbean culture […] is reflected in the Dictionary. By expository glosses of the names of Hindu and Muslim religious festivals, ceremonies and related items and expressions, customs, foods, domestic items, apparel, etc., that have become or are becoming part of the everyday life of Guyana […] the work cuts a path, for the first time routinely available, towards a necessary understanding and cultural integration of the East Indian West Indian.[47]

In Guyana it will, in short, act as a useful integrative agent and "*tell the world* who we are, *as the book stands recognised side by side with any other professional dictionary of World English.*" Dr. Allsopp is adamant that a work of this kind can and should help to foster a sense of Caribbean pride in the face of the 'abashment' he deplores, echoing the sentiment of A. J. Seymour when he conceived the idea of the Memorial Lectures. And it must be remembered that the Dictionary is

not merely a list of words, but, as the title implies, also a guide to usage, which makes it doubly valuable.

In conclusion, Allsopp points out that there are several important Institutes of Caribbean Studies in other parts of the world but, ironically, none in the Caribbean itself. He calls for such an Institute to be set up here "*with inter-campus and inter-university links through a consortium arrangement*" and where lexicography "*would have a natural home playing an enlightening and mutually beneficial role.*" He ends on a visionary and optimistic note:

> And, in our varied voices, let our language, mature in regional thinking, mount an effective call for such an Institute that can give *meaning* to *togetherness*, and then wisdom may take us forward, *intellectually together* as a real start. For, as I said quoting a Swahili proverb in the dedication of my Dictionary, *"The beginning of wisdom is knowing who you are."*

Another twelve years were to pass before **Evelyn A. Williams** was invited, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, to deliver the Thirteenth Lecture in 2009. In her lecture Williams spoke on her late father under the title of *Denis Williams: Art, Blood and Heritage*.[48]

At the time of her lecture, Evelyn Williams, together with her sister Charlotte, had just finished editing a book of essays about their father.[49] By a happy coincidence, Evelyn's Lecture was given exactly forty years after her father had delivered his own[50] and by 2012, Evelyn Williams would herself go on to publish a definitive study of Denis Williams's artwork.[51]

Ms. Williams's purpose was to look back at the areas that Denis Williams had discussed in his lectures, and to consider what progress had been made in the interim. She began by revisiting Seymour's *credo* – that the Memorial Lectures should keep safe the 'treasures' of Guyanese creative and intellectual life, and ensure that "*the thoughts of many remarkable individuals did not become subsumed in the narratives of social and political discord.*" She gave an outline of Denis Williams's contribution to the post-colonial reconstruction project and noted how so many of his theories and ideas were resurfacing, some of them

sixty years after they were first published. For example his polemic *Guiana Today* first appeared in *Kyk-Over-Al* in 1949, and was published again in that journal in 1983, and yet again in the *Guyana Review* of May 2009.

To draw together a sense of his life, she took as her starting point the mural *Memorabilia II* (1976) which is in the foyer of the National Cultural Centre. A reproduction, together with Williams's own critique of it, was included in the programme notes as well as in the published lecture. As public art it served an important purpose because it was central to his view of national reconstruction, and the artist intended us to read it *"as a mural with a didactic narrative."* It shows the Enmore Martyrs on the left side, and sweeps from there through significant events in Guyana's evolving history to the girl carrying a cochineal leaf – a symbol of healing. The artist himself wrote, *"Thus, a sequence which commences at one end of the picture on a theme of martyrdom and sorrow, ends on the other on a note of life and hope."* As Ms. Williams explains:

> It graphically depicts Williams's view of the possibility of an optimistic journey from oppression to transcendence. It is a compelling, coherent and consistent belief that can be traced through his philosophical speculation. It is a cultural marker that seeks an elevated position for all its peoples, free from the redundant definitions of the past.

Mittelholzer had challenged artists to find their subject matter in the Caribbean, and Williams took this to heart, echoing Edward Kamau Brathwaite's notion of 'the inner plantation.' It was a difficult psychological journey. Williams never accepted that there was any future in the intrusive art forms of Europe or any other culture, as they were "*the forms of refuge; they are not the forms of challenge, they are the forms of complacency.*" He was keen to escape from this, and coined the term the 'Guyana School' to describe those artists who looked to local values and material.

Ms. Williams emphasises her father's rejection of art as a function of wealth, and explores the subsequent dilemma facing the artist when seeking a platform for his art. In his Mittelholzer lectures Williams had shown himself as an

'idealistic visionary' with very clear ideas about the role of the artist:

> He was concerned with the attitudes and values that inform a society [...]. Change always begins with culture. In Williams's vision of the national reconstruction project following independence, art was a central cultural and educational tool. The state could not simply leave this to market forces but should instead fund the conditions favourable to artists' development so that the pool of talent of the nation could be realised.

Moving to the theme of blood, Ms. Williams examines Denis Williams's rejection of racial and cultural integrity as "*a self-annihilating fallacy*", and his insistence on viewing the New World, not as a melting pot, but rather as a crucible. Since then received notions of identity have changed because the artist, in an era of globalization, now has the opportunity to be *"local, regional, metropolitan or international,"* something that her father had already anticipated would happen as new technologies developed. She goes on to consider in detail how the forces at work behind globalization can have negative as well as positive effects for the creative artist:

> The world has grown smaller. The world has opened up. [...] There are more actors on the world stage, more choices. More people have more in common. We increasingly find we share a common background of mixed ancestral affiliations as social categories merge.[...] We require open, flexible responses to the reality of today's world.

Turning finally to the theme of heritage, Ms. Williams reminds us how in *Memorabilia II* the artist had explored the symbols and ideas that are associated with Guyana's identity. But in the mural the backdrop to the images of the modern nation state is, significantly, the forest. Williams "*regarded it as self-evident that any future for Guyana was dependent on a thorough understanding of its own past.*" She concludes her lecture by demonstrating how her father's posthumous *Prehistoric Guiana* (2003) is not merely an important archaeological textbook, but also a clear indicator of a way forward, "*a*

successful model offering an alternative to the divisive elements of racial essentialism."

If it is true that we are entering a post-capitalist transition then Ms. Williams reminds us that we must explore new approaches to life and art "*which require the unravelling of tightly-held traditional models.*" But in the final analysis, it is people who make change happen; it is through a shared culture that they make the changes that government on its own cannot bring about. She concludes with a forward-looking message, using a quotation from a piece Denis Williams wrote in 1949, and which, despite the passage of time, still retains its relevance and resonance:

> Williams's native Guyana was and remains a microcosm: an intimate stage on which are played out many of the familiar paradoxes significant to national cultural debates within the global context. On this stage, ladies and gentlemen, walks Guyana man. And of him, Williams wrote: "*Beneath this sun which is all the colour of the world walks the man who is all the races of the earth. His home the world.*"

The Fourteenth Lecture – *Guyanese Literature, Magic Realism and the South American connection* – was given by **Pauline Melville** in 2012. Ms. Melville was born in Guyana of an English mother and an Amerindian father.

Winner of several international literary prizes, Ms. Melville's novels are one of the very few Anglophone excursions into the literary 'Magic Realism' of the Hispanic Americas. The lecture concentrates on the specifically South American attributes of Guyanese fiction, and at the implications it has for the recent literary movement of Magic Realism. Melville feels that, given Guyana's colonial history, it is inevitable that we tend to appraise our literature in terms of the traditions of the colonisers, and draw little from the vast continent of South America, one of the *"great primary landscapes of the world"*, and she notes that Guyanese literature contains influences that derive from that landscape before the advent of colonialism. Although these very ancient legends can be reduced to children's myths – 'infantilised' –

they are, like the Homeric myths, deeply profound, shadowy memories of a hugely ancient past, which makes Guyanese literature markedly different from that found in the remainder of the Anglophone Caribbean.

Ms. Melville stresses that we need many more writers. "*Literature*," she says, "*should illuminate the human condition wherever it is set. It is the reader who writes half the book, since every reader brings his or her own experiences and imaginative interpretation to the table.*"

Jane Bryce has been teaching African Literature at Cave Hill since 1992, where she became Professor of African Literature and Cinema in 2009. Before becoming an academic, she was a freelance journalist and fiction editor in the UK and Nigeria. Born in Tanzania, and educated there and in Nigeria (as well as the UK), her research and writing is informed by her African as well as her Caribbean experience. She has published in a wide range of academic journals and essay collections, specializing in popular fiction, contemporary fiction, representations of gender and visual culture, as well as African and Caribbean cinema. Her latest research focuses on memoir and life-writing in Africa by black and white writers, and in particular the relationship with her own experience as a colonial child in Tanzania.

Taking Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as her starting point she demonstrates how the canon is always under pressure, and has been brought to bear on Guyana's early novelists "*essential to the West Indian sense of self*" and now to the current wave of new writers. The lack of West Indian publishers meant that the introduction of strong West Indian stylistic preoccupations distorted the conventional English-centred canon, and 'little magazines' such as *Kyk-Over-Al* had to yield to the likes of Faber and Faber and Heinemann, and to the early development of 'literary' and 'popular' genres, particularly in romance fiction. Some writers, such as Colin Channer and Kwame Dawes, have gone on to blur this distinction. In crime fiction. this arises, she argues, from "*a sense of post-Independence disillusion anddisempowerment*", and some authors like Glenville Lovell have become examples of "*diasporic doubleness*", living and writing in the USA, but dedicating his work to "*the Caribbean massive everywhere.*"

One "*dominant motif*" is the part that the West Indies have taken up with regard to drugs and the resultant establishment of publishers such as X-Press. Another "*outsider form*" is that of speculative fiction, where fantasy mingles inexorably with a Caribbean story-telling tradition which is unmistakably "*of the region*". However she moves on to underline the importance of Karen Lord's contribution to *Crossing the Gulf*, a blogspot in which Mittelholzer's *My Bones and My Flute* (1955) is highlighted as the true forerunner of speculative fiction, even before the term itself had come into being. In his creation of the river, argues Lord, Mittelholzer succeeds in convincing the reader that accepting the 'otherness' of the river "*gives credence to the external evil of the supernatural, so that if we believe in one, we must then believe in the other.*" and while critics have played down the novel's merits, they are acting as "*canonical gatekeepers*", since he had established a context that later writers would come to validate, and her own second novel *Redemption in Indigo* (2010), she admits to a similar *"sleight of hand"*, leaving *"some riddles unanswered and some mysteries hidden."* This, she claims, explains why some works previously excluded from 'official' literary circles have been drawn into the canon, and how outsider fiction has thereby become a "*harbinger of change*" in Caribbean writing.

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These are the Lectures. One of their significant traits is of how they avoid enmeshing themselves with the politics of the day. Some explore 'roots' and antecedents, but always within the design of human conscience. We cannot fully know who we are without knowing where we have been.

Contemporary curators such as Elfrieda Bissember have done the nation considerable service by championing Amerindian artists. Petamber Persaud reminds us of the valuable contributions that Guyanese of Indian origin have made to the nation's literature.[52] The lectures eschew exclusivity; embrace a broad expanse of vision, and welcome the creative arts in all their expressions.

So it is that the Memorial Lectures have, as their shared focus, the kind of inclusive Guyaneseness that Seymour had hoped for. Taken together, they could be regarded as a nation-building manifesto.

Three main issues run through the lectures taken as a whole. Firstly, there is no coherent way forward for a culture predicated on division and rooted in the past. Secondly, as a nation we need to nurture local authors, encourage reading and build up readership, and to this end a publishing house is essential. Thirdly, the Amerindian peoples have much to teach us about how we live with each other and our environment, and this offers much scope for further study.

What other lessons do the Lectures teach us? They teach us to be proud of who we are and where we have come from. Guyana celebrates a growing list of remarkable achievements in the arts. There is now a distinctively Guyanese culture, and indeed this is essential in order to define who we are. As Guyana takes its place in the world, the old doctrines and fossilised modes of thinking can be set aside, and more empowering attitudes chosen. Guyanese must hold their heads high, and be proud to be a nation.

It is a sentiment expressed by 'Sonny' Ramphal in a tribute to Arthur Seymour and Frank Pilgrim in 1989, and it is appropriate to repeat it here:

> But there is something else that Frank Pilgrim's and Arthur Seymour's passing stirs in me. It is our heritage of oneness of which I tried to speak at the beginning of our Commemorations on May 5 last year. What stirs me is a sense of obligation; no, that is not strong enough a word – a sense of great indebtedness to this multi-ethnic section of our society to which Frank Pilgrim and Arthur Seymour belonged, though, in truth, it is the absence of their 'belonging' to any section that I hail. These 'coloured people', these 'red men', these 'mixed breeds', who were immunised at birth from the infection of race, deserve our present tribute. They truly are freed from that inheritance of ethnicity that is such a mixed blessing. Now, with the social hang-ups of colonial society a thing of the past, they are, in a sense, what we must all aspire to be – genuinely, intuitively non racial: Guyanese of many hues, a rainbow society, enriched by all its colours as they merge into each

> other. Therein lies our hope: that the lives of Frank Pilgrim and Arthur Seymour will lead us to acknowledge that we hold our heads high as people, as Guyanese, not because of where we come from but because we are here together, not because of colour or race but because we pooled these ancestral legacies when we became one tribe. Frank Pilgrim and Arthur Seymour lived their lives and enriched our own by being cultural captains of our rainbow tribe. There is a pot of harmony for Guyana at the end of that rainbow.[53]

The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures express the thoughtful and original insights of a succession of talented and visionary Guyanese thinkers and scholars over the past half century – a period spanning the entire life of this young nation. It is a fulsome achievement. The Lectures illuminate the on-going quest for an answer to the crucial question: "*Who are we?*" In answer, art, literature, music, history, language, archaeology, anthropology and philosophy are all assembled. for us to consider.

This collection represents a rich and valuable range of material: a unique archive that will surely become essential reading for future students of Guyanese history. They are beacons of excellence of which Guyana can be genuinely proud and which cast their light into the wider Caribbean and the world beyond.

Andrew O. Lindsay

ENDNOTES:

[1] Frank Pilgrim, writing in the Souvenir Programme for the opening of the National Cultural Centre in 1976.
[2] A. R. F. Webber, *Those That Be In Bondage: A Tale of Indian Indentures and Sunlit Western Waters* (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1988). With an introduction by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and an afterword by Wilson Harris.
[3] Georgetown: The Argosy Company, 1931.
[4] Egbert Martin ("Leo") published two books of poetry, *Leo's Poetical Works* (1883) and *Leo's Local Lyrics* (1886). The first of those was published in London by W. H. and L. Collingridge, and was dedicated to the then Governor Lord Gormanston. The second was published by the Demerara printer Baldwin & Co., and dedicated to the Mayor of Georgetown G. A. Forshaw. David Dabydeen has recently edited the *Selected Poems of Egbert Martin* (Coventry: Derek Walcott Press, 2007). Martin was unique because he saw himself as a Guianese poet rather than a colonial subject writing in English.
[5] Reprinted by Peepal Tree Press as *Guyana Boy* in 2002.
[6] In his foreword to a University of the West Indies publication entitled *The Artist in West Indian Society.* Cited by Martin Carter in his 1971 Memorial Lecture.
[7] The spelling *Kykoveral* is also found.
[8] The two main printing presses belonged to newspapers and were not publishing houses as such. The lack of a proper publishing house in Guyana is lamented by a number of the Mittelholzer lecturers, and so the launch of the Caribbean Press in 2009 was a very welcome move.
[9] Prem Misir, '**Cultural assimilation to wholesale Western thinking**', in *Guyana Chronicle*, 4 July 2010.
[10] George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) quoted in Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 40.
[11] **'Michael Gilkes discusses the role of the arts in personal and social development'**. Interview with Ameena Gafoor in *The Arts Forum, Kaieteur News* (15 November 2009).
[12] A. J Seymour, *Cultural Policy in Guyana* (UNESCO, Paris: Imprimerie des Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), p. 18.
[13] The first contingent arrived in May 1838 in what is known as 'the Gladstone Experiment'. John Gladstone owned numerous sugar plantations including Belle Vue and Vreed-en-Hoop on West Bank Demerara. He was the father of British Prime Minister William Gladstone.
[14] Richard Allsopp has recorded that the Hindu sub-culture in Guyana is *"massively Bhojpuri"*, a cousin dialect of Hindi. See '**The Work as a Cultural Agent**' in the informative Introduction to his *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Kingston: UWI Press, 1996), pp. xxxi-xxxiv.
[15] *Guyana* (London: Central Office of Information, 1966), p. 9.
[16] Denis Williams and A. J. Seymour, '**An Exchange of Letters**'. Published in *Kyk-Over-Al*, Vol. 24 (December 1958), pp. 93–98.
[17] The first Caribbean Festival of Arts was held in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1952, providing the inspiration for Carifesta.

[18] *Cultural Policy in Guyana*, p. 31.
[19] An exception is the lecture given by Gordon Rohlehr who delivered it *verbatim*.
[20] The 2002 Wordsworth McAndrew citation refers to Guyanese Awardees at the Brooklyn-based Guyana Folk Festival on 24 August 2002. Other recipients included Richard Allsopp, E. R. Burrowes, Martin Carter, Stanley Greaves, Valerie Rodway and Raj Kumari Singh.
[21] Al Creighton, Review: '**The Collected Poems of A. J. Seymour**', in *Arts on Sunday, Stabroek News* (18 January 2004).
[22] *AJS at 70* (Georgetown: Autoprint Ltd., 1984) which contained a selection of fifteen poems under the title *The Essential Seymour*. The volume also has letters, tributes, reviews and a chronology. There is a very useful bibliography by Joan Christiani of the National Library (1974) and a portrait sketch by Denis Williams, together with photographs of AJS with his wife and children.
[23] Ian McDonald, and Jacqueline De Weever, *A. J. Seymour: Collected Poems, 1937-1989*. (New York: Blue Parrot Press, 2000). Ms De Weever is Seymour's niece.
[24] '**A Tribute to Arthur Seymour and Frank Pilgrim**', in *Guyana Chronicle*, 28 December 1989, p. 4.
[25] **'A Death at Christmas - Last Memories of AJS**', Ian McDonald in *Stabroek News*, 28 December 1986, p.16.
[26] Georgetown: Ministry of Information, National History and Arts Council, 1968.
[27] London: Hutchinson, 1963. Reprinted by Heinemann in their *Caribbean Writers* Series, with an introduction by Edward Baugh (1983). Reprinted again in 2010 by Peepal Tree Press, together with his second novel *The Third Temptation* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1968).
[28] London: Allen Lane; (New York: New York University Press, 1974).
[29] Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2003.
[30] Georgetown: Ministry of Information, National History and Arts Council, 1969.
[31] See for example Francesca Scalinci, '**A matter of colour: Edgar Mittelholzer's A Swarthy Boy,'** in *Les Caraïbes: convergences et affinities* (4, 2009), http://publifarum.farum.it/ezine_articles.php?id=92: *"Among many themes and subjects, the concern with the genetic, psychological and social implications of skin colour and miscegenation is at the heart of much of Mittelholzer's work. The Guyanese novelist's attitude towards race (and racism) emerges in most of his novels and is usually shaped by a contrast between strong and weak individuals."*
[32] Compare the case of V. S. Naipaul as discussed in Harish Trivedi, **'Locating Naipaul: 'Not English, Not Indian, Not Trinidadian'**,' in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* (Spring 2008).
[33] Letter to A. J. Seymour in **'An Exchange of Letters'**, p. 94.
[34] See his interview with Michael Gilkes in *Kaieteur News, The Arts Journal*, 11 July, 2010.
[35] See for example her *Flight: A Quantum Fiction Novel* (1995).
[36] Stewart Brown, **'The Truth of Craft'**, in *Caribbean Review of Books*, (2006).
[37] '**Is there a West Indian Way of Life?'** Symposium in *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 6, No. 20, 1980), pp. 193-194.

[38] This is what Evelyn A. Williams has referred to as the 'European Imprimatur' which played such an important part in her father's art. See her study *The Art of Denis Williams* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2012.)
[39] *Kaieteur News, The Arts Forum*, 15 November 2009.
[40] Friday 28 June 2008.
[41] *The Arts Forum, Kaieteur News*, 18 May 2008.
[42] See Rev. F. P .L Josa, *"The Apostle of the Indians of Guiana." A Memoir of the Life and Labours of the Rev. W. H. Brett, B. D. For Forty Years a Missionary in British Guiana* (London: Wells, Gardner, Darton and Co., 1887). Josa was Rector of Holy Trinity, Essequibo. No researcher can afford to be without Joel Benjamin, *The Lokono Arawak Language of Guyana and Adjacent Territories*, edited by Denis Williams, Jennifer Wishart and George Mentore (Georgetown: Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology, 1991).
[43] See George Mentore, '**Guyanese Amerindian epistemology: the gift from a pacifist insurgence'**, in *Race & Class* (Institute of Race Relations, Sage publications: Vol. 49, No. 2, 2007), pp. 57–70. He argues that all conventional anti-racism policies, however well-intentioned, are predicated on unquestioned premises of difference, each side claiming legitimacy and moral superiority, and through an inevitable focus on blame and grievance serving only to institutionalise and perpetuate the societal division they are supposed to be healing.
[44] For example, Rev. C. Jesse, "The Amerindians in St Lucia," published by the St Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society in 1968, and quoted by Wilson Harris in his 1970 lecture.
[45] Georgetown: The Department of Culture, Ministry of Education and Culture, 1998.
[46] *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (London: OUP, and Jamaica, Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 1996).
[47] *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, p. xxxiii. For example we find *daru* (= rum or strong liquor. Bhojpuri < Hindi *daaruu*, 'liquor'), *mandir* (= a Hindu place of worship < Hindi *mândir*, 'temple') and *roti* (= an unleavened bread < Hindi *rotii*, 'bread').
[48] Georgetown: Walter Roth Museum, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009.
[49] *Denis Williams: A Life in Works. New and Collected Essays* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2010).
[50] It was Jennifer Wishart who spoke with the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport about the desirability of reviving the Memorial Lectures, and suggested Ms Williams as an appropriate choice as speaker.
[51] *The Art of Denis Williams* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2012)
[52] For example the series of lectures entitled '**An Outline of the Imaginative Literature of Guyanese of Indian Ancestry,**' given in Georgetown under the auspices of GOPIO (Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin) in May 2010.
[53] *Guyana Chronicle*, 28 December 1989, p. 4. Sir Shridath Surendranath "Sonny" Ramphal served as Commonwealth Secretary from 1975 to 1990.

First Series, 1967

Edgar Mittelholzer – The Man and his Work

Arthur James Seymour

INTRODUCTION

In my capacity as Editor of *Kaie*, the official organ of the National History & Arts Council, I am very happy indeed to write this introduction to the published texts of the first Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures organised by the Council, under Government auspices and delivered by Mr Seymour.

Mr Seymour's choice as first lecturer was most fitting since more than any other Guyanese writer, he knew Mittelholzer so well for so long and to my mind has qualifications exceeding those of anyone else I know to initiate this series and interpret the creative mind of Mittelholzer to Guyanese readers,

A. J. S. was Editor of *Kykoveral* from its inception in 1945 for its entire lifetime of seventeen years and focused in its pages the best literary thought of Guyana and the West Indies. A former President of the British Guiana Writers' Association, he founded the British Guiana Centre of PEN in the late 1950s and was President until his departure to Puerto Rico in 1962 to join the Central Secretariat of the Caribbean Organization as Development Officer for Culture and Information. An outstanding poet and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts A.J.S. has been Chairman of the Council of the Arts in Guyana and has lectured at Universities in the West Indies, Puerto Rico, America and Germany on literary and cultural subjects.

Finally I treasure my personal memories of the discipline and persistence of Mittelholzer as a pioneer and particularly I recall a conversation with Edgar here in Georgetown in the 1950s when he expressed his faith in the literary evolution of the Caribbean and urged me to continue my own writing career.

Celeste Dolphin
Editor, *Kaie*
2.7.68

I

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

A most unusual thing happened to me the other night. Soon after I had begun to prepare the text of these lectures, I had a dream in which the spirit of the late Edgar Austin Mittelholzer came to me. I had been reading over some of his letters and then going back to passages in some of his books, checking references here and there, pondering over what seemed inconsistencies and so on, so I had been evoking his image in a rather creative sense, and that night in the twilight between sleep and wake when one is caught between two worlds there he was. He had the same lean burning intensity about his deep-set eyes and a half mocking smile playing about his lips. You know how in dreams you are never quite sure about details of appearances and their correspondence with the shadowy water-waving reality that dreams subsist of. But I was aware that he was seeking to communicate something which he considered important to me and I became more and more anxious that I should read the signals and get the message correctly. I'm not sure what he wore, but there was the same old, indomitable cheerfulness about him that I knew, a devil-may-care slightly brusque rapidity about his speech which meant he had made up his mind

It wasn't very long, this dream in which our encounter took place – it was one of those micro-macro intervals of time which can be like the flash of an intuition or illumination, but which stretches the elastic of interpretation as long as time, As Kabir says:

> Between the poles of the conscious and the unconscious, there has the mind made a swing: Thereon hang all beings and all worlds, and that swing never ceases its sway.[1]

When I had completed my dream, I wrote down in the form of a letter in the style Edgar had cultivated, the things he had said to me.

And this is the letter:

Dear Arthur old man

So you're going to give a lecture on my work. I was most interested and amused to learn this from our bulletin the other day – because they keep us well informed here and there was your name in the small print – I was tickled pink because I see that you're going to invite the Authorities to listen to your lecture.

Arthur, old chap, I think I'll have to be there and put in a personal appearance. Call of Author – sort of thing – I'll have to try and work something out. At first I thought I'd do the ghost in Hamlet and stalk across the hall where you're talking, with cloak pulled about me, covering my head and I'd call out in hollow voice "Adieu, remember me, remember me," Because that is what you're doing, isn't it?

But I never was an actor and better still, I thought, since all you chaps are so political and national nowadays, I said let me give it the Berbice touch.

Let me just say I find, old chap, that I am awfully attached to that sentimental old mud-flat of a town of New Amsterdam where I was born, and the terrible and interesting people who live there in the cocoon, and that Berbice river, and as a matter of fact I've been enjoying and reacting against them all my life and death.

But to the point. I think I'll come back as the music of the ghost of Jan Pieter Voorman of Goed de Vries up the Berbice River. You remember the story of *My Bones and My Flute.* You will hear that tuneless wandering trickle of treble notes coming from out of the trees.

Not that you should think that like Voorman I am the prisoner of unnamable presences, where I am, I am not.

You probably would like to get my address but they say I mustn't tell you too much, old chap, I can tell you this though, we speak a kind of German here and I've been having the most enlightening conversations with Friedrich and George. They're a wonderful pair – those two. You know, of course. I mean Friedrich Nietzsche and George Bernard Shaw. That fellow's a wizard, George. He's showing me how to use a typewriter he's developed where the notes play music either in the Mozartian or the Wagnerian manner and I'm beginning to work on a theory to put in the pages of a new story – like the technique in *Latticed Echoes* which baffled so many people.

And so you've invited the Authorities. Well, well, well. All my life I've been against the Authorities. You know that – at home, at school and everywhere else, and now here I am being treated like an Authority myself.
But just tell them something for me. Tell them I'm impenitent that I'm a story-teller, and that I lived and wrote the way I did and will you sometime read out to them that poem I sent you many, many years ago.
I said it was not for publication but you can use it now.
Well, good luck, I'll not fail and I'll be there.

Yours,
Edgar

The poem to which he referred goes as follows:

Why must I create and create
What Lernian Hydra with unresting mania
Impels my pen, compels my mind
To feed and feed and sate
Its many mouths – its all-hungry yearning bellies?

To root, delve, to rummage and to find
This thought, that truth, this hue and tint
Until the very wracked timbre of my being
Reels and quivers like a noisy mint
Coining words and dreams and potent jellies?

And no peace, nor peace for me –
No cooling wind, no shade of tamarind tree
To give me respite from this surging thing
No wizard-wand from out the burning day
To touch my spirit and wake me free.

In 1908, Marcel Proust, conducting his personal war against Sainte Beuve and at the same time formulating the intuitive nature of his own genius, declared of a writer's authorship that:

> [...] it is the secretion of one's innermost life, written in solitude and for oneself alone that one gives to the public.

> What one bestows on private life – in conversation, that is, however refined it may be, or in those drawing-room essays whittled down to suit a particular circle and scarcely more than conversation in print – is a product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self which one can only recover by putting aside the world and the self that frequents the world; that innermost self which has waited while one was in company, which one feels certain is the only real self, and which artists – and they only – end in living for, like a god whom they less and less often depart from, and to whom they have sacrificed a life that has no purpose except to do him honour […]

And so, by failing to see the gulf that separates the writer from the man of the world, by failing to understand that the writer's true self is manifested in his books alone, and that what he shows to men of the world (or even to those of them whom the world knows as writers, but who can only resume that character when they put the world behind them) is only a man of the world like themselves, Sainte Beuve came to set up that celebrated Method which according to Taine, Bourget and the rest of them, is his title to fame and which consists, if you would understand a poet or a writer, in greedily catechising those who knew him, who saw quite a lot of him, who can tell us how he conducted himself in regard to women etc. – precisely, that is, at every point where the poet's true self is not involved.

I should like you to keep the echoes of those words of Proust's in your mind as we proceed, that "*the writer's true self is manifested in his books alone, and that his work is the secretion of that innermost self*" which Marcel Proust calls the only true self "*which artists and they only end in living for, like a god whom they less and less often depart from and to whom they have sacrificed a life that has no purpose except to do him honour.*"

Reading these words over again the other day, I was struck by the degree to which they are appropriate where Edgar Mittelholzer is concerned since the writer in Edgar Mittelholzer was much more important than the man.

Instituted to perpetuate the memory of the late Edgar Mittelholzer, this Lectureship should encompass the joint themes of creative writing and Caribbean affairs and I

propose as the first lecturer to attempt to investigate the springs of his inspiration and if possible to analyse the chemistry of his creative powers against the background of his family and community life,

If at all we are interested in creative writing in the contemporary Caribbean context, and the nature of the development of the arts in Caribbean society, we must ask certain questions. For example, what makes a man or woman want to write? Does his material come from inside or outside him in equal proportions? Does he invent a world of his imagination or does he annex the world around him and convert it to this purpose? How does the writer view his role? Is it that of a sociological critic consciously or unconsciously commenting on his society as his writings develop? Does he find any literary or philosophical ancestors with whom he has special affinities? What is the proportion of pleasure and preaching in his work? How far does the body of his work show consistency while exhibiting areas of development? Does the Caribbean context inhibit the free development of a writer's talents? What should we do, as Caribbean readers, to support the growing body of critical and creative writing, being evolved, either in our midst, or by writers who have felt the need to escape from our midst?

There is a large body of questions of this kind waiting to be answered, and those which we do ask and answer represent the truth of the saying from A. N. Whitehead, that by our definition and concreteness we "*are always carving a world of actuality out of a realm of infinite possibilities.*"

Perhaps I should say here also how the Lectureship originated.

There was a newspaper item, soon after the report of the death of Edgar Mittelholzer, in which it was stated that Mr Jan Carew proposed to write the Prime Minister of Guyana (then British Guiana) to ask for some official recognition to be given to the literary works of the Guianese novelist Mittelholzer who had died in England the week before.

Mr Carew is reported to have said of Mittelholzer:

> He was the first Guianese novelist to gain recognition and the first West Indian writer from anywhere in the Caribbean to achieve international status as a novelist, His output was extraordinarily varied and amounted to twenty-three books over fifteen years. I feel that there should be some kind of memorial plaque erected to his memory in New Amsterdam where he was born, or else that a square or street should be named for him. It would be a fitting tribute and I am writing to the Premier to suggest this.

Unusual interest was shown in his work in the Greater Mackenzie area where I live, as a result of which I was invited to deliver public and well-attended lectures on Edgar's work in Wismar and Mackenzie. Many questions were asked after the lectures had been given, and I thought I could discern a deep-lying need on the part of the masses to learn more of our writers, artists and musicians, and to be informed of the image of Guyana being projected abroad. I could also see that whether or not he had set about it consciously, Edgar Mittelholzer had helped to give a sense of identity, value and importance to a body of people who share a land and a culture of their own, and that my audiences were making an act of possession and seeking to grasp how this writer they hadn't known was their spokesman in countries which they had not visited and some of which would remain only as names on a map.

I was therefore prompted to write the Prime Minister and suggest that the Guyana Government institute an annual Edgar Mittelholzer Lectureship on a theme of contemporary Guyanese or Commonwealth Caribbean writing, or some aspect of the relationship between thought or history and the emergence of creative writing in the Caribbean area, in order to promote a sense of national pride and help to keep Guyana in the forefront of the new nations. It would provide an apparatus whereby Guyanese writers and intellectuals abroad could be invited to come back home at a level of honour in order to serve the country by bringing new ideas to bear upon the community's inquiring minds. The annual publications of the texts of the Lectures would add to our small but growing Guyana bibliography, and should help to make young intellectuals aware of their own heritage, and assist as a

regular stimulus towards informed discussion of the nature of the development of the arts in Caribbean Society.

The Prime Minister expressed his enthusiastic interest and did me the honour of discussing its elaborations and later the Government's approval of the project was communicated to me, and the process of translating the idea into action has now been completed for the Edgar Mittelholzer Lectures to he born.

My first meeting with Edgar I can't recall. I was a visitor to New Amsterdam every August when I was a boy of nine or ten and I must have met Barno as Edgar was known to his New Amsterdam friends, fairly early since our mothers knew one another. But Barno comes to consciousness as a boy and lad who liked to dance the tango at the many dances which the Queen's College boys attended when they paid their annual visits to play against the Berbice High School and All-Berbice cricket and football teams. Barno wasn't good at games but we Queen's College boys found him to be out of the run of the mill, since he could talk books and certainly had a fairly high estimate of himself. And no one dared to make fun of him as he was known to be quick to take offence and to be quite formidable on the other side when he was roused.

I take energy and persistence to be the main characteristics of Edgar Mittelholzer and the basis of his success. *A Swarthy Boy* gives 1927 as the year in which Edgar began his long and tireless assault upon the publishing world of London with short stories and articles. 1929 is the time when the first novel he had completed, *The Terrible Four,* representing two months' concentrated writing was posted to George Newnes. I come into the picture in 1933 when I spent a year of my life as a Superintendent of Sorters in the mails branch of the General Post Office. It was a job of long tedious hours in which the horizons of one's life dwindled down to the bags of mail entering and leaving Guyana by ship and air. Sometimes the night trains from New Amsterdam would include in their mail large registered packages of manuscripts addressed to publishers in the United Kingdom and posted by one Edgar Mittelholzer, *5* Coburg Street, New Amsterdam. The outward stream of packages was balanced by the inward stream of the packages almost exactly as far as I can tell with the manuscripts returned by the publishers to their author. But Edgar kept on

writing, writing new stories, new plots, new variations and sending them off to the publishers in England. Chapter 25 in *A Swarthy Boy* is devoted to the campaign he was engaged in, and the chapter and the book ends with the words "*throw in more reserves. No retreat. Victory goes to the strong and persistent. Ignore the taunts on the home front. Keep on throwing in more reserves. The enemy defences must he smashed, The order of the day went out to the troops 'Victory or death'.*"

I know that for eleven years this went on, this bombarding of the publishing world, this ceaseless writing and re-writing of stories before success or as he termed it victory was achieved.

I know too the method of the writing in the early years. When he came down to live in Georgetown for a while, one morning I visited him at the boarding house when he was staying over the Labour Advocate office in Hadfield Street, and watched him while at work on a novel. Writing in pencil, still in an exercise book, he would begin every morning by re-reading and re-touching the work he had written the day before, erasing here and there, re-casting sentences and paragraphs and so re-capturing the mood of the section on which he happened to be working. Then as soon as he had re-entered the mood of the section, he would continue as if it were a seamless garment, taking the characters and the action on to the next development. I remember being struck by his complete absorption in what he was doing – he was the writer at work.

Reading through *A Swarthy Boy* again and through some of the chapters of *With a Carib Eye* which capture in a quiet and mature manner so many of the early impressions he had gathered on his trip up the Berbice River in 1933, I can see that there is really nothing in the man we knew to explain the remorseless dedication of the writer. He was a pioneer without caring to know he was one. He was just a man whose ambition was to write. He had mentioned to his father that he wanted to be a writer. That was what he wanted to do in life – write books and stories. It must be his career. "*It doesn't matter,*" he thought, "*what anyone says. I can do it – and I shall show them I can do it.*"

Looking back now it seems incredible. No formal education to speak of, no inspiring teacher to point to, with a mental apparatus no one can describe as being in the first-class – not a scholar, no encouraging family circle, actually the reverse, since I gather the Authorities frowned on his, to them, brainless desire to live by his writing, born and living in New Amsterdam which is a Rip Van Winkle type of sleepy hollow and a cultural wilderness, that every young man in his right mind would desert as soon as he could, reading only a few writers of his choice, concentrating on the art of telling a story. A pioneer in the true sense of the word with no precedent of anyone who had made a living by his pen. Only willpower, energy and persistence, digging existentially within himself for inspiration and plot and characterisation, studying Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, falling in love with Wagner, discovering his love of painting and poetry, and pursuing these arts, linking with kindred spirits where and whenever he could.

We will never know just when the innermost self of which Proust tells us began its essential development in Edgar. He traces back in *A Swarthy Boy* to his first sense of injustice when he received corporal punishment over the false report that he had got drowned in the large ornamental pond in the Promenade Gardens. He had done nothing at all, but his mother administered severe punishment and the utter injustice, the withering unfairness awoke a glaring awareness in him that he was a person who had been deeply wronged.

I shouldn't say that there was no literary antecedent. Edgar tells us that his father used to write a short story for the *Christmas Tide* every year. He wrote under the initials W. A. M. and the story was invariably about a situation that involved some ironical twist of events in the lives of a middle-aged couple. Edgar describes these stories as being written in a scholarly rather sonorous style, with a wry tone since his father disliked sentimentality. So on the father's side, there is an urge and a facility.

He tells us too, about his grandmother who was an excellent raconteur. She used to tell Bible Tales of the Flood, and David and Goliath, Samson and the Philistines. She had a

wonderful sense of drama and used not only her voice, but her hands and face to convey the colour and excitement, and she had imagination, Edgar recalls, and would often digress to tell some little true story of her own experience to illustrate a moral. The villains in her stories went to Hell and the heroes and heroines sailed up to Heaven. She spun about Edgar an atmosphere of security, because he felt the heavenly Guardian Angels she told him about were always on her side.

Then there were the silent film serials shown in the single New Amsterdam cinema he went regularly to see, and Buffalo Bill books and the activities of Doctor Wang Fu. Edgar became Doctor Wang Fu, head of the mysterious criminal secret society always outwitting a rival gang for the hidden jewels. Edgar says he was so impressed that a strong desire came alive in him to create heroes of his own in tales as exciting as those on the screen. So at eleven, in 1921, he bought an exercise book and began to write a story. After that, there were always stories being written of one kind or other. Sir Lionel Luckhoo told me while we were Civil Servants together in one office how Edgar was always filling these exercise books with exciting stories and passing them around for his friends to read.

Then there is the important habit of keeping a diary which he began in the early 1920s. Every day without fail he would write down in the diary briefly concerning what he had done or experienced. It is true that there is a break in the diaries between 1936 and 1948 but from 1925 continuously until his death, I believe, Edgar kept a diary. I am not sure we are all conscious of the great personal discipline involved in keeping a diary, the sharp conciseness that it gives to the recording of any event which one has experienced, and the continuous search for the exact word in describing one's experiences justly. Talking about this habit, Edgar referred to it as the Myth that Never Died, and to my mind regarding writing as I do, as a means of self-discovery, this habit of keeping a diary over this long period of time must be considered as an essential stage in the developing of whatever writing ability Edgar initially possessed.

It is not yet possible to explain the writer from the background but we are groping our way towards the genesis

of his ability – that absorbing interest in suspense tales and tales of mystery and death, the one-track discipline, the beginning of the sense of injustice in the adult world, the growing opposition to the Authorities, the desire to shock the middle class values with which he is surrounded, and in a way within which he was caught, the energy and persistence. It seems that Edgar turned in on himself, developed an inner world of his own with many elements of fantasy and poetry in it, and projected it in his writing. The world of his imagination was relatively uncontaminated by academic education and was marked by a compulsive quality in the episodes and an evocation of character which we may see as linked with these formative stages of his life. We cannot call it daydreaming, but Edgar in his stories was staging a withdrawal from the inadequacy of his control of events in New Amsterdam and pitting his determination to the task of overcoming the challenges of his environment in his stories. What we are looking at here is the evolution of our first Caribbean Commonwealth professional writer, fighting for his survival as a writer in a philistine society.

I would like to sketch in one or two glimpses of the author. Trying desperately to make money as a writer, Edgar writes, prints and publishes in 1937 a pamphlet of twenty-eight pages entitled *Creole Chips*.

This appears to be the first publication ever issued by him and as such is worthy of notice and I will take time to examine the contents fairly closely. These Chips are 250 words each as a general rule; some are written in play form with individual characters bantering one another in Creolese, while others are straightforward prose pieces. What are the situations recorded? Conversation teasing the conductor in a bus named Sweet Muchacha, in Cummings Street, two neighbours talk about their pet dogs and one mentions that a Chinese cook shop has opened on the corner; in a magistrate's court unorthodox means of identifying a child-father include the location of moles on the human anatomy; neighbours argue over the way the pawpaw tree drops leaves on a Marshal Neil rose-plant; a policeman is caught by a sergeant paying unscheduled visits to ladies' houses while on beat; a little boy is told by his nurse how to identify an 'old hye-g';

baccoos frequent a house in New Amsterdam; two drunken customers in a rum shop come to blows over Haile Selassie and Mussolini; in short there is a complete range of essentially comic proletariat situations ending with the final Chip No. 25 which describes the last dance at a bram.[2]

Seven of these Chips had been published by Hilton Harewood in the *Daily Chronicle* and given much chuckling pleasure to many readers, and Edgar had seized upon the opportunity to build up the table of contents to twenty-five and publish the collection as a booklet. He then walked from house to house in New Amsterdam and I believe in certain parts of Georgetown, hawking his ware from door to door for the princely sum of four cents each. I can imagine the courage born of desperation and resolution on Edgar's part and the sense of shock which ensued in middle class Berbice society. But the sense of dramatic clash and the suspense and the capsule delineation of character by phrase and action are all here in this modest bid for immortality. I was looking at my autographed copy the other day and considered it a collector's item, which showed the short-story writer evolving.

Four years later in May 1941, there appeared an 8-page poem '**Colonial Artist In Wartime**' printed by the Argosy Co. in which Edgar, describing the progress of the war, punctuated his poem regularly with the sentences "*Teach us how to live*" as a refrain. One section sets out the philosophy of the artist.

I met a woman on the burnt-earth lane
One midnight when the moon was on the wane
An East Indian woman moving laden home
Vegetables on her head and baby-bulging belly like a
    sideways dome
And portently my soul mumbled from its anticipated grave
In twenty years this belly bulge may be a brave
When nations once again make somersault and rave;
But you, of course, being an artist, cannot help to save
Either now or then your country, because you'd fain
Make images and mango-coloured dreams in imaginative rain.

'**Colonial Artist**' is journalistic verse for the most part, raising rhetorical questions. One question, however, to my mind stretches forward as a pointer to the later novel *Shadows Move Among Them*:

You there in the Saxon north
Tell me if to silt your bodies in putrescent hate
Will give you joy […]

Or tell me if to love beneath the cabbage palm
Amid the coconut sun-glittering fronds in shade
And see the human race in sighs and rapture-panting
Heralding new units for the future rage
If this, instead of hate, will sprinkle on our souls the dew
of calm
If this awesome welding of the male and female made
With singing breath of earth and limbs blind-rhythmed
Will settle wars, mind-storms and write upon the page
The alpha-cypher of solution, of evolution, revolution
Of mankind's morning yearning, midday sweating,
evening dreaming.

*****

1941 marked the end of the Guyana days of the author. He tells us in *With a Carib Eye* that left Guyana in December of that year to join the Navy and my letter files tell me that he considered the Navy one of the blackest and most unpleasant interludes in his life. He began to write his experiences in book form to be entitled *His Majesty's Serfs* and legend has it that to get discharged from the Navy our author had to feign madness and perform the works of a madman. His enemies say that these would be natural acts as he was cracked anyhow, but his friends tell of his storming into an officer's room and carrying on in some outlandish manner. But he got his discharge on medical grounds in August 1942, and re-entered civilian life, continuing to live in Trinidad. He was already married by then as he had met and married by March 1942, Rona Halfhide. He got a job with the Trinidad

Government in the Harbour Engineer's Office transferring later to Planning and Housing and he wrote to say that the work was congenial and he found plenty of time to do his own scribbling. That is how he was able, he said, to write three novels between June 1942 and January 1943. He lists the names of these novels and describes them in a few words. *Mr de Germain and the Yankees* was essentially a character study in 50,000 words of a middle-aged man of French Creole stock whose deeply rooted traditions were gravely injured by the American 'invasion' of Trinidad. He also described the character as symbolic of a moribund type – the old Tory whose world was being threatened with disintegration.

The second was a novella of 20,000 words called *Immoral Fable*, a subtle attack he claimed, on capitalism done in fantasy form. An adding machine is presented to the owner of a coconut plantation, a very avaricious man, Mr Hedge. It brings him luck and the plantation prospers. But for every act of greed and despicability Mr Hedge commits, the machine makes him suffer. Eventually he crushes his rivals and buys them out gaining the monopoly in the coconut industry, but the price the machine makes him pay is a terrible one. In the end when his wealth has reached a total ruled to be an immoral one by the machine, the machine springs upon him and destroys him. Later this appeared in print as *The Adding Machine* published in Jamaica

The third was entitled *For Better Things*. The long and short of this was that it was intended for the American fiction public. His agent thought it wouldn't be a success in that market as it was too solid and heavy. He realised that was the mistake he had made since the American public prefers a lot of action and *For Better Things* was extremely subjective and not particularly a fast-moving thriller,

In the letters appears the mention of another work, *Caribbean Villa*, a sociological novel of the Trinidadian middle class. The Perrijambs are a coloured family of the pale olive complexioned variety with 'good' hair and Edgar's intention was to portray them realistically, in a coldly dispassionate manner, all their virtues and failings, especially where culture and refinement are concerned. He said he had long wanted to write a work like that as "*there is much need in*

England and America of a true representation of the coloured middle class element in B. G. and the West Indies." He wrote:

> We've been looked upon too long as 'natives' and for once and all, I want to have the truth out, I want the English and the Americans to realise that there are coloured 'natives' out here who can be just as educated and refined as they can be – I want them to know that it isn't only calypsoes and jungle music (to wit, the BBC and NBC 'West Indian radio programmes') we out here can appreciate. We also know about Bach and Beethoven and Gauguin and Rembrandt and T. S. Eliot. At the same time you may be quite certain that I shall not attempt any kind of 'boost'. Oh, no, my dear fellow: the artist in me won't allow it. Hence all the gross creolese expressions of which our middle class is guilty are going to come out exactly as uttered and all our failings and foibles will be pictured without bias.

Many years later, Edgar mentioned in another letter that he had written *A Morning at the Office* "*to debunk certain fallacies held by people in northern regions about the people in the W. I. , especially the fallacy that makes us out to be a backward half-civilised people, it is really a grand tract nicely dressed up.*" He described that book as "*a mere social document (very necessary, however) in the guise of a novel.*"

So it seems clear that *Caribbean Villa* changed its shape into *A Morning at the Office* and it is revealing to note Edgar's motive in writing it, a motive which in the 1940s every West Indian would agree with.

I'm prompted to make an observation at this stage. I see Mittelholzer's life and work as an essay in freedom, as he moved from one place to another seeking his personal dignity according to his lights, using the tensions which develop between the individual and his community in a creative manner to project into fiction, but bearing in mind the protests of the individual against stereotypes and against middle class hypocrisy as well.

I feel we should bear in mind the pioneering nature of his work. Blazing a trail against the implacable philistinism of the colonial middle class to which he belonged, quite cool to the idea of national projection until he got caught up in the

research he had to do at the British Museum and the New York Public Library on the *Kaywana* trilogy (which we will look at later), impatient at being typed with the new wave of West Indian writers coming in his footsteps, cultivating his own vein of the urbane and ironic which he protected from contamination. So Edgar came relatively late to the nationalist ferment in the area, even though he was to serve it and his own country eminently well in the *Kaywana* series,

After Edgar left Guyana, contact with him depended on a slender stream of personal correspondence which took the form of comments on our two-way exchange of books, pamphlets, magazines and news. He would always mention the novel on which he was currently engaged. He always had a crowded and frenzied routine but obviously he enjoyed the life and was happy in it. Writing in the early 1950s, he said, he chuckled quite a lot when he had read what I had had to say about *A Morning at the Office* in one of my broadcast talks. *"Yes, Arthur,"* he wrote eventually *"you'll come to learn that sex and religion are my "themes" as a writer."* He went on:

> I hold very strong views on these two subjects and in everything I write, you will note that I shall touch on them. In some works I shall emphasize them heavily, in others I shall introduce them as a background accompaniment; but they will always be there. In my latest *Shadows Move Among Them*, religion is the main theme. I'm simply itching to hear what you think of it. If you write any comments, be sure and let me have them. Perhaps I might mention that I am prepared to be judged on *Shadows* […] It is a novel as I like, and want to write, a novel. I wrote it to please myself entirely, without a thought to publishers or public. However you'll see for yourself soon.

The letters come from various addresses. In the 1940s it is Coburg St., New Amsterdam, then it becomes 12 Warner St., Port of Spain, Trinidad where at a certain stage, to get his writing done, Edgar volunteered to do the shopping and the house chores and look after the baby, so that he could be at home writing as much as possible, while his wife got a regular job as a typist. Then the letters began to arrive from Millside, Church Road, Bagshot, Surrey, England. In May 1952,

a letter from Bagshot tells me of the Guggenheim Fellowship Award that Edgar had received and of his decision, made before the Award, that he would leave England and settle in Montreal. Edgar was then, he declared *"sick of England"*. He had discovered that the people there were moribund and simply existing on 'the past', on a tradition as dead as Stonehenge. There were other things about the way of living and personal habits of the English that annoyed and irritated him and the only thing he liked intensely and would never forget was the English countryside, especially in its springtime garb.

In this letter, he records that *Children of Kaywana* was out and had sold more than half the edition after only a month despite the price and the adverse reviews in the press. He had changed his publishers and gone to Secker & Warburg since Nevill's had turned down *Weather in Middenshot* together with five other publishers.

He was then working on a novel about Georgetown between 1920 and 1941 but he had already decided to use the Guggenheim Award to assist him on the second volume of the *Kaywana* series, dealing with the period 1763–1831. He had been working with the British Council, but had resigned to spend two or three months, before sailing to Canada, on preliminary research at the British Museum,

The next letter in November of the same year 1952 comes from Van Horne Avenue, Montreal, telling of his research in Guyanese history and the poor public response in New York to the play, which was the dramatisation by Moss Hart of *Shadows*, and presented as '**Climate of Eden'**. He was sure the play would be a flop. As he explained to me "*Americans, by and large, must have simple themes and must not be expected to concentrate on sub-plots and themes dealing with philosophy, Utopias and the development of character. The intellectual crowd likes it and I have received nothing but high compliments from this section of the populace, but the others [...] there can be no doubt that the play has a short run before it."*

However, the long dreary Canadian winter of 1952–53 made his Montreal flat a real prison for the entire Mittelholzer family and there were four children by now. Bagshot had meant a cottage and garden, but the Montreal dwelling was

an apartment house with outside temperatures at and below zero most of the long winter from November to March. So he planned to settle permanently in Barbados. They were all longing for sunshine again.

Edgar had finished by then the second book in the *Kaywana* series, *The Harrowing of Hubertus*. He described it as a *"quiet book devoted chiefly to a study of the character of Hubertus van Groenwegel – deeply intellectual, bookish but tries to be religious as well, hence the harrowing he suffers to the day of his death". "In another way,"* Edgar wrote, *"he is a projection of a facet of my own personality.''*

He talks further about the Georgetown novel, *Life and Death of Sylvia* – a rather pathetic tale, very unlike anything else he had written. *"I know,"* he says, *"several females will hold hankies to their eyes before they've finished it. But life is like that, sometimes, and I must tell the truth, even if it seems like sob stuff."*

He warns against letting the publishers blurb on *Sylvia* scare me: *"they've over-coloured the book shamelessly and talked a lot of bunkum […]":*

> Georgetown [he quotes] a city where love and hate, sex and violence, jealousy and deceit are covered only by the thinnest veneer of civilisation [end of quote]. As if this isn't true of London or Paris or any city in this world! I shall look forward to chuckling over this book with you when I come. You'll recognise many portraits, even in their disguised states. Even I myself am in it, very thinly disguised – and you yourself come in for a 'mention.' Oh, there'll be a lot to giggle over.

Edgar had hoped to come to B. G. for a fortnight in August or early September 1953 to do some research at the Georgetown Library in respect of the history of B. G., but on arriving in Barbados he found it necessary to postpone the visit and reside in Barbados for an unbroken period of six months to qualify for certain income tax exemptions at 9/6 in the pound. He mentions this in a letter of August 1953 from an address in Maxwell Coast Road, Christ Church, Barbados. The setting was *"idyllic – cane fields, windmills, gently undulating wooded terrain and many casuarinas feathery against the sky. Two hundred yards from the sea, with a sea bathe whenever wanted, but not plagued with the roar of 'the breakers'."*

The next letter from Edgar on file is dated November 1955. It is a short note but full of the sense of recent achievements. It tells of *My Bones and My Flute* published in London in October 1955, *Of Trees and the Sea* to be published in the summer of 1956, and *A Tale of Three Places* to appear early in 1957. He is returning to live in England after all in the May of 1956, but hoped definitely to pay the long-deferred visit to Guyana before he leaves the Caribbean for good.

I continued through the years to receive the personal copies of the Edgar Mittelholzer books as they came off the press, generally with the same genial autographed wishes.

There is a change however taking place as seen in the salutations. In the copy of *The Piling of Clouds* he wrote – this is Nov. 20, 1961 – "*for A. J. S. Herein is expressed my disgust of contemporary society.*" When my copy of *The Wounded and the Worried* arrived he had written on the flyleaf, *"These days I feel as if all you people are behind the Iron Curtain! What a state poor old B. G. has fallen into"* – this is July 14, 1962. In *A Swarthy Boy,* he said, Feb. 10, 1963, ''*Hoping you'll recognise me – and the B. G. that was."*

But let's go back to the letters. In March 1960 he writes to tell me he has been divorced in May of 1959, and is getting married again in April to a young English girl Jacqueline Pointer, whom he first met at a Writers' Summer School in the August of 1959. She is a writer of short stories and poetry but was working on a novel. They will honeymoon on the Rhine, he says.

This letter from Dippenhall, Farnham, Surrey, expresses his hopes of the chilling and thrilling new book *Eltonsbrody* set in Barbados, and reports that *Latticed Echoes* had sold 5000 copies already, "*despite the nasty remarks of the critics.*"

In February 1963 writing from the same address he is evidently under great pressure with his work and the home chores have trebled because of a new son, the first of the second marriage, called Leodegar Arthur. Leodegar is an old Swiss-German name given to the first-born male Mittelholzer since the seventeenth century. This had been retailed to him by a kinsman Dr Johann Mittelholzer who had also shown him some family records in Appenzell in 1961, when he was on a visit there with his second wife.

Dr Mittelholzer was very keen on family history and Edgar had promised him he would maintain the family tradition in some measure at least, hence the name of the new son.

He mentions two books, *A Swarthy Boy* and *Uncle Paul*. Of *A Swarthy Boy* he says "*it is autobiography for a change. The first 18 years. I couldn't venture to go further than that. It would have embarrassed and hurt too many people now very much alive. As it is, I've only done this book now because my parents are too old to read – my father is practically blind at 89 – for I know it would have pained them very much to read much of what I've put down on paper about themselves.''*

Uncle Paul he describes as "*really an intensive character study of myself – though only I will know that. I've disguised the character too well for readers who are strangers to suspect. These days, you see, I'm obsessed with the urge to speak from within myself of all that I feel about people and the world as I see it. I admit I've become a bit preachy, but that can't be helped. I must say what I feel is wrong with society today. However, in* ***Uncle Paul****, I've done it as subtly as I could. I don't think you'll find it preachy."*

Here my file of letters received directly from Edgar comes to an end. But I have a note from my friend Frank Collymore in Barbados who wrote to express his great distress that Edgar had written to tell him he wished to be incommunicado, that he doesn't want to be written to any more. Did I know what was wrong? he asked. I didn't but I had been conscious for a little while of the trend of writing in the novels he was now publishing, a growing sense of extreme scepticism bordering on nihilism, something very like an evaporation of faith in life.

And then came the news of Edgar's death. A few days afterwards, I received a letter from a cousin of his. She had spent a day with Edgar and his wife the autumn before in Surrey and somehow a tide of sympathy had flowed between them, so Edgar had been in correspondence with her and in actual fact she had that day received what must have been the last letter he had written. In it he had said that he had always been a fighter but he was tired in spirit, and the burden of his disappointment and discouragement and insecurity had become too heavy. He had become increasingly obsessed with the apathy of the Government in dealing with thugs and

hooligans. He had financial problems and his pride didn't allow him to become a burden. He wrote that with him it was a sharp alternative. Victory or death. There was no intermediary stage for him.

And so the Mittelholzer canon is closed with the death of the author. We must go back to the beginning of our talk and remember the words of Marcel Proust, that it is the secretion of one's innermost life that matters, that the writer's true self is manifested in his books alone, the mind that quarried them out of the stuff of the imagination in response to an inner compulsion – this mind is at rest, but we have the long Mittelholzer bookshelf, the high piled books in charactery, holding like garners the full-ripened harvest. Edgar's pen was able to glean his teeming brain, and it is right that we remember in this way the remarkable achievement of the New Amsterdam boy.

II

In our scrutiny of the Guyana novels which Edgar Mittelholzer created, I propose first to put the author within his work in order to experience his sense of concreteness and to ask the questions – how things grow together where he is concerned. How does he relate to the Guyana of his imagination?

The character Milton Copps in *Life and Death of Sylvia* as many of us have already discovered, is the thinly disguised self-portrait of the novelist. How does he view himself for others to see him?

He is keen to stress the villainous nature of his looks, "*a good screen bad-man, the kind who plotted and nodded and gave curt callous orders in a quiet voice, who twisted the heroine's arm and narrowed his eyes in sadistic pleasure as she winced and gasped.*" There are other traits – a precise clipped tone of voice, the Latin American look, with dark hair sleekly brushed back, sunken intense dark eyes that always looked into, rather than at you; and he is uncomfortable in his clothes. And there are two seemingly contradictory aspects – the ironic humour of his conversation and a certain indefinable sympathy in his manner, as he talked with Sylvia

He is unconventional and claims to be totally lacking in respectability. He says quite casually that he belongs to one of the oldest of the oldest Berbice families – there is a picture on the wall of a former Mayor of New Amsterdam who was his uncle, but he has the reputation of being a lunatic. He has instituted a campaign against God and the church, he says. He likes loud, thunderous, weird and dissonant music – music must be strong and passionate, even flaming. He gives advice to Sylvia, "*Never dump into Lethe what is unpleasant. Turn it around before you, probe it, analyse it and get to understand the anatomy of its unpleasantness.*"

He announces his creed. He says, "*I believe in Destiny – and myself. Work like the deuce on my own schemes and leave the rest to Destiny.*" He detests bourgeois society, wouldn't work in an office like a respectable young man of good family, but he

preferred to live by his wits and to ignore the barrage of contumely from his relatives and fellow townsmen.

Other parts of his advice to her are savage and direct. He tells her, "*when you are dealing with people of genuine culture and breeding, be a gentleman; when you're up against raw brute humanity, be a savage – act like a savage, otherwise you get crushed.*"

Then on the purpose of life he says, "*What the devil are any of us alive for? Simply to produce others like ourselves and continue in perpetual monotony throughout the ages, fighting and building and singing and dying.[…] We should all look forward to death. It's the one dream that, once having come true – and it always comes true – will cause none of us any disillusionment. The final emptiness. The final cessation of all pain and striving and back-biting and anxiety. What greater heaven could one desire? I live for death." He threw out his legs and guffawed, but added, "Come, come, no morbidity. You must fight, Sylvia. Keep on. That's my policy. Frustration and disappointment only make me more angry and defiant, more determined to slam my fist into the ugly visage of life.*"

This, of course, is the doctrine of Nietzsche *à la* Mittelholzer. Summarised briefly and oversimplified, it is the philosophy that the best thing in man is strength of will, power and permanence of passion. Man is the cruelest animal; the real test of a man is energy, capacity and power. The aim of all life is not the happiness of the mass, but the improvement of the type. Society is an instrument for the enhancement of the power and personality of the individual. Intellect alone does not ennoble; something is always needed to ennoble intellect. It is blood – good birth and eugenic breeding. The body must be taught to suffer in silence and the will must learn to obey and to command. To be brave is good. What is bad? All that comes from weakness. So energy, intellect and pride make the superman.

We are looking at the foundation on which Edgar built a working philosophy to project with the passion of his imagination into his books. As we go along, we shall see how this is mediated in his preaching.

In his self-portrait, Edgar refers to himself as being a member of one of the oldest of the oldest families in Berbice. For centuries, there has been always the record of a

Mittelholzer in Berbice, and Edgar's belief, crystallised in *A Swarthy Boy*, was that the Swiss-German manager of Plantation de Vreede, which flourished in the middle of the eighteenth century, more than fifty miles up the Berbice River, was Herr Constanz Mittelholzer, the first Mittelholzer to come to this part of the world. The legend of the sabre still in the possession of the Mittelholzers, used in 1763 by this ancestor to protect himself and to escape during the famous slave rebellion is also preserved for us in *A Swarthy Boy*.

In *With a Carib Eye*, Edgar mentions his thrill in 1933, as he travelled in the steamer up the Berbice River, "*the thrill of one about to penetrate into a territory of ghosts – the ghosts of the eighteenth-century Dutchmen and their slaves who had peopled the banks of the Berbice for over a hundred miles up. […] As the river narrowed and the jungle loomed up nearer and nearer on either side, there was history concealed in every mysterious opening amidst the glittering greens that overhung the rapidly darkening water.*"

It was at Appenzell in Switzerland that Edgar saw the large ledger filled with small German words which reappeared like a ghost in the Mittelholzer family history in Switzerland from the South American plantation on the Berbice River, full of the account of the life of the plantation. It had been sent about 1866 by someone unknown on behalf of a recently deceased member of the Mittelholzer family.

So if we add these elements together we come to the belief that there has long been an identification imaginatively in the mind of Edgar with the stern resistance offered by some of the Berbice estate-owners to Cuffy and the other slave leaders of the rebellion. Here therefore is part of a motive for some episodes in the *Kaywana* trilogy, here is reason for delving into the chronicles of the Dutch settlements, here is cause for the fortunes of the Van Groenwegel family to extend and be transferred from Essequibo to the Berbice River, here is the imaginative centre of the letters preserved in the canister in the *Kaywana* series, which kept tradition alive for the children with the anecdotes and episodes of the Old Blood at work in one generation after another of the Groenwegel family.

Of course, it will be pointed out that the visit to Appenzell took place long after the *Kaywana* series was completed, and

that we seem to be looking back at a historical justification of an imaginative projection, but what we are concerned with is the relationship between the event and its celebration in fiction. Here is part of the genesis of the *Kaywana* series.

But I want us to look at another fundamental aspect of his work.

In the history of many countries which have been richly served by their national poets, playwrights and novelists, we can trace abundant and varied literary associations. Think only of a field of daffodils in England and we think of William Wordsworth. Think of pilgrims on the way to Canterbury and we think of Chaucer and his magical tales which stand at the well-springs of English Literature. In the same way the county of Berbice is Mittelholzer country, and as time goes by, increasingly we will see its image in terms of the literary associations he has begotten. Because he has taken this area of our Guyana and invested it with the passion and holiness of his creative imagination, and peopled it with a gallery of speaking characters that are more real in one sense than the people we meet and talk with in life and that constitute among themselves a world of reference and tradition upon which we will increasingly call as a nation.

There is a literary landscape map of Guyana of which we can speak. Starting at home, I think I can say I have a small corner in the matter of Kaieteur the waterfall, because the Legend is now a source of literary associations for many.[3] Celeste Dolphin has made an act of possession of Cabacaburi[4] and her *Child of Guyana*, Schapelle the Arawak boy, belongs to the literary history of our country. In time we will not think of Cabacaburi without remembering him. Jan Carew in his novels has created a world of the African villages of the coastland and of the world of pork-knockers in the bush with *Ocean Shark* at the centre. Peter Kempadoo has made an indelible mark with the village of Port Mourant, in which his *Guiana Boy* grew up. Mahaica and its historied events have received the imprint of the mind of Christopher Nicole in his novel of the 1823 revolt in *Ratoon.* Wilson Harris possesses the Canje and Pomeroon rivers and certain parts of the Rupununi and owns the voyage up the falls in a very special and creative way, because he has caught for ever the atmosphere of these areas in his work and made them speaking characters.

But it is to the credit of Edgar Mittelholzer that he ushered in the beginning of our Guyanese imaginative literature with his *Corentyne Thunder* published in 1941. The opening chapters describe the train of thoughts in the ageing cow-minder as he walks home with his daughter and his forty-seven cows and attention passes to the planting of the rice field by his neighbours. There is a lyrical quality about the description of the book, the thunder faint and mysterious from over the distant courida bush and the wind trailing over the savannah like cool threads of silk and the hawks looking for creketteh snails in the rice nursery. Even the tall brick chimneys of Speyerfield sugar factory, are shown to the reader as "*huge guns of unreckoned age trained upon Eternity.*" The characters go through their uncomplicated ballet of emotions and reactions, but over it all the Corentyne savannah spreads its magic of sound, its changing skyscape and we see the ripening of the ricefields. The symbol is the sound of the fisherman's horn, the moaning conch-shell, drifting over the areas covered with the samphire shrubs, moaning quietly, telling a tale of peace and simple folk minding cows, of mud-houses and rice-fields, creketteh hawks and muddy-watered canals, brown and rippled, moaning like a portent too, as though foretelling the things of the future in the veiled core of its lonely cooing.

The triumph of *Corentyne Thunder* is that it is a peasant, proletariat novel, so fully realised from the inside. Kattree and Beena as we are made to realise, lived at the centre of the universe in their mud-house and had never been to the great town of New Amsterdam before. Everything is in artistic keeping, apart from Geoffry and his young friend from Queen's College, whose conversation is typical of the young unfledged intellectual, but there are the pleasantries and jealousies of sugar-estate life, the curry-feeds at Jannie's, the sudden wealth of the rice farmers. Everywhere the creatures of the story are shaped by the dominant Corentyne savannahs and the changing weather-faces of the sky.

It is of interest that Edgar had a thought about this book some ten years after it was published. I had been under the impression that the publishers Eyre & Spottiswoode had asked him to revise the dialect he used in the novel and I had said so in a broadcast.

He picked me up on this and wrote to say that the dialogue had in no way been revised. What had happened was that the publishers had written him saying that some of the dialogue was unintelligible to English readers so Edgar had compiled a glossary of phrases which should have been published at the end of the book. But, in the upset of war conditions, neither the glossary nor a foreword which Edgar had prepared, was published much to the author's surprise. Not a word of the text however, was altered. Then in his letter he went on to say *"One day, if I do re-write* ***Corentyne Thunder*** *(I shall only authorise another edition on the condition that I am allowed to re-write it) I shall modify the dialogue considerably to make it more easily intelligible to readers anywhere. But that is in the future"*.

The book is a fine example of writing from the inside and the author is sympathetically in tune, with the world of the Indian peasant and his hopes and fears. So *Corentyne Thunder* is an act of imaginative possession of an important part of Guyana's agricultural area and captures its way of life, as a navel of the universe.

If we draw a map of the Berbice River and move from New Amsterdam, we come at last to the mission house at Berkelhoost where Rev. Harmston was in charge. A long journey on the small river steamer from half past seven in the morning to quarter past five in the afternoon. To read the description in S*hadows Move Among Them* and compare it with the chapter in *With a Carib Eye* is to realise that Edgar used the material recorded on his own trip up the Berbice in 1933 for Gregory Hawke's Journey in the fictive account dated as July 1937. The visual effect of the jungle and the spider-phobia mentioned in both books recall one another.

The way the book begins makes us realise that Olivia, that delightful character is the conscience of the story. Here is a whimsical and poetic child of twelve years old, fashioning the world around her to her moulding. I have called Olivia the most attractive character to my mind to come out of Caribbean fiction in English, and reading the novel again, I fall even more in love with her from the opening chapter to the last when she begins to grow up; such passionate imagination hoping and desiring to grow up to become passionate

flesh, such insight, such sympathy, so conscious of the shadows that move among us and so at home among them. No wonder her brother Berton was afraid that she might lose herself in such a way that nobody, not even she herself, could find her. Gregory sees shadows too out of sickness and ill-health, but she is the positive pole to Gregory's negative and shattered nerves.

The place they inhabit is one of the scenes of the 1763 slave rebellion and the jungle is full of shadows that call from two centuries before. There is one compelling scene where Olivia leads Gregory into the ruins of the family house of the Schoonlusts and their active imaginations, hers whimsical and poetic and his fevered and bordering on delirium tremens, both work together to recreate the world of the 1763 slave rebellion, and Edgar is going to do another transcript in the *Kaywana* series. The author weaves matter-of-fact descriptions of the swizzle-stick trees around them as they talk and wander among the shrubs and Olivia, surprised and bitter that he should have confessed to eavesdropping on their family conference, taunts Gregory to strangle her there and then in the jungle and throw her body into the old bone-filled cellar where it would not be found.

This is the type of scene in which Edgar excelled, a situation in which the characters are emotionally heightened in their awareness of one another and of the environment, when the ordinary stream of mental impressions are diverted into unusual speech and the pattern of thought deserts normal channels. You may say that they are both abnormal for one reason or other, and susceptible to the evil influences around them, which have been sown in the rape and slaughter of the Slave Rebellion. Edgar has exercised considerable craftsmanship in his handling of the various segments of the book. There is a sermon, a massive indictment of western civilisation which he hands to each of at least four characters so that they can bombard the main character, Gregory, who is a symbol of the English reader. Because Gregory is at an emotional height of awareness, particularly as he meditates upon the Berbice River, the sermons are quietly slipped into the story without any perceptible slowing of the action.

In the revelation of the way this particular 'religion' of the Brethren of Christ the Man was founded, the author has already shocked and surprised the reader (though not the main character) with the ceremonies and attitudes before he condescends to explain how this bizarre type of worship was founded in Oxford and created missions in Berbice, Malaya, Burma and Africa. The explanation comes casually of the wealthy aunt financing a whim of her Oxford nephew (in the Wesley tradition, shall we say) and the eight founders ordain one another.

The creation of the settlement is another casually introduced item in the story, and yet here is a Guyanese author projecting his Utopia as a world in which to develop one's best self – not too much work, a great deal of discipline in personal promises, the Code of the Mission, no sexual orgies although there is sexual freedom with free contraceptives as item one on the list of basic necessities and general community permission for children to be born. In an engaging lottery, perhaps, or by consulting the waiting list of couples who want to have children, it was decided that a new clearance scheme and the erection of several more benabs in the residential area permitted ten new babies to be born. Does this point the way to a new government policy of housing and planned parenthood?

In a special way, *Shadows* is a seminal book in the Mittelholzer canon. We are first introduced to Middenshot which will be the scene of a critical approach to life in England. The links are Gregory himself and the Harmstons who used to live there and who remember the sleepy quiet town (which bears many marks of resemblance to New Amsterdam up to the proximity of a mental hospital nearby from which patients will escape). Here is the first hint of the criticisms of society in the English context which will be amplified and brought to vigorous dramatic life in *The Piling of Clouds*, *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* and other novels from his pen.

The attitude to sex is that of a permissive society, without orgies of licentiousness as Mrs Harmston tells her nephew Gregory. And the author leaves in our minds the memory that Mrs Harmston had been greatly upset by the rumour of her

husband's fathering a child outside of his immediate family. So the main impact of Edgar's Utopia in this respect is that of what he calls natural urges being indulged; while the 'guinea pig' character, our hero Gregory, considers sexual indulgence as a temptation against which he must preserve his continence for the sake of his integrity and of becoming sane and whole again. Edgar must have taken pleasure in concocting the scene in the canoe on the river in which Mabel as a child of nature urges the philosophy of the pleasures of the passions upon this shell-shocked product of war and civilisation and he holds back, despising himself as he does so because he wants to rid himself of the power of passion. Gregory is the prototype of characters in other novels, who as P. H. Daly points out will hold on to their continence as a means of personal discipline in the Nietzschean philosophy.

Shadows is perhaps most notable as Edgar's major assault against orthodox religion. Remember that he is in total revolt against what he calls middle class morality and hypocrisy. The special attack on the Creed comes while the sick, split personality of Gregory is more involved with Mabel and his new-found affection towards her.

What is the attack? The congregation intones, to a voluntary on the organ, a creed stating God as Father of all Myth, Jesus Christ as born of natural union and described as King of Dreamers, and the Bible as a book of lovely legends; they believe in a code of a life of cultural simplicity, comforts but not vain extravagances, dreams and fancies, fairies and phantoms. Hard work, frank love and wholesome play, spiced with make-believe. They believe also in the basic Christian way of living, loving your neighbours, pitying your enemies, walking in humility, seeking no power, revelling in the day but hoping for nothing beyond this life. For this life is the Kingdom of Heaven and after death nothing but shadows.

The people of the Mission believed that the only way to achieve true happiness was to forget reality, do just enough work to keep their minds and bodies healthily occupied and to provide themselves with food and shelter and entertainment.

This then is the blueprint of Edgar's Utopia.

Gerald Moore remarked the other day that it was all old hat to say that readers in England felt a special exotic thrill

over the noble savages that Edgar developed, on the pattern of Rousseau, in the Berbice River wilderness with the Penguin books of Clive Bell and the gramophone records with the music of Beethoven and Sibelius. I would suggest that this may indeed have been an element in the reception of the book – that a man from England shocked by the wars and fears of western civilisation travels back to the womb of civilisation in the Guyana jungle free from hypocrisy, in order to restore and heal himself at the bosom of Nature with a capital N. To a war-weary Europe, this may have been a fantasy of escape indeed, perhaps sought and longed for by many readers.

One small point on race. Edgar makes a point of underlining the perfectibility by education of the Amerindians on the Berbice River in the same way that he displays utter identity with the psychology and the psyche of the East Indian peasant characters in *Corentyne Thunder*. In some quarters, the criticism has been made against him that he was guilty of the wrong racial attitudes towards Africans and Indians, that he was a snob (which indeed he was) despite his strong antipathies against the middle class and that all through his books he hugged his Swiss-German ancestry to his bosom as a little girl hugs her dolls. I would say that he was a creative writer born in a committed society and that these would be the Idols of the Market Place which Francis Bacon tells us about, errors arising from the commerce and association of men with one another. And does Shakespeare escape all criticism when we consider his treatment of Shylock the Jew and Othello the Moor?

We should notice how economical Edgar is, as an author. Wherever his interest brought him back, he returned, and he always came back to the 1763 Rebellion and to the Berbice River. *My Bones and My Flute* is "*A ghost story in the old fashioned manner*", this is how he describes it himself, but the setting is the same as in *Shadows* – a jungle estate named Goed de Vries up the Berbice River and a young painter fond of local history. On this occasion this opening leads to the haunting and chilling story of a Dutch planter who turned from his God to unnatural malevolent practices and had put his soul in the hands of Satan. Again the 1763 Slave Rebellion plays an important part in the story, as the event which surprised him

and cut off his days and suddenly sent his spirit raging and desolate among the living.

Edgar here poetically throws a veil of unfamiliarity over familiar things. His device is to involve the attention of the reader in the disturbed thought processes of the character who is normally of an innately morbid disposition and now is engrossed in alarm and the fear of approaching death from the old Dutch manuscript in the rusty tin canister. Then he proceeds to infect an element of impending disaster and gloom into the story by investing the natural surroundings with little touches of despair. For example, the river is a sullen enemy, the silence is charged with a waiting quality, the gruff barking heard in the distance is too powerful and harsh for a dog. The night has a dense aliveness and intelligence. The fireflies in their deadly, silent dance heighten the vigilant aspect of the dark. In other words Edgar uses his gift of poetry to enhance the reader's awareness of doom.

In *A Swarthy Boy* Edgar had told us of the imagination of his grandmother and how she impressed him. The words used to describe the memory of the grandmother of the narrator in *My Bones and My Flute* are very similar to those in *A Swarthy Boy*. Both grandmothers have the capacity to produce terror in small boys with their vivid and convincing word-pictures of the Day of Judgment. The memories of the grandmother were very much with the narrator as he penetrated further into the story of the mystery of the power of the ancient Dutch parchment and the vague fluting music that is heard at odd intervals.

The story progresses from these manifestations, closing in with many portents of foreboding, until the spirits of evil are attacking the whole party. The result is a story of occult forces struggling for domination in an atmosphere of mounting terror and unusual compulsion. In the final scene, the tormented spirit seeking Christian burial leads the terrified group into the ruins against the forces that would hold him for ever and as they read the burial service from the battered Anglican prayer book, peace descends upon the twilight clearing.

The explanation of this haunting story with its overtones of Edgar Allan Poe is in the diary kept by the tormented Dutch

estate owner, a diary which ends the day before the slave rebels take the plantation by surprise in February 1763. The book is a great success because of its relative simplicity and its compulsive power born of the author's skill to lead the reader's attention from one page to another in pity and terror.

We move down from the upper reaches of the Berbice River and it is in New Amsterdam, that well-known cocoon of existence which Edgar knew so well, that he has set the locale for other Guyana stories.

Writing in *With A Carib Eye* many years after leaving Guyana, Edgar finds it in his heart to describe New Amsterdam as a lovely little town. Seen from the ferry-steamer, the town really has, he says, a picture postcard look, *"The two steeples of the two principal churches, the Anglican and the Presbyterian, jut up like clean white flower pistils out of the reds and pinks and greyish whites and the greens that go to make up a sort of limp bouquet spread out along the eastern bank of the river."* I'm giving you his actual and well-chosen words here:

> Cabbage and coconut palms and saman trees, mango trees and sandbox trees, innumerable flowering shrubs go to make up the greens, and the pinks and reds and greyish-whites are the wooden cottages, one-storey and two-storey, with their red-painted roofs or in some cases, shingled or of plain corrugated iron that look bluish-grey from a distance. A peaceful, pleasant sight New Amsterdam makes from mid-estuary and with the amber-tinted water of the river in the foreground, and the bright blue of a dry-weather day overhead, it is a technicolour photographer's dream.

There is a great deal of love and identification with the scene being painted in colour for us in that description. T. S. Eliot says, *"Home is where one starts from. As we grow older, the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated. […] No man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree of identification (culture) which he acquired from his early environment."* This is home for the writer which the Guyanese poet Ivan van Sertima once described as "*the shrine of the wander-weary spirit, the port of call at which man's restless being finds a soul-smoothening peace and murmurless stillness.*

Home's only for those who have an anchor there, a harbour for the soul's unrest and longing." New Amsterdam is Edgar's home.

He says it's very near to the jungle. He can feel the mystery of unknown tracts of land simply by staring east towards the Canje Creek, all bush where once plantations had flourished. And he writes in *With A Carib Eye* of the clumps of missouri grass floating down the deep Vandyck brown water of the Canje, like moving chunks of jungle, with strange flowering plants and sometimes water camoodies coiled slyly among the dense, weedy clutter. You can actually see the swarthy Mittelholzer boy peering intently as the clumps drift past or the young man walking to Sandvoort to savour the jungle atmosphere in the evenings. He is storing up impressions that will vivify the novels of the future. Wordsworth would remind us that "*The poet's art is an acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe, since the poet looks at the world in the spirit of Love.*"

Latticed Echoes and *Thunder Returning* are a pair of books (he never published the third and last in this series) in which Edgar takes New Amsterdam as the scene of the action. Because the creative imagination has come home, the patterns of memories laid carefully deposit by deposit in the archives of the mind lend authenticity to the action. The key to the first novel is the title since what we read and overhear are echoes and we are behind a screen of latticework where we discern only imperfectly what is going on. Let us look first of all at the new technique which these books display.

The leitmotif technique is based on one of Wagner's operas. It is cinematographic in that descriptive passages with specific emotional and poetic words are used to stand for the characters. It is as if Edgar wrote the novel entirely as dialogue giving what we call the lucid story, and then gave his readers clues as to who the characters would be by introducing their particular mood-music of patterns within the dialogue and so he enriches the texture with a symbol code.

We begin to learn that whenever we read about artillery and giant bees this is Richard Lehrer being introduced. When Lydia his wife comes in a conversation, the signals are summer trees, serrate, ducks, swimming, and misted spaces. Tommy Rowleyson is dark green menace and the veiled magic

of pensive leaves. His wife Lindy is weak red and clear strips, shudders, infant dark, duplicates.

The new technique is of course a handicap and slows down the tempo of the first pages to a pace most unusual for Edgar's books, but looking at it critically, you can see that the author makes every effort to ease the reader into the action. And what are the symbols for New Amsterdam and Berbice? They are *"mosquitoes, swampy, motorboat, midnight. Canje Creek and Savannah*" – and include names we already know are dear to the author's heart.

The writing must have been a complicated matter as if he was always composing with a series of symbols for characters, because the symbols relate not only to characters but to scenes and to the emotional moods of the characters at the time. This denotes an industry which is almost Germanic and not really noticed by the reader whose eagerness to move on lends him wings over these musical efforts to follow the flow of the compulsive story. It is surprising, however, how much we learn the hang of the technique as we go and as the story accumulates its tensions. Somehow looking back on this story of hysteria, double parenthood and madness, we feel mildly as if we are working crossword puzzles and engaged on detective research.

I must say this, however, that there are rewards. In the second book in which Aunt Emily rises in stature, throws off her father's dominating influence and actually grows under our eyes, it is extraordinary how her character becomes the main image of New Amsterdam and how the leitmotif which is herself (*"tide-turns…Yearning year…withering tensions…sad birds chirp and twitter…Crab Island…ebbs…Vryrnen's Erven"*), becomes mellowed as she acts as mother confessor and adviser in lives of greater complexity than her own.

The new technique? Was it worth it? I would say yes. The author confessed to a compulsion beyond his control while he was writing the books, and was disappointed that it became necessary for him to explain the method. So it wasn't entirely successful. But it was something to the author to be able to try out a method of composing a novel which allowed him to work in musical effects from his beloved Wagner.

Suddenly in this complicated web of symbol and sharp action we are conscious that we are back in Berbice as there clash the bells of the churches of New Amsterdam calling to Sunday evening worship – *"beng, bong, pallang, pilling, bellem"* – evoking the memory of the a swarthy boy describing the Sabbath Day, while the bells ring from the Presbyterian Church, the Congregational Chapel, the Anglican All-Saints parish church, the Lutheran Church and the Methodist Chapel.

We have agreed that we needn't tell the stories of these novels – they are there to be read, not talked about – but I like the use made of the Lochaber Road, in walking, marching, and counter-marching, and I heartily dislike the Germanic pretensions of Richard Lehrer and his grandfather. Richard is not a lovable character although he is a type of the author, he is too introvert and selfish, more in love with his daughter Susan than anyone else. His grandfather with his love of Bismarck is an excellent model of the irascible old man who becomes more difficult as the years go by and actually orders his grandson out of his house because in the RAF he had bombed Germany. Lindy is a triumph of characterization and our sympathies for her develop since she works so hard to have a child of her own. Lindy is German-born, and in the book the author seems to be underlining the value of discipline.

Here it is displeasing to many readers as a belittling of the Guyanese tradition and a repudiation of the African slave traditions of our history. But the stories are superbly told and this was Edgar's main intention.

I'd like here to add a personal memory in which the town of New Amsterdam is associated with Edgar Mittelholzer. In November 1952 the Extra Mural Association of New Amsterdam invited me to conduct a weekend lecture course and creative workshop on the theme 'The Novel and Our Times'. I was very happy to take advantage of the situation to pay homage to Edgar Mittelholzer in his own home town during his lifetime – I'm not sure that this has been done to any other Commonwealth Caribbean novelist – and during the weekend we discussed the four novels which had been published at that time from his pen.

With the agreement of my enthusiastic group, we decided as the theme of the creative workshop to plot the final section of a novel centering around Sandvoort, the village on the border of New Amsterdam, and conceived under the inspiration of Edgar's work.

We had a great deal of fun and spent a great deal of time working out the plot.

The plot is set around a family of three generations at Sandvoort Village. It begins with grandparents, Margaret – silent and ambitious; and Leonard – easy going and generous. Peasant farmers, between the ages of 65 to 70, they enjoyed the prosperity of the good old days and experienced depression with the years as the sugar factories stopped grinding in the district; and as a result most of the people removed from the area. Margaret, full of enterprise and ambition, was still able in her declining years to use the advantages of the cooperative movement both for farming and marketing. Leonard was not above being mixed in the illegal bush rum business.

Their only son, James, who inherited the easy-going manner of his father did not turn out to be exactly what his ambitious mother would have liked him to be. James became a carpenter after being apprenticed in New Amsterdam and soon married Susan the daughter of his boss. They lived at Sandvoort and Roy and Emily were issues of the marriage. James however, had a natural son Harold who was born to a woman at Rose Hall, Canje. James is about 45 years old and the new generation is between 18 and 23.

The agreement was that the group should complete in committee a draft of a story, setting the scene in Sandvoort in October 1955 three years on at spring time when an atomic explosion in Venezuela causes a great flooding of the Canje River with disastrous effects at Sandvoort. We agreed that we would include graphic accounts of daredevil rescue work, and vivid descriptions of the test. A love affair between Emily and a Chinese lad named Chan was sketched out. All the main characters were to have been involved together with hundreds of visitors gathered to celebrate a conference of the Congregational Church.

Sad to say, the chapter which we had hoped to publish in an issue of *Kykoveral* was never written.

In *Life and Death of Sylvia*, there is a great contrast between the poetical descriptions of the city of Georgetown and the deepening gloom of the story of Sylvia, as she sinks further and further into the web of frustrating circumstances until she dies. As we look up from the life around us, we are conscious of the looming dignity of the cabbage palms, the coconut trees with their languid fragility, we see the breadfruit trees stamping the silhouette of their grotesque leaves like devil hands against a patch of mauve sky. The saman trees in Main Street are patterned in spidery sepia against the skyline of the house tops.

Somehow the predominant time of day of the novel is evening when the light settles in violet around you and turns the air soft and leafy-smelling you are conscious of the invisible fragrance of flowers. As the text reads, "*evening, like death, always came true.*" The night dew begins to fill the air, leafy and full of earth and flower and flower scents. The insects cheep in the grass, and the pinks and the yellows blend over the river and there is the mysterious foliage of mango trees. "*How could anything be sordid?*" one character exclaims. And yet at the lower middle-class level of this story, the law of the jungle operates and the weak, struggling soul is finally overwhelmed. Sylvia is the negative embodiment of the usual Mittelholzer theme that success and victory are for the strong. It is death for those who can't fight.

There was a noticeable protest in Georgetown among middle class readers when this novel reached the country. The protest was partially discomfort, the beginning of the rage of people who see their image like Caliban's, in a mirror and don't like what they see. It was true that shade of complexion and quality of hair were decisive status elements in their world. It was partially disbelief, since the life that the majority of these readers lived skirted this sordid world detailed in the novel. They had heard that this other kind of life existed but avoided it like the plague. They had heard stories that prominent members of the community would chew promissory notes before the amazed eyes of beneficiaries like Mr Knight in the story, in order to dispose of them and be free of the financial

obligation they involved, but it hadn't happened to them. So in a sense of pride of city, they didn't like the image of Georgetown which was being projected to the world. Some of them said they suspected that the author had taken an unsavoury story from life of a weak, uneducated, unfortunate girl who had caught his attention and interest, on some of his visits to the capital city, and he had written up her story. There are many revenges which readers, made uncomfortable, will take upon an author, and Georgetown was full of them when the novel was published.

But the sketching in of Sylvia is authentic. Everyone knows the problems, insults, indignities and sexual assaults upon the virtue of young, poor girls, seeking jobs in certain areas of the city. The tangled cliques and clans and sub-cliques and sub-clans that the author refers to constitute a bitter truth in the Georgetown world.

The *Kaywana* series, as a group of three novels, is perhaps Edgar's most considerable achievement, and places him in the forefront of the entire range of Commonwealth Caribbean novelists. I was very happy to be privileged to be with him when he wrote the last four pages of *Kaywana Blood* and he records this fact in the inscription to me when he sent the autographed copy. He wrote, "*the true title, of course, is* ***The Old Blood*** *and you were there at Mill Hill the day I wrote the final 4 pages – l2/8/56.*"

The *Kaywana* series immediately challenges comparison with other series of historical novels written in English in the past fifty years, with the *Herries Chronicle* by Hugh Walpole and with the *Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy. Whereas the *Forsyte Saga* is a study of the possessive instinct running through sixty years of the story of an upper class English family, the *Kaywana* series is a chronicle of the tradition of strength running through three-and-a-half centuries of Guyanese history, showing the truth of the motto "*The van Groenwegels never run*". I take the view that in a very special sense, the preparation and composition of these three novels completed Edgar. He was able to allow his own love of the Mittelholzer ancestry to run coincidental with the history of Guyana, and in this manner, he was able successfully to project the image of his nation. In the series, Edgar and Guyana are more

nearly identified here than anywhere else and so this series puts him fully in the national tradition.

1 understand that new personnel of the United Nations Agencies bound for Guyana are requested to read the *Kaywana* series before they come, in order that they may understand and appreciate the variegated background of our history in a palatable manner and gain an idea of the psychology of the people. In the same way the novel *Passage to India* by E. M. Forster was required reading during the late 1920s and through the 1930s for every senior British Official going to work in the subcontinent of India.

In the *Kaywana* series Edgar created a cosmos of the imagination. He took the framework of our country's history, getting the details right, both at the British Museum and at the New York Public Library, in order that he could set a story of the long, fierce dialogue between heredity and environment in this saga of the Old Blood. He was able to introduce the Nietzschean philosophy that strength is important, that the individual personality and the family to which it belongs must meet all the challenges from the environment with courage even though it means ultimate disaster. The message that Edgar preaches in the Saga is the same that he will later amplify in the England novels, but here it is secure in our national framework. Before the completion of the series Edgar's role had been that of an individualist reacting against the hypocrisy and the mores of his home and town and community, he was telling personal stories using the techniques of suspense to look at varieties of human personalities in curious situations, like Gregory Hawke in *Shadows Move Among Them*, like the narrator in *My Bones and My Flute* or the simple personality of Kattree in *Corentyne Thunder*, faced with a choice between saving someone she loves and possibly killing her father. But the *Kaywana* series enable him to gather his forces and by dint of his energy and persistence to marry his own personal experience with a national story. All writing is personal as we have to accept experience into the crucible of our creative imagination, but here he was able to gear himself to the arduous task of completing the series of historical novels.

I propose that he was aided in this task, by the fact that one of the main episodes took place in the Berbice River and centred around the 1763 Slave Rebellion, and maybe we can look upon his treatment elsewhere of the Berbice Rebellion joint-themes as so many drafts for the final picture that we find in the *Kaywana* books.

Because he was engaged in depicting this unceasing struggle between heredity and environment, he created a complete gallery of portraits, in which he tested like an artist and a philosopher the way in which strength and discipline will be undermined by various factors – notably the institution of slavery, the fact that the slave owner could indulge himself in sexual excesses because of this sullen but unresisting reservoir of human material, the slaves, with whom he could experiment. In other instances, he shows how artistic tendencies make persons soft and weak and liable to be overwhelmed by circumstances.

Notice how cunningly he uses the canister of old letters preserved in the van Groenwegel family as the heart of their tradition of strength. A canister had appeared in My *Bones and My Flute* as a receptacle of despair and dread, but the canister with the van Groenwegel family letters radiates strength for all who want to read them. What is the message? I quote a passage from Hendrikje: "*The family is what matters. The family must come before all other considerations. You must keep repeating to yourselves: I come from a great family. I must never let down the family name. I am proud that I am a van Groenwegel. The van Groenwegels never run.*"

Or this statement from Jacques to Amelia George: "*Under their layer of culture and refinement, civilised men are animals and it doesn't need much urging to have them flying at one another's throats. We must always remember the animal and we must always be prepared for outbreaks of savagery. And in order that savagery might he kept in check, we must be strong, physically strong. Physical strength results in moral strength. Strength respects strength and peace follows […] In the easy way lies complacency – and weakness. And weakness is always bad. Strength is always good.*"

As a by-product of his achievement, I look upon Huis Kaywana as an important imaginative creation. A. L. Rowse tells us that one of the strong points of a nation, one of the

rallying centres from which strength will come, is very often a true tradition of its history – one that makes sense of the past and makes events and their upshot intelligible. Rowse may have had in mind the Spencer Churchill tradition, and the way in which it flamed into power during the last World War in the person of Winston Churchill.

I have been privileged to see a draft that Edgar made of the history of Guyana at the request of a publishing house. It was not a good draft, since Edgar is not a historian. He is a novelist, and he was able to forge the elements of his own creation according to the gifts of his nature. The historical student, searching through the pages of the *Kaywana* series, will find all the proper landmarks of history, but Edgar's main purpose as a writer was to delight and entertain, and to work out the whims and vagaries of his personal creative imagination. He is a fine story-teller and it is no accident that the *Kaywana* books, particularly *Children of Kaywana* have been translated into many different languages and brought delight and entertainment to thousands of readers in many parts of the world.

I remember the incident on my visit to Minneapolis to give a lecture for the National Education Association of America, Elementary School Principals. I was being interviewed on the local radio station and as I discussed Guyana and its background with my interviewer, I was told that the only information currently and popularly available in the bookshops in Minneapolis about Guyana was a paperback telling the story of the *Children of Kaywana* by Edgar Mittelholzer.

And so in a very special sense, the preparation and writing of the *Kaywana* series helped to save Edgar from becoming a precious author, one dedicated only to quirks of the mind and the creative imagination, and led him into the main stream of the national tradition.

Like C. L. R. James, he was a pioneer. He had no roots to guide him and he had to forge his own trail. His was the honour not to come late in a nation's history, but to come early, blaze a trail, build glory, and pile magnificence within a name.

Some years ago, I was giving a public lecture on Edgar Mittelholzer, and I mentioned a book which he didn't write, but which he should have written. I said:

> Suppose Edgar had come to live in the Greater Mackenzie area he would have been attracted by the essential dramatic quality of the community and the air of clash and conflict about it. He would have been pleased with the natural antagonisms he would find, the sense of rivalry of the two populations on either side of the river, the opposition of values and divergent drives between workers and management, the rapid historical growth, the way civilisation had been carved out of a jungle by strong men and powerful machines. He would have set two or three love stories going at different social strata between expatriates and descendents of the original *Three Friends*, Spencer, Patterson and Blount, using the rumbling trains and the placid river as foils for these human contrasts and clashes of goals. He would have taken his characters out on a scene of hysteria and desire into the mines in a deep moonlight night and set them scrambling over the man-made hills of sand and clays, in the landscape of the mines which more suits the desert of Gobi than Guyana. Strike and negotiations would be woven through the texture of his plot and men and women would venture out upon the tailing pond or run through a town plunged into sudden darkness or in a trapped building on Wismar Hill in a holocaust.

Had we thought of it we might have invited him to come and live here for a bit and put flesh and blood upon this skeleton of a typical Edgar Mittelholzer story. But it is too late now.

III

Wherever he went, the spirit of the professional writer in Edgar compelled him to weave the local scene and characters into a story. From his letters, we know that the Trinidadian scene interested him, especially the French Creole types with their air of natural aristocracy and that he had drafted at least one novel on that section of society. And then, he had married a Trinidadian girl, and must have absorbed a great deal of understanding of the way the Trinidadian mind worked, in contrast with the Guyanese.

A Morning at the Office is a real success and conveys a quality of buoyancy and realised fun that makes it most attractive. We know that the author intended it as a tract for the times, for readers in northern countries to dispel their false impressions of Caribbean natives, but the creative imagination seems to have run away with the story, and it ended by being a long extended short story beautifully held together with flashes back, which educate and entertain at the same time, and convey the social history of the multi-racial multi-cultural community of Trinidad. Indeed in certain passages the book includes a comparison of the racial ethics of Grenada as well. Some one tells me that Edgar was surprised when Penguins approached him and said they would like to put *A Morning at the Office* in paperback edition. He wasn't sure that it deserved that honour. And yet the novelette possesses a sure development of pace and emotion that keeps the reader's interest alive.

Many of the comments concerning the cast-iron nature of the social scale in Trinidad, and the heights beyond which the aspirants could not rise, if they had coloured blood, which seemed so correct in 1950 have been proved wrong in this year of grace in an independent Trinidad. This is an indication of how rapidly certain changes in Caribbean society have taken place.

I find myself wondering whether some of the vividness of characterisation isn't due to the fact that Edgar moved almost

directly from the society background of New Amsterdam into the fascinating and colourful life of cosmopolitan Port of Spain, without a pause of life in the intermediate stratum of Georgetown. Again, I don't believe he had worked really in an office until he had obtained an office job in one or other of the Government offices in Trinidad. So his reactions were sharp and stimulating to the special tang of Trinidad life.

A Morning at the Office is remarkable also for a very sympathetic study of the character of Jagabir, the Indian assistant accountant. There are so many things we would dislike about him – the overbearing attitude to his subordinates, and the sycophancy towards his superiors, but his hard work, his ambition and above all, his economic insecurity are real and important, particularly the last. His sickening fear of losing his job is the basic insecurity of the wage earner in a poor community. We realise in Jagabir how much the poverty of the region is responsible for the low standards of all types, including the physical, the intellectual and the moral.

There is a long and fully detailed section in *With a Carib Eye* in which Edgar describes his first impressions of Trinidad when he arrived there in 1941. It probably all comes from his diary, because the impressions are fresh and despite one or two near-accidents with the Marines, the impact was stimulating and even pleasurable.

The section contains a fairly full description of the segments of Trinidad society, with special attention being paid to the French and Spanish Creoles. He claims that "*the coloured middle class is so complex in structure that a whole chapter can be used to describe the various layers and sublayer pockets, cliques and sub-cliques and the delicate links that join them together. Complexion and quality of hair are the governing influences, though the tinkle of money can set up vibrations disruptive and unpredictable in the great churning kaleidoscope of tints and tangled strands.*"

A *Tale of Three Places* explores this 'churning kaleidoscope' which is the social scene in Trinidad in some detail. The story which will take the reader from Trinidad to England and to St Lucia before it ends, has as its central character a young and unsympathetically drawn Trinidadian, Alfred Desseau, who is a member of a wealthy French Creole family, undecided about himself, not sure whether he can bring himself to fall in

love with anyone, preferring the thought of life in England to the harsh and repelling reality of life in Trinidad.

The world of bewildering social variety that had been tantalisingly glimpsed in *A Morning at the Office* is fully set out before us. At the end of that book, one had wondered what happened after Mr Lorry had had dinner with Mrs Hinckson that evening following the morning's work in the office. Well, after reading *A Tale of Three Places*, one would be pretty sure what had taken place, since we learn more concerning the pattern and tempo of Port of Spain evening activities.

At the time that Edgar wrote these stories of Trinidad, his predecessors who had treated Trinidadian society in one or other forms, had been many. C. L. R. James had published *Minty Alley*. There was Alfred Mendes, creator of the world of *Pitch Lake* with its emotional conflicts of the Portuguese lower-middle class, and of the world of *Black Fauns* full of the gossiping philosophy of people of African descent living in a Trinidad barrack yard. Ralph de Boissière had written *Crown Jewel* and recorded the birth of the trade union movement among the serious minded working class, Selvon had begun to chronicle the impact of the American 'invasion' upon village life, and had brought to life Tiger in Barataria. We had read *Mystic Masseur* by Naipaul, with its solemn poking of fun at the Trinidad politician, but not yet *A House for Mr Biswas*.

Edgar sketched out and made a special corner for himself on the Trinidad scene, in the world of the civil servants, politicians and cocktail parties where deals are made. He shows us Trinidad as a melting-pot of political and social exuberance, with the stains of corruption permeating the body politic.

Alfy is a frustrated civil servant searching for love and meaning in the family environment, by which he and his friends are shaped. Alfy remains immature throughout the book to the end, taking without really giving in return, bewildered in the kaleidoscope of characters swirling around him in Trinidad and in London, capable of many selfishnesses and betrayals of those who love him. His friend, Errol, with whom he had been at school and whose unloved and divorced wife he will marry, emerges as the epitome of cynicism and strength in the political corruption. But Errol explains that

the world is not a civilised place and that he has no respect for the crass superstitions, the doltish taboos, the low-standard mentalities with which he is surrounded, even though he retains a curious untypical loyalty for those who are his friends, like Alfy: "*Chin-Chin*," he says, raising his glass. "*Damned mixed-up world, oui.*"

To my mind, there is a shapelessness about the book even though it bulks a certain size. The opening section portraying the cocktail lives of the Creole families is too wordy, the encounters of Trinidadians in London with our hero are too casual and episodic without helping on the action. One would suspect that the diary had been very much in use in bodying out the novel, and the detailed cinematic sequences often without real point, recorded originally the author's early life in England. The same is true of sections of the third 'place', St Lucia, which abound in descriptions of the island's tourist attractions, and the proportion of time spent on the reactions of characters as against time spent on physical descriptions is comparatively low. One looks for the story to lift as it can in the Mittelholzer tradition, but no, they talk again and we proceed on the hovercraft instead of mounting in an aeroplane.

Martina and Lavinia and Elsa and Constance – the women in Alfy's life – all love him or suffer him more than they should, and we look in vain for the fellow to mature and grow up. Harold Simmons told me in Castries once, much to my interest, that some of the characters were drawn from the life, and if this is true, I come to the belief that maybe here, as in *Sylvia* the digestive powers of the author did not work successfully and that his creative imagination was inhibited by the models he had taken. But this is speculation at the worst and conjecture at the best.

Edgar described his first impression of Barbados seen from the air as having a colouring with the soft middle tints of Degas, pastel-like yet intense with a hidden interior intensity, dullish greens, dullish yellows, and dullish browns. He was struck after a few weeks with the uniform accent all Barbadians employed in their speech, and obviously was intrigued by the rigid lines of colour and class which divide the society into the Medes and Persians. The trees were noted specially

by him – the casuarinas, the mahogany trees, the cordia and the sinister manchineel which he confessed to be his favourite tree – a Wagner among trees, massive, spreading, heroic, with romantic foliage and of course, its powerful corrosive sap.

He evidently enjoyed his years in Barbados, and enjoyed also observing the society and reacting against it. Barbados in the Mittelholzer bookshelf is celebrated by four novels. At the end of one of them, *Of Trees and the Sea*, one of the characters makes the explanation. "*What other form could a book on Barbados take, but poetical comedy-fantasy, with marine, botanical and religious overtones as a matter of course?*"

Slight and impish, *Of Trees and The Sea* is a comedy bordering on farce. The manchineel trees are dark green poisonous objects which menace a young married couple and threaten their happiness, even to the extent of almost blinding the husband, but an elderly Barbadian neighbour down the road acts as adviser and comforter, and brings about a happy ending. The author exhibits considerable skill in putting together this tale of Barbadian formality, counterpointed with gossip under the strange influence of the manchineel trees and the strong spirit of earthy love that pervades the beach on the edge of the Custard's Plantation woods, and he weaves in sex and religion with an even hand.

It is the author's skill in construction which makes the story credible at all, abounding as it does with such bizarre characters – old Broome the shoemaker who would groan, stare at a woman against the light, and foretell the sex of any child in her womb; the virile 81-year-old island historian who radiates gossip and organises many lives; the weather-crazy colonel; Bellows, the shopkeeper who spouts an eighteenth-century oratory typical of small island schoolmasters; the patchwork quilt of gradations and social customs in an intricate, colour-obsessed Barbados society, at which the author pokes gentle fun.

And yet the book comes off in a sort of bewitched way, because of the close web of suspenseful episodes. It must have been disappointing to many Barbadians to read this puckish satiric tilt at their serious-minded community.

Eltonsbrody is a not very successful novel in the horror tradition. There are the puzzling behaviour of an elderly

widow, who likes to be mystifying and who looks upon death as the one exciting event we can look forward to experiencing and who finds joy in horror, and the normal paraphernalia of an old house with locked rooms in it, the sense of being watched etc.

On the windswept high ridge overlooking Bathsheba, there is an eerie old house by the name of Eltonsbrody seen through the eyes of a young English painter. It is composed in the Barbadian mode, but this book seems to be a stubborn and intractable variation of the more successful macabre novel which we have already met in *My Bones and My Flute.* No sex is here but sex exhibitionism. On the whole, we should say "*Horseman, pass by*."

The Weather Family is one of the liveliest of the novels he has written. Always composing, as we have discovered, with a special correspondence between the processes of the character and the environment, this book gives him a chance to have a real hurricane of 1955 Janet as his main character dwarfing all others in the story, prowling like a panther in the ocean off Barbados, sending in a series of easterly waves to cause apprehension in the island, and then suddenly appearing, like the panther in action, to toss housetops curlicue against the trees, to pour the rain down in a liquid eiderdown upon the canefields, to unearth a fan mill as if it is a toy machine, to smash the Gospel Hall if it were indeed 'God's match box' in splinters.

I detect a gaiety, a freshness, as if there were a suppressed excitement in the author taking over – maybe Olivia going to her first grown up ball would have the same gamin quality. The link between the hurricane, and the rest of the story before Janet announces her arrival in person, is the middle-class family, the Larches, who are simply obsessed with recording weather changes and have perfected a technique to follow all these changes.

There's a precise description of the Larches in Caroline's diary. She writes:

> Sometimes I can see us all, the whole family, as if we were shapeless masses (cloud masses). I see us without faces, only with moods. We drift about in the sky and sometimes we look

> shiny white with sunlight and sometimes we look grey and slow moving (that's when Aunt Clarice has caused gossip of some sort and we're feeling embarrassed). Then sometimes we scud about in tiny flecks (that's when Daddy is in a jovial mood and Aubrey is telling bawdy stories and even Mother doesn't behave as if she's shocked. Everyone laughs, even Miss Prude Me, and we don't give a damn). Then we can get thundery and a quarrel breaks out, me generally on Daddy's side and Aubrey too, Peter and Leila on Mother's and Aunt C's side (cold and warm air-currents).

The Larches look upon the hurricane as an experience of exhilaration rather than one of fear – the last one was in 1898 – and to my mind, there is a vast Rabelaisian play of sea and sky, and the antic pranks of the hurricane with houses and trees seem like those of a playful and now pensive kitten in operation.

Here is no social realism, no problem of the emergent society and no suggested solution, but we have fine purposeful writing that catches Janet as a destructive agent full of beauty, and the emotional crises mingle with hurricane disturbance. All through the story the conflicts and tensions building up in the minds of the main and lesser characters are in tune with the growing intensity of the forces of nature.

In *Of Trees and The Sea*, the author had sketched in this special interest in the rain-gauge and the barometer and their interpretation. This is brought to full flower in *The Weather Family*. In a special author's note, Edgar explains that the rainfall and wind-directions comments were from his own records on the Maxwell Coast, Barbados.

There are other links with *Of Trees and The Sea*. We come again casually upon Broome the shoemaker with his second sight in respect to pregnant women, and Bellows our oratorical friend and old Mr Drencher and his 19-year-old wife. And the newly married English couple have their libido silenced by the hurricane.

Reducing all else of love stories to sighs in a minor key or bearing them along on a huge wing of passion, the last few pages of the novel are the tremendous fierce ending of a passage of music in which neither conductor, nor woodwinds pause to draw breath but plunge rushing to the ordered chaos of the end.

The other Barbadian novel by Edgar was originally published under the pen-name of H. Austin Woodsley. The name of the novel is *The Mad MacMullochs*. Milton Woodsley as you may remember was the name of the young New Amsterdam painter known as the eccentric crank who would never get anywhere by the respectable people of the town and who records the events of *My Bones and My Flute*. Woodsley is also the name of the English painter in *Eltonsbrody* who comes to the old haunted house while on a holiday in Barbados and who becomes the angle character witnessing the drama and mystery of that sequence of events. So the name is a fairly transparent disguise.[5]

The publishers introduce what they call "*a young West Indian writer with an undoubted flair for the unusual*," and prophesy for him an interesting literary career. I'm not sure how many people guessed Edgar's secret, but it was some years before Edgar acknowledged that he was the author and the title of the novel took its proper place in the growing list of his published books.

The main point of this anonymous novel is a second version of the Mittelholzer Utopia, created within a heavily barricaded plantation near Horse Hill in Barbados and known as the property of the mad MacMullochs. The author introduced us to the nudist camp with its advanced idea of leading a civilised and natural life, through two unusual and uninhibited girls who spend time on the beach outside Powell Spring Hotel looking for husbands.

From their conversation we learn that they believe in courtesy and casuarinas, courtesy and sugar canes, and cassavas and corn and more courtesy, and like the two wealthy and dissatisfied young men whose attention they managed to attract, we are drawn more and more by curiosity until we enter the plantation with the special password and find ourselves in Edgar's second Utopia, and this abounds in new, seemingly logical and uninhibited responses to sexual relations and to religion, race, class and creed which are bound to shock the puritanical in Barbados and elsewhere.

Maybe the philosophy of this settlement is summed up by the school teacher talking to the children aged six to eight in the school in the plantation; she says, "*the dream of a perfect*

world is the dream of idiots. But with strength, discipline, alertness and courtesy, we humans can make our world a more than tolerably pleasant place." And Edgar's Utopia is a dramatisation of this philosophy.

In this Utopia, married couples consummate their marriages in a tomb in the churchyard, having signed a card which reads, "*Together in courtesy we enter, our love so binding, and in courtesy to part and depart if we care*." So divorce is easy. Couples have to make record of their lovemaking and have it on a chart over their beds, and to seek permission to have children. Shrines along the roadway turn out to be a revolving show of reproductions of art work by the Old Masters.

To keep the community up to mark there are War Games every three months, with various departments undergoing vigorous training. *Life* and *Time* magazines are in every cottage and inspectors check on the records and appearances of the cottage to award points. Unless a certain number of points show that couples are disciplined in their homes, then they are demoted to Section UND where undisciplined persons are segregated. Alcohol is out. There is a department named the Income Tax Evasion Department. Cremation is the order of the settlement, since land is too precious to be wasted on corpses.

Although she had to get special permission to marry from the Errors, Exceptions and Elasticity Department, since she was under age – or maybe because of this – Roxanne is perhaps an image of a developing Olivia, the puckishness becoming passionate, the pleasant whimsy breaking out into a self-willed, adolescent refusal to follow adult rules, and yet an engaging directness about her that will win the reader's heart as it did Ronald's.

I think that Edgar was trying to disguise his style in this book and to write, if it were at all possible for him, in an un-Mittelholzer fashion. Maybe he felt that this was the best way, anonymously, to get his message across to his readers, that if the Barbadians, for one, knew who had written it, they would have said, "*Ah, another of that strange chap Edgar's books,*" and so the impact of the story would have been less. Maybe he had fun in trying to hoodwink the public and wanted to see if the critics would make some comparison between Woodsley

and Mittelholzer. Of course, the title helped to beg the question. The MacMullochs were mad, even though the peasants were friendly disposed towards them, and the social classes were furious and indignant. But the novel did not make much of a stir.

So these novels add up, in a way, to an anatomy of Barbados, as he saw it. One of my friends once described Barbados to me as having the atmosphere of an English cathedral town. Maybe this provoked the imp in Edgar and set him out to scandalise and shock the staid Barbadian types he knew.

From Little England we go to Great Britain itself for the last group of Edgar's novels, which I am tempted to term a group of morality sermons and experiments in the novel of ideas. It is surprising how much he related to English social conditions, and how much he was disturbed by them especially thuggery and hooliganism. Perhaps he should have faced them frontally and examined them under his microscope from the inside. And at the same time, he began to take more and more interest in disturbed persons and in the distressed, and the psychopaths. He began to indulge his desire to preach sermons on his Nietzschean theme, as if the old time morality from which he had sought to escape as a boy was completing itself to come full circle, and bringing in its revenges. This furious preaching at the conditions existing in England seems to have led him into conflict with the publishers so that they were less willing to take his books as they were, and he seems to have waged war against them relentlessly.

When *The Weather in Middenshot* came out in 1952, it was clear that his descriptive powers had been tested at full stretch, by the wind and the fog and the snow of the village of Middenshot, and had proved triumphant. Because these elements of nature were characters in the story, affecting moods. The wind is a lewd demon whining and whooping down the chimney and determined to hurl a hoarse, coughing horror through the cottage where delicate romantic Grace was shivering. The fog, the fog is a white murrain upon Middenshot, spreading slowly through the trees and over the ground, thick and furry. And the fog is in the mind of Mr Jarrow also as he looks upon the weather. And the snow is a

quilt from above, shedding its insides with soothing insistence, like the moralising of the detective Southerby.

Of course we know by now that Edgar delights in contrasts, and *Weather in Middenshot* is no exception.

One contrast in the book is the weather against man. "*Wind, fog and snow, we can do nothing. We can only wait and take what comes.*" This is what gentle Grace the elderly daughter thinks as she remembers with fear and with delight her walk with the widower, Mr Holme, going down the village High Street.

There is another contrast between Grace with her thoughts and fine feelings, and Hyacinth the young 22-year-old girl, who cleans up for Mr Holme and she has the shapeliest rump in the village, which she knows will make her fortune one of these days. And it does. Another is the double of Mr Jarrow the pretended mad man and Mr Jarrow sane again.

Even the two detectives, called in to find the criminal when five innocent people have been murdered – they are in contrast one with the other. The boisterous North and the moralising Southerby. And Broadmoor lunatic asylum from which a homicidal maniac has escaped is very near to the village.

Above all else, the novel is a sermon. We have heard the text before. It is the detective preaching:

> Men are only self-tamed beasts, but beasts remain beasts whatever coating of civility and culture is laid upon them. A small percentage of us continually menace the safety of those with the better developed brains. Our business then is to eliminate these inferior brains wherever they occur. Most people avoid the dreadful – think of what is pleasant. But the dreadful is always there, always simmering behind our backs, or beyond our blinkers, always waiting to surge into view. It is strength or weakness that counts in this life of ours. If you act with strength, you win out and achieve worthwhile states of mind. If you act with weakness, you lose out and you suffer chaos and defeat. The requisites of a successful human civilisation are four – strength, discipline, alertness and elasticity […] what we need is an education free of religious bias and based upon the elements of courtesy.

The Piling of Clouds is another sermon – didn't the author describe it in the inscription in my copy as "*expressing his disgust of contemporary society*"? In the spirit of the staid and desperately lonely income tax inspector, who lived at Mill Hill, there was a little cloud from the time he was born. And other clouds took shape and there was a piling of clouds. But clouds can't pile indefinitely. And the lightning flashed in the weather of his temperament, and disaster is the result.

I remember many years ago reading a short story Edgar had written in which he told the story of a man going mad in his last 36 hours, with lightning seeming to flicker about his limbs. This novel has some of the same sadistic pleasure. The story is full of sermons against the odd types, particularly by Peter who kept clippings of murders and violence. Indeed as one character says, "*we every one of us have kinks of one kind or other.*" In the tax inspector something ticked over and the lightning flashed.

The reader might say that the child murder to which the whole action of the book leads, is senseless, unless he reflects that the author sometimes likes to dramatise a story in reverse. The father in this story is so concerned with the rot in the world that he trusted his friend too much and didn't know that his own wife was battering down defences in their trusted neighbour and friend that would lead him to display his own kink to strangle their growing daughter. At the end we begin to perceive that in many matters, there is a general community guilt and that we are all contributing by not being alert enough, and by being intent on our own selfish ends.

Continuing to explore the psychopaths, Edgar contrives a story in which four persons who have all attempted to commit suicide and are trying to pick up the pieces of their lives, are invited to come together under one roof, to see if they can help one another in the future. This is the synopsis of *The Wounded and the Worried.* The central figure is the unfrocked priest with a magnetic personality and with a great belief in the power which the Intellectual Mind has over the Instinctive Mind but who hates being ridiculed and laughed at, and the others are a hard-boiled American girl who yearns for clean sex, an ex-school mistress who is lonely, frustrated and uncompromising, and the hostess is a retired hospital

administrator, who asks that her guests should write something in their diaries every day at three o'clock.

The young ex-priest is a persistent Samaritan, and wants his companions to believe in the things he believes in but even more important, he finds that he genuinely desires to make them feel happy.

As the book progresses, Tom uses his magnetic healing ability to relieve headaches, and wards off a suicide attempt with the aid of the projection of his astral self. He introduces the Gita with the theme of the three Gunas (incidentally, also used in *The Weather Family*) to dramatise his own partial independence of the urges of the flesh, while neatly suggesting how his three companions were influenced.

Sex and religion emerge again as main themes in a direct encounter between the ex-priest who has mystic leanings with strong doses of Nietzsche, and the American girl who likes her sex clean. The book is really about loneliness. (One character says, "*I've had a life during which not many comforting things were spoken to me by anyone,*") and the message is that loneliness and its consequent suicidal depression can be defeated by a strong, positive attitude exemplified by Tom Dellow.

The overall effect of the book is optimistic and good, and Tom Dellow, to my mind, emerges as the most realised male Mittelholzer character. He has in him bits of Harmston and Gregory Hawke of *Shadows*, some of the impatience of Wort in *Of Trees and the Sea*, the loneliness of the tax inspector in *The Piling of Clouds*, something of undecided Mr Holme in *Weather in Middenshot*, and of the young men of *The Mad MacMullochs*, but he seems to be becoming integrated and is an active agent who, as one person tells him, tries to 'play God', because he cares for other people.

This is not the time and place for a full analysis and interpretation of Tom Dellow, but he drew on the best elements in the author's creative imagination.

Aloneness, strong criticism of hooliganism in England and the Yogi motif come in the novel *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham*. A widow anxious to be her real self and to achieve a completeness and inner harmony which she has yearned for, keeps to herself as much as she can in her country cottage, but is

besieged by new neighbours from New Zealand. One member of the family is a Yogi, interested in the occult, and his brother is disgusted with civilisation and feels the civilised world is doomed.

Mrs Chatham expresses satisfaction that she is materially secure and that her spirit can therefore go where it will without fear of ridicule or contempt. But she is assailed by the concern of her homosexual friends, by the homicidal tendencies of a friend's psychotic wife, by the teachings of the Yoga books she borrows. Because she is weak and lenient in her attitudes, she is attacked by the psychotic wife, stabbed with a knife, almost killed but recovers.

I think I detect Sheila Chatham as a type of Sylvia, but with more material resources, more informed friends, and more education, so in the end she survives her weakness. Harpo, the friend who hates the world and would blot out thugs and hooligans like lice, is a developed pattern of Milton Copps who advised Sylvia how to meet savages like a savage.

And the sermonising. We see what Edgar meant when he said he had got preachy. The extracts are in many instances too long and affect the action of the story – a massive indictment of the lack of discipline and over-ripeness of the society.

The Jilkington Drama is the study of a quartet – a father, and a son who is a disturbed personality, the father's mistress and her religiously-inclined daughter, increasingly burdened with the weight of her mother's sin, to whom the son is attracted. The scene is laid in a farm house, in an English countryside, and with this tight group, the author intertwines a web of relationships leading to a situation in which the tides of love run counter-wise and cross, much to the anguish of all. The son is a sick unstable soul, brooding over the death of his much-loved wife, and eventually he destroys himself with the fireworks he had been collecting, but the stream of the story concerns his relationships with other people and the confused feelings and loyalties that he expresses. And yet the action is so plausible – it could happen like this in reality.

Garvin the son, is obviously a prototype of the author, with deep depression weighing upon him at this stage.

What is unusual about this book published posthumously is the sure structure of the plotting that leads the reader on to the next episode, mingled at the same time with a general aura of unpleasantness emanating from Garvin's psychotic personality. This attraction and repulsion is like the fascination of the snake about to strike.

Paul Mankay, the main character in *Uncle Paul*, has conflicting feelings about his racial origins and a continual war in his blood – the despicable Jewish and the laudable Nordic Germanic strains in his heredity. He joins a Fascist group and because he wants to know what it is to hate, he helps them to preach their anti-Semitic doctrines. It is the hatred of what he perceives in himself. But he eventually wrecks the office in which he had worked for the group and he hides in the country with his sister, fearing retaliation.

He had been attached to 'the Moscow lot' as he called them, but he got out of that also. But he expresses concern to find that his nephew is circumcised, because it reminded him of how the boys had jeered at him as a Jew boy at Rugby.

The country retreat also develops in him a fondness for a little adolescent girl from a neighbouring family. Paul is touched by her rosebud love for him quite in contrast to the devotion of his mistress and his sister's casual love for him, and we are liable to believe that he has incestuous feelings towards his married sister. He is furious over the crumbly rottenness of the country – "*the refusal to stand up to evil and make a really effective attempt to wipe it out*." This as we know already is a self-study of the author. For Jewish-Germanic, read Afro-Germanic.

We have to avoid monotony in this survey and analysis and we have been doing a helicopter run across the fairly familiar Mittelholzer novelscape, coding the similarity of wooded terrain and river, and only descending like a god out of the machine to take a closer look at the clearings and the villages and towns and what we feel will repay the interest. We will look later at his satiric comments on art and music in the present and the future, but let us draw this lecture to a close with a look at what we think we have learnt so far.

We know that the basic Mittelholzer male character is insecure and confused, and given to moodiness, selfish, not

wanting to give of himself, immature, accepting love and the tokens of love from all as tribute to himself and his powers. The immaturity lends itself to drama of a sort, since our expectations await a movement towards rest and reconciliation.

We have noticed a change in his attitude to religion. Originally he held the view that after death there were only shadows, and no hereafter, but he begins to experiment with Yoga and forms of reincarnation and at the end he generally plays with the idea of reincarnation and mystic and occult matters as a means of explaining differences in the degrees of maturity of individuals.

He indulges in frank erotic talk, but often is driven to exercise sexual restraint as a means of completion and discipline. He is disgusted sometimes violently and uncourteously so, with the trend to undiscipline among the young and with hooliganism and thuggery, and is given to expressing extreme and violent views of how to deal with these society patterns and sometimes he takes the law into his own hands. Matters of conduct interest him, especially matters of motive and ethics. His is the philosophy of the value of strength in all matters, derived from his passion for Nietzsche and often he dramatises this by showing the disaster that happens to weak people. He loves Germanic music and worships the discipline known to be inherent in the German people.

We have always noticed a tendency in the male character to use sex as a means of release, fulfilment and self-completion, but as the novels continue to flow from the author's pen, the characters explore, psychologically, Lolita-avenues in the relationships between grown men and little girls, and Byronic alleys in the overtones of behaviour between the character and his sister or the character and his father's wife, or his wife's daughter.

This tendency for people to be always jumping into bed has put off a number of readers, but increasingly the urge to explore more and more unorthodox sexual relationships as part of the suspenseful and interest-making structure of the book, has become apparent in the author's work. Maybe he desires to shock middle class susceptibilities, maybe to give his readers a cathartic release from the pity and terror of the

repressed. All has been done under the banner of finding truth and the real self in the individual, breaking through the crust of habit and custom, or environment ties to the essential hereditary endowment of the individual, and giving play to the entire range of genetic characteristics.

We would need almost a separate lecture for Edgar's use of dreams in the novels, how he sprinkled the dreams to forecast or contrast the eventual outcome of a situation.

Not much of this development of the psychological probe by the creative imagination into character motivation and analysis while in action will have come straight from textbooks, to my mind. The author has been quarrying out the matrix of his own psyche, feeding it all the while with reading and reflection and exercise of an occult nature. As Edgar tells us, he was a Yogi from nineteen.

The later novels seem to have been created under a crisis and a withering away of belief in the ability of the group to keep the beasts under control. Personal problems, including financial ones, loomed large in the later years and some of the magic and the bloom went out of the descriptions in the later books as disillusion and frustration set in. The enquiry into the purpose of living and the ceaseless dialogue on the major aims and philosophy of existence become professionally taut and then the world ends with a bang and not a whimper in a wood near Farnham.

IV

In this lecture series on Edgar Mittelholzer, the man and his work, we have gone through some of his letters to see whether we can understand what he hoped to do as he wrote his novels. We have used his autobiography and his travel book as a frame of reference to check his use of material. Without recounting the tale in each, we have looked at the Guyana novels and also at the novels written in Trinidad, Barbados and England. We have observed certain correspondences among his characters and settings and we have come to one or two obvious preliminary comments.

There are at least three attempts Edgar made, half in seriousness, half in fun, to create a Utopia in his books and he was stimulated to do this by his reactions to what he felt was the hypocrisy of society and its constant desire not to live up to the truth and its best self. They are in *Shadows Move Among Them*, *The Mad MacMullochs* and *A Tinkling in the Twilight*, and it is a salutary exercise to read the development of the ideas he would have wished to apply to redeem society if he had found himself in a position of power. Maybe one of these days, there will be a motivation to look at Edgar as a political animal and analyse fully his soapbox oratory and his sermonising.

A further field is the use he made of dreams in his characters as an element in the manipulation of mood, and the dramatic influence on episodes.

In the classical theory of the interpretation of dreams, we are led to understand that the mind in dreams calls upon a wider range of memories than in the waking state, and may summon otherwise inaccessible material. Dreams may include symbols which come from earlier stages in the development of language, they may stir up memories of childhood buried under much later clutter, and even call upon material which belongs to the racial memory. Dreams also let us know how the unconscious mind works and take us into the kingdom of the illogical. Well, this takes us rather farther than a lay critic would wish to go at the moment.

At the end of our last talk we found ourselves in a position to extract the algebra from the arithmetic and to attempt a generalization of the Mittelholzer male character, using one of the most satisfying and successful personifications as the first among equals. We have discovered the head-waters of his philosophy of strength in the philosophy of Nietzsche, and seen him preach this doctrine on three levels – in the individual, in the family and finally in the nation. The family tradition is that of the van Groenwegels in the *Kaywana* series, and at national level we have had two instances, the Germanic tradition of discipline to which he was greatly attracted and which he invariably praised, and the failure, as he felt it, of the British Government to deal with the hooliganism and thuggery in its borders.

His novels abound in examples of the need for strength on the individual level, and he was consistent in the application of this philosophy even as regards himself, because we know that when he could no longer master the forces acting on his own life, he applied the principle so often expressed in his novels of victory or death, and with fortitude, sought a flaming end. This death-wish by fire was foreshadowed in his last novel, published posthumously, and looking back over the last books, we think we can discern the narrowing of horizons, the withering of faith and the crisis in belief in which he passionately identified himself with the deepening gloom on the international scene.

We cannot pretend that we have exhausted either the man or his work in this brief exercise. There will be others to explore, in patient detail, both the life and the books he has written. The Government of Guyana by instituting this Lectureship has done honour to itself as well as to him and I am honoured to have had a chance to pay a tribute to my friend-in-letters, which also allows me to draw attention to some features of his life and work which may not have been fully grasped.

But there are one or two things we may yet do, under the auspices of this Lectureship. I promised we should glance at the comments, largely satirical, which he made on art in the present and as he saw it in the future, and his ideas of how the music of the future would develop. I would like also to help

to bring home to us all the extraordinary achievement of protean characterisation in his novels and finally I want to look at some of the lessons we may draw for Caribbean letters, based primarily upon the Mittelholzer canon.

We know that Edgar was keenly interested in music and we have seen the Wagnerian experiment of mood-music in words in *Latticed Echoes*. He was interested in painting also and a practising painter from his early days, and his water colours particularly had a delicacy of touch and insight which one would not normally have associated with the author of the *Kaywana* series.

In at least two books he gives us satirically of the benefit of his knowledge of painting. Here is the first comment.

In strong and sometimes revolting terms, Susan Scanlan, who is a split personality with sexual and psychic disorders and also an artist, explains that "*the sure way to schizophrenia*" (and she should know) is a too great obsession with artistic ambitions:

> How does one win praise from the critics? How become an artist of the most towering significance? Well. It is simpler than you think. You set up your canvas. You stare at it. You hate it. You hate society. You belch. That's the bile of hatred working in your guts. You fart, that's the stink of your revulsion for the world. Suddenly you squeeze a tube of paint – as if it were a shrivelled breast. The breast of a spat-upon mistress. Or the shrivelled penis of an ex-lover, if you're a woman. You squeeze another and another tube, growling, gnashing your teeth, breathing malevolence upon your palette. Then with a snarl you leap at your canvas and slap the palette on it, smearing the colours at random and in turgid confusion, all over it. You step back. You whack the canvas with clenched hand – furiously, furiously. It's an iron hand – or a diseased penis, stiff and rottingly erect, dying but still virile, and it's creating havoc among the smears already in a havoc of hellishly squirming, spermy squelchiness. Then you sigh, vomit and sink down to the floor in exhaustion. Above you leers your masterpiece. Tomorrow is Bruton or Dover Street. Even South Moulton. On Sunday – the critics.

That passage satirising modern painting comes from *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham*.

The second treatment of artists and critics comes in the humorous and delightful *A Tinkling in the Twilight*. This is a typical centrifugal novel told in the first person and organised around one central character, a retiring bookseller in Paddington, London, who has developed a deep interest in Yoga and has renounced the sensual life of his youth. So Brian Liddard concentrates and meditates, in order to be ready for the more advanced psychic experiences. Somehow he manages to break through the time barrier – the sign is a tinkling in the twilight – and as one would pass through a gate, he passes many times into the London of the twenty-first century, to the years around 2039 and 2040. He sees the art galleries of the future at Bruton Street and he attends a concert at Festival Hall.

> The paintings were Advanced Art, of the conventional Dot Obscuro School of Art. One of the most talked-of pictures at Burlington House was 'Yellow Dot' by Charles Partridge, because it had taken the *Times* critic 2 hours 23 minutes, and 46 seconds to find the dot concealed in the background of emerald green. The critic of the *New Statesman* had taken 2 hours 39 minutes, and a few seconds to locate the dot in the same painting, but then he wasn't as clever as the *Times* critic who was the cleverest of them all. […] The picture that came nearest had taken the *Times* critic 2 hours 19 minutes, and 7 seconds to find the dot in its background.

The music of the future he hears at the Festival Hall. It is Pembroke's Third Symphony performed by the Royal Philharmonic and called 'The Murder Symphony'. On a dark empty stage, a shrill, anguished, blood-curdling scream writhes its way through the gloom, then another more agonising scream is heard, then a long silence, then thunder followed by wailing and sobbing sounds, drifting through the dark. For well over half an hour he heard screams, thunder, wailing and sobbing, once or twice deep, mocking laughter in between lengthy, suspenseful silences, then suddenly the lights went up and the audience broke into enthusiastic applause.

It is time to go back to those questions we asked ourselves in the first lecture, when we registered our interest in the nature of the development of the arts in Caribbean

society. Let's rehearse the questions for the sake of freshness. What makes a man or woman want to write? Does his material come from inside of him or outside of him in equal proportions? Does he invent a world of his imagination or does he annex the world around him and convert it to his purpose? How does the writer view his role? Is it that of a sociological critic, consciously or unconsciously commenting on his society as his writings develop? Does he find any literary or philosophical ancestors with whom he has special affinities? What is the proportion of pleasure and preaching in his work? How far does the body of his work show consistency while exhibiting areas of development? Does the Caribbean context inhibit the free development of a writer's talent? What should we do, as Caribbean readers, to support the growing body of critical and creative writing being evolved, either in our midst, or by writers who have felt the need to escape from our midst?

These are some of the questions the critic must formulate.

Let us be realistic, however. We must expect no definitive answers in this dialogue between the artist and the critic as a special audience, or the artist and his general audience. All answers are equally valid because they are authentic and genuine and come from the specific personality who prepares the answers.

I don't think anyone has captured, satisfactorily for all, the secret of the chemistry of literary creation. We don't know these laws of behaviour of the combinations of impulses involved. For children, I generally say there is a Spirit of the Place, that touches the author on his shoulder to say "*Write me a poem on that bird soaring up into the heavens, or that rose vibrating and caught in the stillness of the net of its own beauty.*" Children understand this summoning to high activity of the creative mind.

On the other hand, there was T. S. Eliot telling me in London in 1946, so simply and humbly, "*We write because we must, and we are grateful that we can write at all.*" It is difficult to phrase an answer more simply than that.

And there is Aimé Césaire insisting in his voluble jets of French to me in Martinique in 1962 that the poet has a role to play. He has to wrestle with the poem, getting it out of

himself and eventually he is confronted by something alien, outside of himself and he would take its measure and the poem has been born.

All writing is autobiography of the highest order, taking the stuff of one's psyche and moulding its plastic power into the shape of beauty that its being demands and our nature provides. This inner urge is a solitary gift, an inner facility by which words flash into or are born in the mind in an immediate response to a situation to describe an external object or an internal state of mind.

Different writers use different phrases to describe this mysterious process of creation. E. M. Forster speaks of letting down a bucket in the unconscious and drawing up something usually beyond one's reach, to mix with normal experiences and make into a work of art. Katherine Mansfield says that sometimes the creative artist is literally possessed and inspired by a spirit or force from outside or within, and this subconscious element is a most important part in the creation of his world.

Others refer to the value of the psychic energy of the artist – that in his searching the artist is drawn and allured by some unknown sense of meaning or force in his materials, and this leads him to a sensitive, discriminating awareness of the issues opening out before him and so to a shaping of his material into a particular form. So we have the notion of a quick expansion of the mind, attended by a passionate play of nameless impulses, until all the resources of the mind use their powers of discrimination and the artist creates his work of art. Professor Ghiselin who lectures on this fascinating subject of creativity reminds us of Virginia Woolf's remark – that looking out of a window at the sea, she saw once a fin passing far out and she felt a curious state of mind, of which she then made a note. Four years later she said she had then completed "*heaven be praised, the end of (the novel)* ***The Waves*** *— I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes – when I was coming to the end of* ***To The Lighthouse.***"

But certainly it is the duty of the artist to develop himself as best he can. In an adaptation from Wordsworth, we can say that writing very often is the recollection of experiences and

emotion in tranquillity and that the writer may do well to go abroad and then listen to the god within him without the distraction of the old stimuli and the danger of long-practised responses to the challenges of the environment getting into the way of the working of the creative imagination.

Where does the writer write best? At home or abroad? Some writers do well abroad, but they need to come home again now and then, if they are the type of writer whose talents demand their regularly drawing inspiration from the springs of their youth and upbringing. Many children do not need to live with their parents after they have grown up and become mature but many need to keep the contact. And it is a dicey point who should come home and how often. Maybe the development of a writer's talent, his genius, demands that he take root in the community of his adoption. Reading carefully the books they have written one may say that maybe there is no need for Ted Braithwaite to come home, or Christopher Nicole. Judging from his early experiments in rooting the legends of Troy in Guyana, one may say that Wilson Harris is maybe already so soaked in his Guyana background that he will develop inevitably into an international writer dealing with the fevered and heightened aspects of the human personality, and that all of his apparatus and resources already have been prepared at this stage. Of course, one may easily be wrong, and no one can say how much, consciously or unconsciously, a writer can adjust or readjust the calibration of the instruments of his creative imagination.

There is always need for the buoyant support of one's peers in the growth period – there should always be other individuals nearby, with whom one can discuss a point of technique as one is growing and even when one is developed, and try out experiments in the knowledge that not every experiment can be successful.

As part of community encouragement and support, the writers must organise among themselves reading sessions of their work in progress. While the anvil is still hot with the metal and the creative mind hasn't fully lost its essential and unique mood of the occasion and moment, it is valuable to read out the passage on which one has been working to others and to sense their reactions. The writer can then see if he will

heed their reactions or disregard them. Maybe his experiment is too strong for them at the moment, but he should persist in reading sessions of work in progress.

I give you one instance: for many years, Thursday evening was an evening where a small group kept meetings either at my house or at my office, to discuss poetry, and general ideas of a creative nature. There were never more than ten people present, but Wilson Harris and Martin Carter, Wordsworth McAndrew, Ivan Van Sertima, Milton Williams, were among those who came regularly, and at the end of our two-hour discussion we would be conscious of a glow in our mental apparatus, because we had discussed things which were satisfying to us and at the very top of our bent.

Sometimes we had visitors – Mrs. Patricia Strauss, Governor of the Old Vic or William Walsh of the Irish Trade Commission, or the Editor of *Evergreen Review* – and we would invite their participation, but if they took part or not, the discussion would proceed on the piece of literary work under discussion at the same intensity.

We must also give opportunity for publication – we do not often give enough thought to the part played by the printed word in the developing and growth of a creative artist. You've got to produce your poem or short story or article, and then you should see it in print, make sure that this is the way you want it, and pass it to certain of your peers so that they can read it and discuss it with you and then you get a feedback of the growth of your own talent.

Of course, this is the essential and valuable function of the little magazine. But even if this doesn't seem possible to a group, then it would be wise to remember the practice among the first Elizabethans of circulating a play or poems in quarto or octavo among friends – in manuscript. The Roneo machine is a ready instrument for the young enthusiast and may prove an indispensable tool in his development.

Maybe in a country like Guyana, it is not possible at the present time to be a full-time creative writer and survive. For example – it is impossible to hold the view that Edgar could have remained living at 5, Coburg Street, New Amsterdam, and written his books and got them published, as they were published. Remember also that the published books are the

apex of a pyramid with a broad supporting base of his short stories, his plays, his reviewing and discussion of books and concerts and plays which went on incessantly in the press, in small literary groups, and on the radio in Guyana, Trinidad, Barbados, and in England and in Canada. Maybe it is a measure of their development and of the undeveloped nature of Guyanese society that writing cannot be a full-time job here at present while it can be in the UK and the USA. Maybe the development of our Universities in Guyana and the Commonwealth Caribbean will help to change this opinion in the next ten to twenty years. But nothing we have said so far takes away the personal obligation of the would-be writer to develop his craftsmanship for its own sake. There are some who will say that it is this inner urge and its persistent motivations which is indeed the measure of the writer, and marks him as a writer, that whether or not, people will read his work, he will produce it, that whether or not he lives in a cultural wilderness, he will read and write and attempt to cultivate his own talent, with company of a like-minded nature if such exist, but without that if it comes to it. This is the working of the god within, that Marcel Proust described for us at the beginning of these talks, that we more and more begin to live for him alone.

I hold the view and it may be challenged of course, that in a very real sense the working of our creative imagination is limited by our memories and that therefore it is difficult to get beyond the range and capacity of the impressions stored, particularly in the early years of our lives, no matter how we travel perceptively and have valuable adult experiences. Often there is a failure in our moral nature, or our emotional apparatus, or our intellectual capacity which serves to keep us from developing as fully as we would wish. Sometimes we are held back by the very strength and solidity of an existing cathedral of belief in our mind, from absorbing or assimilating new experiences to the full, if the structure of our slowly and painfully built edifice will be disturbed. And the novel is a projection of our inner world, and the recall of our memories may sometimes be deeper than descriptions or the appreciation of contemporary fact.

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What can we do as Caribbean readers to encourage our writers, musicians and artists, so that they are conscious of a supporting and sympathetic group of nationals and others behind them and that they can create in a satisfactory fashion for us who read.

First of all, the artist needs sympathy; he must feel that he is not a crank nor an eccentric and that people generally want him to create in a manner which is satisfying to him.

It is of course much better now than it was in the past and I assume with our growing nationhood, things will be even better in the future. When I was younger, I sometimes got the feeling from the educated and well placed individuals around me that it was positively indecent that a young Guyanese should want to write poetry. That sort of activity was for a person born in another country – you should read about it happening in England or America but in a colony it meant that you were young and conceited and so should be taken down a peg or two; you were half cracked and you should know your place. How could you hope to write anything that would deserve to be read seriously by any thinking individual. What was worthwhile had already been said, and in any event you were presuming, as a young colonial, when you attempted to use the language which Shakespeare had used.

Then again what on earth could you write about. You didn't have the nightingale that stimulated Keats, you would have to write about the kiskadee or the carrion crows. There was not the beauty idealised about the mango or sapodilla that had been woven about the apple. The hills and rolling downs and meadows we read about in books must be immeasurably superior in their evocative appeal to the savannahs and the rice fields and the cane fields which had nothing romantic about them. Look at the brown colour of our rivers and creeks.

Then again we didn't know enough English grammar to be able to write. We were not educated enough. We had no university in our midst. Who had taught the writer how to put words together in a sentence? Nobody of any worth.

Many of us can probably out of our own experiences amplify this massive assault against the young writer in Guyana wanting to write at all,

What these individuals were doing was to dramatise the stifling effect of the colonial habit of mind. I never weary of quoting a reference *from* A. J. M. Smith, editor of *A Book of Canadian Poetry* in which he set out the analysis of a Canadian critic of 1864: *"Colonialism is a spirit that gratefully accepts a place of subordination, that looks elsewhere for its standards of excellence and is content to imitate with a modest and timid conservatism the products of a parent tradition in abstract and conventional patriotic poetry. One of the most damaging of the results of colonialism is the feeling of inferiority and doubt it engenders and the remoteness it encourages. The colonial attitude of mind sets the great good place not in its future, but somewhere outside its own borders, somewhere beyond its own possibilities— Thus a direct result may be a turning away from the despised local present, not towards the mother country, but towards impossible hopes and noble dreams – to consider the realities of the life around as too modest or too coarse for the attention of poetry is the temptation that faces a poet in a colony."*

Fortunately this is all past history. I remember writing in *Kykoveral* in 1952 the following comment on this passage:

> The West Indies has passed through its colonial phase. Let me put it in a positive way. In spite of shaping influences in the past and present for which everyone is grateful the time has come for the area to create its own standards of excellence, to reject anything that savours of accepting a place of subordination, Instead of the abstract and conventional, the symbols of poetry and art must be realistic and concrete, reflecting and accepting the unpleasant conditions around us where they exist as so many challenges to our organising and remedial ability. Feelings of doubt and inferiority must be cast away and an atmosphere of optimism and pride created in their place. Who are the great leaders, what are the great events in our regional history? Let them be known and celebrated. The great and good future of the region becomes an aim towards which we must move steadily and knowingly. There must not be impossible dreams but the plan of our action in the entire society must be an inchmeal advance, making do with a little, being patient with small successes but always building slowly upon them' to higher but manageable aims.

I remember one or two persons in 1937 asking me why should I want to publish a book of poems at all. It hadn't been done, at least not for years and years. And my answer was, that I wanted to do it and that was all.

In the French and Spanish territories it is a matter of honour that one should be a poet. In the English-speaking tradition it was something you kept under cover or acknowledged with a shamefaced reluctance. And of course very few people may read the poems when they are published.

Now that we're a sovereign people, we have got to be different.

Already we have produced poems about the kiskadee and the Carrion Crow, and the savannahs and the cane fields and the rivers and the creeks.

Already – and it is not by accident either – our children in schools sing songs about our own country and our flora and fauna and legends.

It is not beyond conjecture that we shall have to use the memories of our own dead heroes in our honour roll and present the Iron Cross of Damon, or create an individual Companion of the most distinguished Order of Cuffy and Akara – the movement is already on the march.

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I think we need scholarships and grants. The Arts Council of Great Britain has begun to make modest sums available by way of scholarships and financial grants to poets, novelists, artists in general, in order to relieve them of problems of finding money to support themselves and their families for a period, so that they can devote their entire energies and their waking hours to complete a work of art – a play, a novel, a book of poetry. There must be many ways of using this common drudge between man and man which we call money, in a creative way to allow artists to develop.

We need a printing press; it is a matter for great shame that in a region like the Caribbean, we do not possess a printing press, with two universities, and still we have to rely on the printing of the UK and the USA to produce books for us to read. I remember my personal shock when I realised that Ralph

de Boissière's Crown Jewel was printed in Australasia. Until we are able to have a printing press, starting perhaps, as a development of The Pioneer Press in Jamaica or as a planned activity of the Guyana Lithographic Company's services – until we have a printing press, we shall not have the – not a luxury, not a comfort, but the plain courtesy of printing books which we in the Caribbean will read.

Up to now, we are always looking over the shoulder of an English or American reader since their interests must take priority with the UK and US printers who print books by the Caribbean authors.

I had a sense of fierce pride to read that portion of Vere T. Daly's Foreword to his *The History of the Guyanese People*, published last year, in which he refers to his determination that he wanted his books printed in Guyana and not in the UK. Of course, I realise all that it means by way of standards of printing, size of edition, publicity apparatus, the sophisticated service of experienced readers to pass judgment on the text of the manuscript. I realise too, that the Caribbean peoples are borrowers of books and not buyers, and that this is one of the reasons why we have not been able to realise this long-needed amenity of a printing press.

We need to buy more books by Caribbean writers, to give them as presents to our friends, and make the point of having them in our homes as part of our Caribbean library bookshelf. It is to our despair that we are not a book-buying people. I remember in Jamaica in December 1962 at a meeting of the Jamaican P. E. N. hearing my fellow guest speaker, George Lamming, speak passionately and with great feeling on this point, that although he had been awarded prizes given by the English publishers for the quality of his books, and received much commendation from friends, well-wishers and relatives in the Caribbean, the sales in the West Indies would amount to 58 copies of a particular edition of a book, sold up and down the length of the Caribbean countries. Until we show more than an act of faith in our artists, by buying their work and purchasing their books, it is impossible to give that buoyant readership support that is necessary to bring the best out in the author, that beginning of the dialogue between reader and writer which will make a people great, because they cherish and support their spokesmen in the fields of the arts.

We need to have our children read and study extensively from our Caribbean writers in their school lessons. To my mind, there is an indecent race among British publishers going on at present, jostling one another for place, so that they can get texts to print in London to go out and sell to the Education Departments of the Caribbean countries as fit for schools, without much consultation. If we had a printing press in the Caribbean, we would stop all this. But the children need to have as part of their school lessons, extracts from the works of our Guyanese writers, giving them descriptions of the birds, flowers, rivers and creeks around them, taught sympathetically by their teachers with interpretations of their inner significance, in any independent country, this is very necessary to build the sense of nationhood at the level of the children's comprehension and loyalty.

What are the temptations that face an artist or a writer in the Caribbean context? Unless one holds passionately to the idea of discipline and dedication to creative writing, there must be several temptations, so many ways in which one can destroy and dissipate one's artistic tensions, but certainly among them are these. There is the temptation to be involved in the sociological inquiries of his country and his nation, and in this way, he would siphon off the creative tension and dissipate it either as part of politics or the academic world. There is the temptation to have a special sense of power in learning more and more about less and less, so that you become a lecturer then you have audiences waiting upon your every word, and you have your pupils hanging upon your sentences while you destroy a contemporary reputation with a careful phrase.

There is the temptation to take a job in the Civil Service or in Commerce and live a quiet ordered life and not to attempt to strike out, take a risk, live by your wits as Edgar Mittelholzer did, roll in the gutter, go sleepless at nights, and perhaps without meals in the day, for the sake of developing one's talent.

There is the temptation to drink, drown one's frustrations in alcohol, and with this bold strengthening of our ego, to get aggressive, and shout against others and your enemies in an undisciplined and uninhibited display of petulance and passion.

There is the temptation to womanise, to say that because one has a creative gift of poetry, one's ego demands that every pretty girl in sight must be induced to go to bed with us and be seduced so that we could say I am great, I am Napoleon and ten feet tall.

And the writer and the artist will be saying, here I am getting a lot of experience which I can now put into my book, or into my music, or into my art and if there is anything valuable in me it will come out.

There is the danger that one may be annexed by political parties, because we have the gift of language and can make slogans and in the words of Tacitus, we can think with subtlety and express ourselves with energy and precision.

What is the message that we get from looking at Edgar Mittelholzer's work during this first set of his memorial lectures; what is it he told us?

The message that I read includes the value of strength, energy and persistence and the quality of dedication. This is not necessarily a conscious reaction or even a philosophy, and it has to do with so many things over which we have no control, the quality of our heredity, what kind of fathers and mothers we had, the acknowledged or unacknowledged blessing of a good physical constitution, a compulsion to remove ourselves from any stultifying influence in our environment so that we can breathe and develop our individual talent or genius. It means a singleness of purpose which often gives us control but which may make us boorish in company and an embarrassment to our relatives and our friends, because in some respects, the major recipe for the making of an artist is in the phrase *"desert all else and follow me"*.

You remember that at the very beginning of the series, we discussed the quotation from Marcel Proust that the real self of the writer is the part that expressed itself in his work, that there is a god within him from whom he departs less and less, and to whom he is more and more willing to devote all his fife and time, so that he could do the god honour.

Like all the authors whose work we have glanced at, Edgar quarried out of his imagination and his unconscious and produced the novels we have been examining. As a dedicated,

professional writer, he lived only to do honour to the god that resided within him, and he had to renounce all else and lived for him alone. This is artistic integrity and it can set a writer running counter to the whole apparatus of the nation to which he belongs, as in the case of Boris Pasternak even though he is bound to lose in the end.

Edgar exhibited the same quality of dedication in his work.

Let us finally take an exhibition promenade and walk along the remarkable gallery of the woman characters created in Edgar's Garden of Eden, his Eves.

First and foremost in my group of the young ones comes Olivia Harmston from *Shadows*. Aged twelve it is true but she is Ariel and Puck combined, and so truly feminine, so perceptive. She stands at the head of the tradition.

There is Roxanne MacMulloch, at seventeen, a first sketch for Olivia's growing up into a darling passionate and self-willed woman. Lavinia the Rhine maiden from Alfred Desseau's London comes here also. Silent, provocative, sure of the power of her body, she must have grown from similar beginnings. With them is Valerie from *Uncle Paul*, innocent, sweet, compliant, on the thresh-hold of adolescent womanhood. Had she not been accidentally killed in the attack on Uncle Paul, obviously she would have grown into the devoted type of woman, rather like Beena in *Corentyne Thunder* or at best Sheila Chatham. She would have belonged wholeheartedly to some inconsiderate hero-husband and been content to move within the shadow of his god-likeness.

Valerie really comes in the group of the meek and sometimes weak woman characters Edgar has created. Sylvia belongs here and we know to what end, and so does our dear Grace from Middenshot. In their varying ways, we see the lineaments of Kattree and Beena from *Corentyne Thunder*; Mabel Harmston in *Shadows* and Constance and Elsa from the *Tale of Three Places.* As women they complement and complete a man's world. They are not the strong people and the judgment of Nietzsche falls upon them unless they do somehow escape it by attaching them to a lord of existence.

Kaywana leads a very different group, the strong women who appear like anchors and pillars in the history of the van Groenwegel family keeping the blood in circulation and

maintaining the strength of the family tradition She is there with Hendrickje and Rosaria and Faustina, and others of the Old Blood: these are the strong ones.

If we remember, Euphony and Evaline MacMulloch also have a strength of inner will all of their own. They know the tradition to which their family belongs and they are active agents of Utopia in their book. They have their portraits too in the gallery as of right.

There are inevitably some sick ones who are strong in a mad way. The type is symbolised by Susan Scanlan, the archaeologist who develops melancholia and sits nude at night awaiting the husband she has driven away with her insistence on a special type of sexual relationship. She can be a tiger or a lamb as the mood takes her. She will attempt to take the life of Sheila Chatham.

Perhaps Sally Elmsford cannot be categorised as one of the ill ones, but she is not exactly balanced either and her wilful attempts on the virtue of the tax inspector who is her neighbour leads in the long run to her daughter's murder in *The Piling of Clouds*. Her portrait hangs in the gallery also.

We looked quickly the other day at the male Mittelholzer characters and we noted Tom Dellow in *Wounded and Worried* as an outstanding and unusual figure for a number of reasons. Alfy in *Tale of Three Places* and Richard Lehrer in *Latticed Echoes* perhaps are the normal types of the demanding and taking male that Edgar created. We will note a number of the ill characters in the gallery, among the men as among the women – Garvin for one who caused so much trouble in *The Jilkington Drama*, Gregory the shell-shocked split personality in *Shadows* and the silent suffering Inspector in *The Piling of Clouds*. Let us not forget those delightful cameos of the ambitious boy Horace and the insecure man Jagabir whom we find in *A Morning at the Office*.

But we must leave the picture gallery we have been sauntering through. We have glanced at sufficient faces to show us the varied richness of the characterization, and the basic family foundation born of the imagination that brought them to life.

Mr Chairman, I have come to the end of the series of talks on Edgar Mittelholzer, the man and his work. For the past

weeks, with much pleasure and interest, I have lived through his stories once more and meditated again upon the characters he created. The body of his work has a remarkable consistency and unity about it. There is a considerable complexity of elements and parts involved which he organized successfully into his stories. These stories, as a general rule, exhibit the inherent plausibility of poetic truth. We get the impression that in his stories we are kept above the humdrum of everyday living at a pitch of intense wakefulness, filling our imagination and stirring our emotion. Each novel, with its drums of suspense and magic compulsion creates a new world into which we are drawn and in which we seem to live with the illusion that we are seeing life steadily and whole.

I feel that this body of work represents a most remarkable achievement for any writer and I know that it has brought entertainment and enlightenment in many languages to thousands in many parts of the world, and bearing in mind the limitations of the society which produced him, and the pioneer nature of his tremendous single-mindedness and discipline, I feel Edgar Mittelholzer must take a high place indeed in the history of our young literature of Guyana and the Caribbean.

ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's note: Indian mystic author, born circa 1398.]
[2] [Editor's note: a noisy, informal party.]
[3] [Editor's note: a reference to '**The Legend of Kaieteur'**, a poem set to music by Philip Pilgrim. It received its first performance in 1944, only days before the death of the composer from typhoid.]
[4] [Editor's note: the spelling '*Kabakaburi'* is now current usage.]
[5] [Editor's note: also the German *Holz* means 'wood': another clue.]

Second Series, 1969

Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana

Denis Williams

FOREWORD

It is indeed a pleasure and an honour to have the opportunity to write a short foreword to the second series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Lectures which were delivered by Mr Denis Williams in January this year.

Mr Williams is one of the few West Indians who have retraced the Middle Passage and lived in Africa and so is in a position to speak with authority on the cultural origins of an important segment of Guyanese society. His lectures dealt with the concepts of miscegenation and racial purity and the way in which what might be a socially divisive element can be creative in a cultural sense. One of the lectures disclosed how tropical African and Caribbean literature revealed opposed reactions to facts of the obvious, and finally he played a searchlight upon the work of Wilson Harris to illustrate his original concept of the nature of the individual consciousness in the Caribbean situation.

Novelist as well as *littérateur* and painter, Denis Williams, with his development of new concepts, stimulated and intrigued his audiences to an extraordinary degree, and we feel sure that the lectures will play an important part in developing the idea of a fully conscious Guyanese and Caribbean culture.

A. J. SEYMOUR
Deputy Chairman,
National History and Arts Council

I THE CONCEPT OF THE ANCESTOR

Before embarking on the rigours of this second series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures I wish to say how honoured I am to have been asked by the National History and Arts Council to deliver them. These Lectures will always be associated with the name of our Chairman tonight and their inaugural speaker, for his initiative in conceiving them and for his contribution to the study of Edgar Mittelholzer – the Man and His Work. In delivering them each subsequent speaker, I am sure, pays willing tribute to our 'A. J.', the chief architect of our contemporary literary culture. The record should also properly acknowledge, as Mr Seymour has himself acknowledged, the part played by Jan Carew in stimulating this memorial to Edgar Mittelholzer. Mittelholzer will be a monument wherever there are literate Guyanese, and to this end I hope that his manuscripts and papers will come to be collected and preserved among us for the benefit of the student of the future who will be less near to the author than was Mr Seymour.

Tonight I would like briefly to remember yet another Guyana monument – the monument that is Edward Rupert Burrowes. Burrowes is not likely to be judged by posterity as the finest artist produced in this country, but I think that our posterity will find it difficult to name a 'Bajan man' who came to be the father – now in immediate retrospect the grandfather of Guyanese Art. In the history of art this is perhaps an inflated boast, but in the history of this young country I feel that we can be proud of having now produced three vital generations of painters. Mittelholzer and Burrowes stand at the same point in our history as pioneer figures of our cultural awakening, and they both are now Guyanese institutions. A case might be made of Burrowes's Barbadian blood in its valuable effect on the Guyanese reality because, taken with the Swiss-German element in the Mittelholzer heritage, it leads directly to the substance of the first lecture in this series – the concept of the ancestor in our polyglot New

World societies. As artists neither Burrowes nor Mittelholzer had minds of the classical temper; they were both romantics, each in his way subjectively prisoner to the circumstances of environment. Both were, in idiom and in attitude, and in the context of the day, colonial artists. But where Burrowes unreflectively accepted this state, Mittelholzer, as the Seymour lectures have shown, remained in conscious and continual revolt against it. Mr Seymour has observed, *"I see Mittelholzer's life and work as an essay in freedom as he moved from one place to another seeking his personal dignity, according to his lights."*[1] I wish to suggest that in Mittelholzer's personal pursuit of dignity one might read an aspect of the Caribbean problem of blood and ancestry. Mittelholzer, we are told, suffered the awareness of a person who had been deeply wronged.[2] I do not believe that anyone who knew the radiance of E. R. Burrowes would say the same of him. These two artists embody opposed attitudes to the colonial situation – attitudes of acceptances on the one hand, and of revolt on the other. They are attitudes to do with one's view of our unique history in its relationship to the ancestor. They are neither of them creative attitudes notwithstanding the impulses they separately generated towards the creation of works of art, for an artist might successfully write or paint out of the most bizarre philosophic convictions; in achieving autonomy the work of art takes on a truth of its own. It is not my intention, Ladies and Gentlemen, to assess the value of the works of Mittelholzer or of Burrowes – I am neither a literary nor an art critic – but the attitudes revealed in these two Guyanese artists to our unique history are important to us all, since all art is born of a sense of history, of individual and particular responses to ancestral imperatives. And both in Burrowes and in Mittelholzer we are aware of attitudes to the ancestor which determined the nature and even the content, of their art. As a simple, unintellectual man, Burrowes was not in conflict with the cultural values of a European ancestry: he was not aware of the paradox of the black European. Mittelholzer was. And I think that this was perhaps the secret of his ceaseless pursuit of dignity, of his awareness of having been almost cosmically wronged. In turning to Guyanese history with this cosmic questioning Mittelholzer

returned only the responses of contaminated blood, contaminated soul. It is an arena of judgement and of guilt which a Kafka might have peopled with quite unique monsters. The monsters of Mittelholzer's creation are not unique; they are not unique because their sense of having been wronged does not achieve cosmic scale. But in the mechanism of revolt through which they are manipulated Mittelholzer proposes one response to the colonial circumstance. The other, the mechanism of acceptance which radiates through the work of Burrowes, represents the alternative attitude in the context of the day. It is possible that in our polyglot societies of the New World these are not the only two responses open to us as impulse in creative action, as warrant or witness in our search for dignity. In these lectures I shall try to examine impulse and idea resulting from a further interpretation of our New World situation in terms of our relationship, our several relationships, to the ancestor.

In matters of culture and the intellect I think that we have hardly begun to be aware of our uniqueness, and the problems and opportunities it creates. For my part I had never particularly considered the significance of Aimé Césaire's *"unique people [...] little flunkeys heaped on top of the great savage; little souls shovelled on top of the three-souled Caribbean*" – the significance of the image never struck me until after arriving on the Mazaruni a year or so ago. Before this, in Nigeria, I had read a very bad introduction to a very bad collection of Haitian poems. I remember nothing at all about this book (and therefore must apologise for not being able to quote it). I remember nothing beyond the claim in it – which struck me in the vivid way in which the obvious is sometimes suddenly illumined – that from the sixteenth century onwards various races of Europe and of Africa had mingled in our areas of the New World to create this unique 'mulatto' society – mulatto let us understand in a loose sense to mean of composite blood. Composite blood later, in our country, to be compounded with racial strains that would make our bit of the Caribbean a great deal more than 'three-souled'. This is our uniqueness, this composite blood. Very obvious of course, but it took this book of indifferent poems to illuminate this truth for me. Not that it meant a great deal to me even then; it

did not. I was absorbed in trying to write about a very different, very homogeneous world in West African tribal society. It meant so little in fact in any immediate sense that on the ship returning to Guyana some months later I was to experience a feeling almost of shock when confronted, for the first time in twenty years, with the West Indian mass in the dining-saloon. Shock yes, and confusion and alarm and even paradoxically, repulsion. This polyglot mass, this composite, this hybrid, this mongrel – who were these people? I suspect that the answer to this question keeps many a reflective West Indian abroad. Mr Naipaul for instance has recently been reported to have said, "*I don't know what West Indian means. I have nothing in common with the people from Jamaica or any of the other islands.*"[3] It is a serious question. It takes courage to face for one, as Mr Naipaul might be suspected to be, who is adapted to one of the homogeneous cultures of the Old World – of Europe or Africa or Asia. It is a serious question because it leads us, if we have the courage, to examine the implications of our genetic uniqueness. It proposes problems that refer to no other people on earth. It brings us face to face with the concept of the racial ancestor.

In our relationship to the ancestor we of the New World are judged by the pedigree consciousness of the Old: our mongrelism is abhorred by the thoroughbred sensibilities of the world. Miscegenation is the nightmare of those 'pure' races who have invested the words 'half-caste', 'half-breed', 'crossbreed' with scorn, contempt, and as we all know even with hatred. All 'pure' races have done this, African or Asian just as much as European. It might surprise many a Guyanese Negro to realise the contempt in which he is held by the purebred tribal African, by whom he is regarded as a man without a name, without a god, without a culture. Today the children of American Negro soldiers of World War II left in Japan are an even more hopeless social problem than are their fathers in the white United States. The supposed horrors of miscegenation are often openly acknowledged by the white races as the primary cause of racial hatred. To the Old World 'pure' races the spectre of miscegenation is the spectre of the loss of pedigree, the corruption of the thoroughbred, the destruction of the ancestor, the emergence of the mongrel.

The paradoxical shock and repulsion which an expatriate West Indian might feel in the dining-saloon of a ship crowded with other West Indians is now perhaps understandable. Attuned to an Old World culture, one has come to view one's own condition as mongrel, one's own being in fact, with the racial biases of pedigree man. One has imbibed the most self-annihilating of fallacies; this is that the mongrel, lacking 'purity' of blood, *ipso facto* also lacks the virtues inherent in purity of blood: cultural integrity, wholeness of soul. I suspect this to be the seat of much of Edgar Mittelholzer's sense of cosmic wrong – the wrong of a man not born whole.

Yet the first fact of the Caribbean situation is the fact of miscegenation, of mongrelism. What are the cultural implications of this mongrel condition? It is important to have experienced the homogeneity, the richness, the integrity of the racially thoroughbred cultures of the Old World in order properly to take the force of this question. It is important if only as a means of discriminating between our condition and theirs, of assessing the nature and status of our mongrel culture when contrasted with the cultures of the thoroughbred, of realising the nature and function of the ancestor as he determines our cultural destiny. For we are all shaped by our past: the imperatives of a contemporary culture are predominantly those of our relationship to this past. Yet in the Caribbean and in Guyana we think and behave as though we have no past, no history, no culture. And where we do come to take notice of our history it is often in the light of biases adopted from one thoroughbred culture or another, of the Old World. We permit ourselves the luxury, for one thing, of racial dialectics in our interpretation of Caribbean and Guyanese history and culture. In the light of what we are this is a destructive thing to do, since at best it perpetuates what we might call a filialistic dependence on the cultures of our several racial origins, while simultaneously inhibiting us from facing up to the facts of what we uniquely are. Moreover, in an organic sense it places us in an untenable position, for where we regard racial purity as a norm by means of which we assess our several conditions, we must accept also the corollary notion of cultural purity. That is to say we must judge ourselves in terms of norms not inherent in our society;

we must reject the mongrel condition which is the first reality of this region, and which is the foundation of our uniqueness, particularly in Guyana. I describe as filialistic this relationship to parent races, parent cultures. I choose the concept of filialism rather than that of parasitism because the parasite is always a foreign body, and not all filialistic cultures are foreign to their parent-host. But where some filialistic societies are of cognate blood and ancestry to the parent-host, while others are not, they all, in an organic sense, exhibit a cardinal characteristic which I illustrate in the following diagram:

> A species of Norwegian pine stands in a mature English garden. Its flowing lower boughs bend under their own weight until they touch the ground at varying radii around the trunk. At each of these points these boughs strike roots from which in turn rise a circle of secondary pines. These do not grow with the vigour of the parent stock; they reach no higher than two-thirds or so of the parent height, but even so their flowing lower boughs bending under their own weight, eventually touch the earth in new radii from which now spring a circle of tertiary pines. These grow with even less vigour than the secondary strain again reaching no more than two-thirds the height of the latter. A kind of relay race in which the baton is handed on to successively weaker runners each striving always towards an illusory tape.

This diagram, I believe, explains an axiom of the filialistic relationship. It is, that the filialistic culture never achieves a vigour which might be comparable to, or surpass, that of the parent-host. We do not, for example, expect cultural originality or artistic innovation from the Canadian or Australian or South African or New Zealand painter or writer, accomplished though he often is. His self-image is that of the parent-host and might not surpass, in depth or in richness, the achievements of the parent-host.

In the Caribbean situation a New World culture stands in filialistic relationship with an Old, or more accurately speaking, several Old World cultures. In this relationship, as we have seen from our diagram, limitations to growth are inherent, a condition rendered all the more stultifying in our failure to

acknowledge its existence. Strive as we may to maintain the image of such a relationship we can never again become Indians or Africans or Chinese or Europeans, *et cetera*; we are peoples of the New World, half castes and mongrels despite whatever appearances might exist to the contrary. We are genetically unique, and this uniqueness is projected culturally in our relationship to the ancestor. So long as we ideally relate to the racial ancestor, or racial ancestors, of our several origins we inhibit awareness of our uniqueness and to this degree deny the possibilities which this uniqueness offers for conceiving an autonomous self-image; we inhibit the growth of this self-image in our works and our achievements, particularly in those achievements of culture and the intellect which all nations value above the individual life.

Yet in Guyanese society today militantly filialistic elements are more obvious than they were a generation ago. These seek sanctions in cultural relationships with various parent-hosts of the Old World. To an extent they are divisive of the social body politic; further they tend to inhibit awareness of what is unique in our culture by diverting social energies away from the springs of our uniqueness. Where such filialistic elements were in the past necessary defence mechanisms in the insecurities of the colonial situation, they do not serve any obvious creative function in the realities of nationhood. Yet they persist. And that they persist is perhaps itself a clue to the peculiar nature of our sense of nationhood; these very divisive elements might be performing creative functions in our culture that are not immediately noticeable; their virulence might at least be read as symptoms of our search for dignity. The 'Cultural Revolution' recently launched by Eusi Kwayana is an example. There are others as we know, equally conscious, equally militant. They are all alike in their concept of the relationship to the racial ancestor. Kwayana, at least, in his creed of name-substitution, is not unaware of its divisive implications for our society:

> "We are not doing this," he says, "in order to divide society: to make this charge is to admit that society is already divided by this and to deny us, the Africans only, a right which colonialism permitted everyone else to enjoy."[4]

But if our society is already divided along interfaces created by our several relationships to the racial ancestor we must find a creative function for these divisions, since our society is a healthy one and no healthy body will tolerate alien organisms without symptoms of friction. It seems to me that since our society is not breaking up along the interfaces created by our several relationships to ancestral cultures, an explanation must be sought for its obvious vitality and persistent freshness. In pursuing such an explanation I suggest that our concept of the nature of the ancestor stands in need of reinterpretation, for in matters of culture it is crucial to be unequivocal about the ancestor relationship. In matters of culture it is a question of tapping reservoirs of creativeness whose content might be as much environmental as they are racial. For the artist it becomes a question of exploring our peculiar psychic heritage in forms and concepts for which there might be no ancestral warrant. But this is the subject of a later lecture. Before we get to it let us examine some aspects of the creative potential inherent in the nature of our polyglot societies, and particularly the creative functions of those divisive and filialistic elements which are the foundation of Guyanese culture.

It is a characteristic of all New World peoples that they are not native to the lands which they today occupy. The New World, so far as we know, has produced no indigenous peoples: it is the sole continent which nature seems to have forgotten to populate. All its peoples have entered it as into a vast hostel or hotel in which they continue to converse in the various languages of the Old World. Immigrant races, immigrant cultures in a continent which has produced no language of its own, no gods. Looked at in this way a land as culturally neutral as is an hotel lobby. Where in such a neutral landscape might one apprehend the image of the ancestor – the ancestor as apprehended in the cultures of Europe, of Africa, of Asia? One needs to understand the iron imperatives of the notion of the ancestor as held in the Old World in order to fully understand this historic neutrality of the lands of the New. In a subsequent lecture I shall examine the defining and stabilising effects of this concept of the ancestor in modern African literature, and the implications

of its absence for the art and literature of our Caribbean society. But in assessing our contemporary situation here tonight it must be remembered that for us of the New World nations, the Old World ancestor figure has no equivalent or substitute in the soil of our landscape. We inhabit a land in which such an image has never been formed – a land without gods, without temples, and therefore without law; a death, as Césaire says of his homeland, without sense or piety.[5] This lack of law, of piety, is the primary mark of American man, North or South, black or white or brown. It is a lack of a sense of the sacred, of the instinctual restraints imposed by an awareness of the indwelling of the ancestor. And this is so because, with the possible exception of the American Indian, we were all culturally mature, already ancestrally contracted as it were, when we came to people this land. This might explain the homogeneity of American Indian culture when contrasted with the fragmented and filialistic nature of all others in the hemisphere.

From the Old World cultures we of the Americas have inherited the concept of the 'pure' breed, of pedigree man, thoroughbred man. With this goes the corollary concept of the 'pure' culture which is manifest in the self-image of the individual, the self-definition of the society. For the security of his being thoroughbred man refers to a past everywhere projected in his institutions: his racial image is constantly confirmed in the cultural mirror held up by his brother. Reflected in the clarity of this racial mirror his being is, as it were, eternally endorsed. Down the ancestral line his image is presented in blood identical with his own. He is a man with a witness. And this witness, what is it but the wholeness of soul evident to the last detail in the idioms of his culture. For us of the New World this racial homogeneity expressed in the idioms of a culture comes as somewhat of a shock when we are first exposed to it. I have never visited Asia, but I have experienced with some intimacy the cultures of Europe and of Africa, both Arab and Negro. I acknowledge it as one of the revolutions of my awareness to have lived in such homogeneous societies of the Old World where the idioms of culture are reflected in every detail of language, of thought, of custom and in the very architecture of the individual mind. I am sure

this experience must be shared by many among us tonight: I have had it described to me by an Argentinian woman in West Africa. It is a wholeness and security which no New World society knows, except perhaps, as we have noted, that of the American Indian. Lacking it we cling to a filialism which is the mark, in each racial instance, of our previous connection with a mature Old World parent culture. It is a mark too of our creative inadequacy. We might go so far as to say that the only thing which is new in our New World societies is this lack of a sense of witness in the blood and regard of the Other. We are people who live without this witness of blood, since the blood of the Other, the blood of the national brother, will bear intimations of psychic impulses or racial predilections that are not individually our own.

The Americas, and North America specifically, are often referred to as a continental melting-pot. The description is not apt, for very few of the elements of American societies ever suffer change. Racial apartness for instance is, in varying degrees, a feature of all these societies, even where, as in Brazil or Guyana, miscegenation is relatively uninhibited, in its racial separateness we might perhaps more aptly describe the nature of American societies, North or South, as a crucible in which catalysts of greater or lesser potency operate – a catalyst, we remember, being a body which changes its surrounding substance without itself undergoing any change. It is the phenomenon of catalysis in American cultures which, it seems to me, render us unique; it is this process which explains our particular relationship to the ancestor. Let me make another diagram:

> Among a group of pork-knockers talking in my Mazaruni home is a man demonstrating with a sprig of ant-bush how to prepare a remedy for snakebite. He is old, tenuous as undisturbed ash. You feel you could blow him over with ever such a gentle puff. He was born, I would say, towards the close of the nineteenth century, of a parentage it is superficially impossible to trace in him. He is raceless; the various racial stocks which have produced him have been bred almost away. There remains though a trait here or there which identifies this man with one or more of these racial stocks. I do not hear his name called, I do not wish to. I wish to preserve such an

> image of racelessness free of the associations aroused by a surname. In my house are other Guyanese – Chinese, Negro, East Indian and Amerindian – all of more or less pure stock. He stands among these others, his national brothers, without a racial witness.

What does this unique association mean to this man, and to our society? He is raceless among these others yet, viewed in time-depth, he is their genetic sum or total. In social terms he is the process of catalysis arrested as it were, for a moment. The substance of all others, he has been subject to change in ways in which, as catalysts, they were not. Since this person cannot be defined by race, or more accurately, since no single racial definition can account for all of his physical and psychic characteristics, what then is he? In thoroughbred terms, in the terms of pedigree man defined in relationship to the racial ancestor, he is the *inversion* or *vacuum* or mere *space* of a man, the shape vacated by the presence of one pure race or another, of the Old World: the *shape* or *figure* of a man but yet, in lacking wholeness of blood, in lacking witness, in lacking the assurance of the indwelling racial ancestor, not quite a man. He is merely the evidence, in time, of the presence or passage of man. A dilutee. The process of human catalysis arrested as it were for appraisal and scrutiny.

Let us extend the scope of scrutiny by restoring him to time so that we might observe this process in depth. Since this man is a Guyanese his ancestry was at some historical stage that of an Old World 'pure' race. In a time-section at four hundred years ago he might have been Dutch, let us say, defined in European ancestral terms. For our image of the process of human catalysis as it affects such a man let us turn to Mittelholzer's van Groenwegels as the line evolves (though in Mittelholzer's philosophy this not perhaps a suitable verb to describe the mere stubborn self-perpetuation of blood) but I still say evolves, provisionally and with the above qualification, to follow the vagaries of blood as it is unfolded on the Mazaruni and on the Berbice Rivers in his *Kaywana* trilogy.

Mittelholzer places the arrival of the first Negroes to this country at, or shortly following, the end of the twelve-year Dutch truce with Spain, in 1621.[6] But since the Dutch were

here a couple of generations before this the scope of miscegenation would then have been limited to Dutch-Amerindian a mixture which was in fact the foundation of the van Groenwegel family, the first van Groenwegel having married the Carib-mulatto slave girl, Kaywana. But a brief generation after the arrival of the first Negroes to the Essequibo, in 1654, this kind of conversation becomes for the first time possible in Guyana. The conversation – you will remember – describes a girl who bore van Groenwegel blood:

> You're not so pretty but you have a good figure. The black blood is plain for anyone to see. Your lips are thick and your nose is wide. (1, 48).

This part-mulatto slave girl will later marry Laurens van Groenwegel, grandson of the founder of the family. The year is 1672. Two generations later, in 1726, Adrian van Groenwegel admits:

> All the children I have up to now are illegitimate mulattoes (1, 218).

but in so far as van Groenwegel blood remains 'pure' his cousin Jabez in the same year passes it on in Hubertus, the son of a Spanish-Carib slave girl (1, 220). By the end of the century Hubertus, beside fathering four legitimate daughters, has also fathered a mulatto child by a slave woman (2. 263). The line is legitimately carried on, however, in the issue of his young cousin, Storm, who also of course eventually fathers a child by a slave woman (3, 20). In the first decade of the nineteenth century the racial complexion of Guyana is summed up by a van Groenwegel:

> There are white planters and merchants and white overseers, and there are free coloured people who are carpenters and masons and hucksters and seamstresses and suchlike, and whom we white people treat with patronage because of the white blood we've put into them. And then we have the black slaves who must serve us because they are born to that kind of life. (3, 51).

To this area of miscegenation we also of course add Amerindian blood. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, by which time a van Groenwegel has legitimately married a three-quarter black Guyanese Negro, the three races of the country are therefore European, Amerindian and Negro. But around this date the scope of miscegenation has widened to include other races. A van Groenwegel now despairingly observes:

> What sort of colony we'll be having at this rate! Portuguese. Indian Coolies. And now Chinese! The irony of it! Every language of the world will soon be heard here – save Dutch! (iii, 286).

This is the process of human catalysis as we observe it in one Guyanese family, a process perhaps more dramatically marked among us Guyanese than among any other New World peoples. In the process of catalysis the sperm is continually invested with a new skin, a new mask. There is no warrant from one generation to another as to the form in which this sperm will be handed on: unlike in the Old World societies our culture inherently lacks those restraining institutions which act as checks and safeguards for the continued purity of the sperm – tribal, religious, social or psychic taboos which secure and protect the continuity of the line. No New World individual might pronounce with absolute certainty on what his grandchildren are racially likely to be. Many of us do not greatly care. We all however know the importance which this issue holds for Old World peoples. It is a question of the relationship to the ancestor, to that in a people which cannot be changed and retain its meaning or value. In many white cultures of the Old World and paradoxically, of the New, blood as we know is continually being shed to safeguard the purity of blood, the purity of the sperm; that is to say, in the name of the ancestor which secures and defines.[7] The raceless pork-knocker standing in my house cannot be considered in any relationship to a single ancestor; he is the human in infinite process of catalysis. In what racial skin his sperm will present in his descendants he has no means of knowing. He is aware only of the form in which it presents in himself. The self as a

function of the process of catalysis, it seems to me, ought therefore to be the primary reality of New World man – of Caribbean man certainly. So I suggest that for us of the Americas, this ancestrally neutral continent, the concept of the ancestor, might fittingly be replaced by that of the donor – the donor of the sperm, restrictive, immediate: my father, my mother. It is all many of us can be sure about. Because of this immediacy of the donor few of us care to look farther back into the genetic jungle to take that 'backward half-look' of T. S. Eliot's which of course it takes an *American* poet to conceive of as filled with terror; for this genetic jungle is compounded of surprising and distorted family trees. We might not conceive of the 'line of descent' of the Old World races, not at any rate in a cultural sense. Those of us who do thereby place themselves in a state of cultural diminution, or even of cultural arrest, as our first diagram has shown; for the filialistic culture never can achieve a vigour of growth which might be comparable to, or surpass, that of the parent-host. The first cultural reality of the American scene is one of catalysis. It has been observed by Ghilberto Freyre (*The Masters and the Slaves*) that in Brazil Europe governs but it is Africa that rules. Yet for all their Yoruba memories these Brazilian Negroes are not Africans. There are no Africans in the New World; there is only the African sperm in various states of catalysis, and it is this fact of catalysis which constitutes our difference from all other peoples of the world. The sperm of the donor is in fact the sperm of God,[8] since this sperm, this gift of the donor, might carry no epithet or racial determinative of any sort. It might not be figured in the forms of a type. It has no witness. In the *space* or *inversion* or mere *vacuum* of a man standing in my Mazaruni home is the image of this sperm of God – we might think of no other concept to fit all the characteristics of this New World phenomenon.

However tenaciously we cling to the image of the racial ancestor we are no longer patterned in his image. The degree to which we cling to such an image merely in fact confirms our role as catalysts in these societies. In these new societies it is the process of catalysis itself which is vital. Elements in a melting-pot tend to neutralise each other, and we know that in New World societies this is not the case at all. New World

societies are instinct with a vigour which is paradoxically rooted in the filialistic separateness of its constituent elements. These filialistic elements are likely to persist in our cultures for as long as we care to imagine. Their social divisiveness is also a measure of their creative function: for in promoting catalysis they invigorate our societies with energies that are self-generating as, for instance, the music of the United States illustrates.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is not my purpose tonight to pay tribute to Edgar Mittelholzer – this occasion is itself sufficient witness – but I wish to record it as my opinion that Mittelholzer's *Kaywana* trilogy is perhaps the greatest monument to this peculiar social reality of our country. It is a work which in the conception of our nationhood is priceless – our national novel you might say, as *Don Quixote* is the national novel of Spain, or *The Betrothed* that of Italy, or *War and Peace* that of Russia. It is not, in my view, the greatest novel written by a Guyanese, but it is supremely the one which, for this nation, *had* to be written. Had to be written not only for clothing the bare bones of history with the vestments of the creative imagination, but also for proposing this unique problem of our relationship to the ancestor. I have called Mittelholzer a colonial artist. I think that I can best support this claim in his own view of mortality and the line. Mittelholzer's interpretation of the vagaries of the van Groenwegel family pivots in his regard for 'pure' blood – the purity of the blood of the ancestor. The struggles of the van Groenwegels become almost mystic to maintain the value of this blood:

> It is blood that matters, Griselda. Blood. Not a mortal man can drain the blood of that old man from my veins – or the veins of my children. What was in my father is in me – and in mine. (1, 42)

It is inherently a sexual struggle – a struggle against the physical realities of Guyanese society. The battle of ascetic purity and restraint on the one hand, and Dionysiac passion and formlessness on the other is presented as a conflict between white van Groenwegel blood and the blood by which

it is circumscribed and threatened – Negro and Amerindian principally. These latter represent for Mittelholzer the forces of unfathomable evil. A superhuman strength is invoked to confront these forces of disruption and contamination – strength against the compulsions of dark physical drives. Fruitlessly. One van Groenwegel after another down the generations is hurled by terrible psychic urges across the colour line. Blood fuses with blood in the ancestral home, in the slave logies, or in the fields. Ancestral blood becomes bad blood. The Old Blood, the van Groenwegel Old Blood, becomes for Mittelholzer the ancestral imperative against which the individual struggles as hopelessly as against fate itself. Hubertus, the stern principled man of God, cries out:

> The mad beast in me defeats my restraint when I least expect it to. I am sure I've inherited it from my mother, that lost woman, that pit of evil […] you and I have strange blood in us, Faustina. My mother. Grandma Hendrickje. Pedro. Lumea. David. Laurens. Slime. Slime on them all. Van Groenwegel blood. Evil blood. Blood of beasts. (2, 62).

In such a morality of the line, moral integrity, purity of soul, are subsumed as functions of racial purity. That is to say, racial impurity means moral contamination, contamination of soul. The van Groenwegel line is doomed from its foundation in the sixteenth-century union of Dutch blood and Carib-mulatto. The obsession of its descendants with purity and family strength will therefore be eternally hopeless.

These characters represent Mittelholzer's mechanism of revolt against the colonial circumstance. In reading into it an aspect of the general Caribbean relationship to blood and ancestry we must regard it as a philosophic limitation on Mittelholzer's part that he applied this thoroughbred judgement, this distorted bias of pedigree man, to the reality of our unique society. If here or there he was repelled, we understand why. It is a colonialist judgement; in making it Mittelholzer's van Groenwegels exemplify that filialistic relationship to an Old World conscience which has changed Guyanese society while eventually destroying them, its protagonists. This is a judgement of self in terms of norms which have nothing to do with one's self. It is willing mutilation

of the soul and therefore an aspect of self-annihilation. It is still today a profound paradox of the Guyanese vision.

Our situation then, in summary, is that the primary social fact of the New World and Guyanese society is that of miscegenation on the one hand, and conservative reaction to miscegenation on the other. This social fact is projected on the cultural plane in mutually irreconcilable views of the ancestor-relationship. Where the New World societies have not developed from historical ancestor-figures, these societies are nevertheless compounded of immigrant elements standing in filialistic relationship to various racial ancestors of the Old World. Such filialistic elements, while being organically restricted, are also socially divisive. Paradoxically, however, they can nevertheless be considered to serve a creative function in their activity as catalysts. The model of New World society is therefore not one of a melting pot, but that of a crucible in which catalysts of varying degrees of potency operate. The self as a function of this process of catalysis is the distinguishing reality of New World man and the focus for the release of his original energies.

II THE COMPLEX WOMB

Certain writers of literary blurbs, certain literary critics and scholars and even certain members of the reading public have come to regard Caribbean writing, like the Caribbean peoples themselves and their music, as racy and efferverscent and exuberant. On one or other of these counts the works of many of our authors certainly justify the opinion, even though it is not, strictly speaking, a literary one. But a case could equally be made for the existence in Caribbean writing of a vein of the solemn and even of the lugubrious and terrifying. On any of these counts I think that Mittelholzer's *Kaywana* trilogy expresses an aspect of Caribbean culture which runs deep in us all and which, because we take it so much for granted we make no particular fuss about. I refer to our peculiar consciousness of this problem of blood and ancestry. This obsession has been granted a passing nod now and then from one writer or another in observations to do with the Caribbean coordinates of privilege and skin-colour, but as a theme in our literature I think that our concern over this problem of blood, this sometimes terrifying apprehension of origins, has perhaps found creative exposition only in the vision of Wilson Harris – and Harris's is a solemn vision: to some perhaps even a terrifying one. That on the one hand the problem has been stated by Mittelholzer, and on the other, as I believe, resolved by Wilson Harris, seems to me proof enough of our concern with it. Because of the several racial stocks which define the nature of Guyanese society it is a problem which in fact promises to be the kingpin of much Guyanese writing of the future. Its resolution in literature and in art will certainly distinguish our work in the Caribbean, will give it originality and resonance, for no other people of the New World are faced with this problem to the degree in which we know it. At this stage in our cultural consciousness it seems incredible that the first reality of Guyanese being – this tangle of ancestry – has not more deeply influenced vision in literary and artistic expression. That this is so would

seem to be a symptom of that filialism which we have examined in the first of these lectures. Thinkers to come will need to give it a great deal more attention than we have so far done if the arts of this country are ever to achieve autonomy and authority.

As a premise to any further creative work in art or in literature I have myself been obliged to give this problem rather prolonged thought. The results have often seemed as paralysing to me as they might seem confusing, or even confused, to you. But because of what we are and the cultural unity we dream of in the coat-of-arms of this country, it is imperative that sooner or later the problem must be faced by us all. In this lecture, whose title, 'The Complex Womb' is taken from a concept of Wilson Harris'[9] I shall try to examine the elements of the problem as I see them.

Some years ago, while still abroad, I did the illustrations for a book called *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples*.[10] I cannot now recall who the six peoples are with whom the author, Michael Swan, peopled our country – on the spot now I can think only of five: Negro, East Indian, European, Chinese, Amerindian. To complete the tally one would he obliged to number members of that non-race among us, represented by the pork-knocker of my first lecture, to which very many Guyanese belong. Perhaps this is what Mr Swan had in mind. I do not remember.[11] If he did, then everyone among us would consider it right and proper and commend Mr Swan on his perceptiveness, for, as we know, this person of mixed blood and ancestry is extremely important in our midst. It is this person who, in the fact of miscegenation, is the symbol among us of that process of cultural catalysis which we examined in the first lecture and which I hold to be the distinguishing characteristic of all New World societies. We have already noted that in lacking the historic ancestor-figures of the Old World cultures we of the New World variously relate to one or other racial ancestor of our several cultural origins – a relationship which I describe as filialistic. Such filialistic relationships are socially divisive in effect. They are also to a degree organically static, for the filialislic culture receiving its self-image from a foreign parent-host is limited always in its growth-potential on non-ancestral soil. We

need only contrast the fertility, integrity and creativeness of the European author from Dante to James Joyce with the products of our colonial or Commonwealth world to see the truth of this, We have had fine writers from South Africa, from Rhodesia, from New Zealand, from Canada. Australia, *et cetera* – and of course from the Caribbean – but we should be hard put to it to feel in these the sense of destiny, the inevitability, the idioms of a culture manifest in the individual work, which we expect from the stable and secure European author engaged at root with the ancestor circumstance. In the New World context these racially static elements acquire a fortuitous dynamism, however, in the cultural sense: by acting as catalysts they change our societies without themselves suffering change. In Guyana our several races preserve the filialistic relationship in forms of art which we find more or less mutually incomprehensible. No synthesis of forms occurs since these forms, preserved in self-defence, are meant to secure, and therefore cannot at the same time be expected to destroy traditional ancestral values. Where, among the Negroes, a connection with the ancestral parent-culture has hitherto been lacking, an impulse is now afoot to secure closer ties with the traditional past. We might therefore perhaps reasonably expect that in due course the more migrant of Yoruba or Asante gods will be made to take up place in our polyglot national pantheon. There would he nothing intrinsically wrong with this, our culture being in any case a structurally filialistic one. Yoruba gods have in any case made farther journeys than to the shores of Guyana: a correspondent from Brazil writing to me in Nigeria wished to know why, in Brazil, the Yoruba festival to the God Ogun has somehow become mixed up with the image of St George, the patron saint of Britain. The answer seems to be that since Ogun is the Yoruba god of war it is perhaps not surprising that among a subject people this martial image comes to be fused, across the two continents, with the no less mighty warrior-ancestor of the English. It would be interesting to observe, if they exist, similar syncretist elements of the Haitian cult-scene in the survival of the Dahomean concept of energy – *vodun* – in local 'voodoo' forms.[12] Festivals to Shango among us

Guyanese, or those of Deepavali or Phagwah, might similarly be scrutinised for syncretist elements – it ought to be at least instructive to cast an occasional eye on these cultural barometers of ours; it seems a pity that we are neither equipped nor apparently inclined to do so. To the naked eye it certainly seems that there is no trace of synthesis on any fundamental level of Guyanese culture; our cultural affiliations remain discrete and disparate – a conclusion which we must accept until such time as scholarship produces evidence to the contrary. If from Martinique Césaire conceives of a 'three-souled Caribbean', in Guyana our image of the scene is certainly a wider one.

Collectively we are a people without a myth, without the unified consciousness of the indwelling of a common ancestor, without any charter whatsoever for a destiny, since in what forms, in what racial skin our issue will present down the generations, we have no means of knowing. In the immigrant societies of the Americas one hardly expect matters to be any different: we are not of the soil, our archaic kin are not buried here; we have chipped our stone celts and fashioned our stone gods, built our shrines to them elsewhere; each racial unit in our country remains a stranger among strangers in an alien land. This alienation from the earth, this lack of a mystic union with the soil which feeds us[13] is one of the roots of our inherent irrelevance; it is at the same time a testament to our inherent freedom – a freedom even from the assurances of a destiny, for what is there in us which will unfold in the inevitable cycles of a unified culture? Is it surprising that in Guyana the great themes of literature – themes of the individual struggles against the grand imperatives of destiny, of the imponderables of life and death in the state of human being, of the ambivalence inherent in the exercise of human power – is it surprising that such themes remain beyond the interests of most of our writers? In Mittelholzer's *Kaywana* trilogy the individual, it is true, might be read as pitted in a hopeless struggle against destiny – destiny in this case represented in the destructive drives of 'The Old Blood' – van Groenwegel blood. But these figures achieve the scale neither of heroes nor of monsters, for the struggle is not conceived in cosmic terms. It is not an inimical

ordering of the nature of things or (in the Kafka sense) the vagaries of an inscrutable Authority which defines and diminishes the individual; it is something a great deal more prosaic – the efforts of the individual to defy the dictates of inheritance, an inheritance to which in no way invokes the immutable laws of heritage, the implacable requirements of an ancestral conscience. No! Mittelholzer's van Groenwegels are enmeshed in a simple bad-luck situation, for it is a situation which presents its alternatives: it does not girdle its protagonists in the iron ring of fate. For the psychologically sophisticated twentieth-century mind, moreover, it might seem invidious, if not in fact naive, to equate the concept of evil with the image of sexual deviousness, particularly among tropical peoples in a tropical jungle. The van Groenwegel situation cannot stimulate catharsis – one cannot be purged by pity or by terror – simply because one is constantly aware of an element of the absurd in the Mittelholzer conception of tragedy. The absurd, since for the van Groenwegel individual there always exists an alternative view of his condition. But, as we know, the dictates of destiny permit of no alternatives. We must remember though that Mittelholzer's characters were subject to the sexual morality of the eighteenth and nineteenth (and particularly the nineteenth) centuries – not that of the twentieth century. The problem of forging symbols acceptable to the twentieth-century reader to illuminate an eighteenth-century predicament is a literary one and it needn't concern us here, but the Mittelholzer interpretation of destiny is one to which we need to pay attention, since, as I have said, it is a theme generally absent from the writing of the Caribbean. So are other great themes in literature – the mystery of human being, the complexity of individual responses to the fear of death, the phenomenon of human power, and so on. It might be maintained that Caribbean writing is in fact markedly unreflective about any major aspect of the human condition, and this is a criticism which one hears made from time to time abroad – that our writing lacks universality. I endorse this view of the basic superficiality of our writing not so much as criticism in the negative sense, but in a spirit of stock-taking as it were: an assessment of where we are, resulting from the facts of what

we are. It is a criticism which, on the face of it, seems merited, but the Caribbean writer in self-justification might reasonably enquire whether art can be expected to objectify impulses not present in the society from which it springs. A sense of destiny, and therefore of the tragic is projected by society itself; it is an intimation to the individual at any given moment of society's role in the life-cycle of the culture as a whole; fundamentally it is an expression or apprehension of the very nature of time itself. So in fact are most great themes, the substance of most grand movements, in literature and in art. A literature can hardly be expected to be philosophic where the society itself is not. That Caribbean society as we know it now is far from philosophic in its apprehension of nature, of time or of destiny must be accepted as a fact of the colonial circumstance; for it is a definition of the colonial situation that in place of evolving systems for the apprehension of nature in its manifold expressions, in place of creating systems for exteriorising our intuitions about the being of God, as have all the ancestral peoples – African or Asian or European – the colonial suffers such systems to be fed to him from one source or another in the Old World. The colonial in fact never builds systems for anything; systems are generated by minds in contact with problems. It is a characteristic of the colonial system that the subject-individual is insulated from all that is humanly problematical, all that is problematically human. Beyond the animal need of freedom we are irresponsible in so far as we know no problems that elicit response. Not only has our world been made for us, it also has been explained for us – to our apparent lasting satisfaction. Lacking our own ancestor-principles as immigrants in a continent which has itself produced no ancestor, the Guyanese Negro has been unable even to generate such syncretist thought as we find, for example, in certain West African tribal religions, or in Brazilian Negro mythology[14]. On the other hand Oriental and other immigrants to this country who have retained original ancestor concepts seem to me to have retained possession of religions and philosophic systems which, apart from their value as defence mechanisms in the colonial context, never will have any relevance in the New World.[15] The desire of certain Negroes among us to promote cultural

relationships with independent Africa will likewise gain us little in any positive sense for the reason that the sentiment is similarly one of self-defence, that is to say it is inherently negative; it is a reaction to cultural pressures exercised by one or more of the constituent racial elements of our society. But these elements, being filialistic in orientation, are limited in their capacity for independent growth. In the Caribbean and in Guyana, where the forms of literary and artistic expression are European, no filialistic element has yet evolved, and I venture to say will ever evolve, an independent idiom of expression in the arts. This is hardly to be wondered at – the ancestral gods do not inhabit the marketplaces of an alien land, or, put another way, cosmologies do not travel well. Whatever the concern of Mr Naipaul, for instance, with the Brahmin gods, and a Brahmin ancestry, his literary thought and literary expression are those of a foreign culture. To a similar extent at least this is also true of the Negro Caribbean artist and writer. And this brings us to a further peculiarity of the Caribbean cultural scene: it is that whatever the particular ancestral affiliation of any given racial group in our society, each in one degree or another stands in a filialistic relationship to a foreign, a European culture – British, French. Spanish. Dutch, *et cetera*. But cultural pressures mutually exercised among our several racial groups, besides being socially divisive, promote the phenomenon of catalysis in our society. While it remains true that no filialistic element is in itself significant in the creative arts of Guyana, they are nevertheless creative in their effect on the nature and fabric of our culture. Our picture, then, of Caribbean and more particularly Guyanese culture, might be summarised as one in which cultural pressures are mutually exercised by our several racial groups, either in extensive or in intensive degree, either aggressive or defensive, while all stand in filialistic relationship to British or another European culture. Each racial group, by virtue of its affiliation to its particular ancestor-culture of the Old World is to that extent limited in its potential for independent growth in the New and therefore for creative expression in the arts. For this reason no filialistic culture on the Caribbean or Guyanese scene has evolved an idiom of expression in accordance with its

particular racial-ancestral heritage – the area of creative expression in the arts of the New World lies beyond the scope of any such racial-ancestral affiliation. In total effect however these several elements in our society, acting as catalysts, are symptomatic of the possibility of an autonomous regional philosophy, one premise of which lies in our unique lack of witness. Lack of witness in the regard of the 'other', lack of witness in a shared concept of the ancestor and therefore – a corollary of our first premise – lack of any charter for a destiny.

The symptoms of catalysis which underpin such a hypothetical Caribbean or New World philosophy are functions of the insecurities mutually generated by the pressures of our several racial groups. By existing each racial group qualifies, and diminishes, the self-image of the other. The resulting uneasiness, the sense of psychic erosion, the self-questioning which are all characteristics of Guyanese society – this total of groups which is greater than their sum – these constitute the image of catalysis as we have examined it among ourselves. It is a consciousness of not sharing a common unity with the gods of the soil. This psychic unease, this self-questioning, this lack of union with the ancestral gods of the soil, these are not characteristics of Old World cultures. It is therefore the supreme paradox of the colonial condition that all experience is articulated for us in the forms and institutions of the Old World.

It has been remarked by a foreigner, a member of an Old World race, that West Indians are not a confident people – a judgement which it would be difficult to deny. But it is a comment which I think can be made with equal justice of any New World people since fundamentally it is a comment bearing on our very notion of destiny. To a people for whom the vestments of the sperm down the generations is always, and always will be, an open question, there can be no iron-clad convictions as to the nature of their destiny. We simply do not know in what racial skin the sperm will present in our children's children; the character of our today will not necessarily be the character of our tomorrow, and the character of all our yesterdays is not common ground. For us of the Caribbean and Guyana no charter of a destiny can exist, since

the very notion of a destiny, both for the individual, and for the society of which he is a unit, implies the consciousness of a self-image, and while we lack the unity bequeathed in the consciousness of a common ancestry, no such unified self-image might be conceived of. In the Caribbean as we know it today our lack of self-confidence is a corollary of our lack of a consciousness of a common self-image. This lack of self-confidence might also explain an almost universal lack of ambitiousness among our writers and painters, especially – if I may say it – the latter, and our utter dependence on foreign norms of criticism in appraising their work.[16] It is a situation which needn't worry us, however, if we recall that until the appearance of Hogarth in the eighteenth-century England had produced no great national painter, and that Henry Moore in the twentieth century might be considered to have no truly national sculptor behind him. Walt Whitman did not appear at the birth of the American colonies, and the birth of Mexican painting which has since so astonished the world had to await its social and political revolution in the early twentieth century. We cannot plan the emergence of such phenomena, and even less can we force them: the expressions of a culture are always wilful. There seems to come a moment in the life of any given society when the obvious is suddenly illuminated in an individual consciousness, and the obvious takes on its own new meaning in the forms of art – a shift of consciousness, if you like, in which the obvious comes to be invested with the beauty of the miraculous. For the artist it suddenly becomes: this is what I have been looking at all the while, what we have all been looking at. Now we see it!

The possibility of such a shift of consciousness is of course always there, just as the obvious in all its prosaicness is always there. The obvious never changes; it is we who, by investing it with meaning, change ourselves, and therefore glimpse the miraculous. An epiphany if you like, as I believe James Joyce called such a vision, or, if I understand him at all, an ordination, in Henry Miller's words. "*After the first death*," Eliot says somewhere, "t*here is no other.*" Might he perhaps have been meaning the death of the obvious?

It seems to me that among us of the Caribbean who hold no warrant for a destiny it is the present which is our only

witness, the present as it has been determined in the complex womb of which we are the it seems to me that among us of the Caribbean who hold no warrant for a destiny it is the present which is our only witness, the present as it has been determined in the complex womb of which we are the issue. An endlessly continuing present ceaselessly created and destroyed by the activities of the various catalytic elements at work on our consciousness. A present whose nature is therefore subject to infinite change as one element or another among us comes to provide the dynamics of the scene. In concrete terms, for instance, let us remember that even touching upon the composition of our society we have no certain knowledge, no security from day to day, year to year, down the centuries. There can be no warrant for the numerical distribution of the several races of this country a generation hence: even though we expect no new influx of immigrants, no further compounding of racial elements – and who can be certain of this – we cannot be sure of what Guyanese society, even in a crude physical sense, is likely to be in our time to come. In a crude physical sense we cannot for instance imagine the future of our Amerindian peoples – the spiritual cushion, shall we call them of our country. It is foreseeably possible that the Amerindian peoples might be physically absorbed and consumed in the wide-open jaws of Guyanese progress – they are a bewildered and exhausted people and their defences are poor. Nevertheless it is fairly certain granted our present racial conservatism, our affiliation to the ancestral gods of our several racial origins, that a complete physical fusion of all elements of Guyanese society is not to be anticipated, however permissive we might continue to be in regard to miscegenation. The fact of miscegenation, and conservative reaction to it are likely to continue to be the polarities of our culture for many a generation to come, possibly forever and forever. This is to say that the process of cultural catalysis is likely, to the end of ends, to remain the principal determining phenomenon of the nature of Guyanese society. This is the obvious, the prosaic, the commonplace fact of life in our country. In what shape or racial skin the sperm will be handed on no one of us, in spite of the demands of racial conservatism, has any means of

knowing, since no institutions we might create, no particular affiliation to any racial-ancestral past, is strong enough to protect the purity of the sperm, the sanctity of the line, as we know it in the Old World.

What conscious eye then might come to see the miracle in our particular and prosaic presentation of the obvious. What regional philosophy rooted in the state and status of New World man might illuminate the obvious in Guyana and provide the springs of consciousness and a self-conscious art? This lack of witness, this lack of the indwelling of a common ancestor, this lack of any charter whatsoever for a destiny seems to me to establish an entirely unique basis for such a view of man, for the conduct of affairs, and for the realisations of culture; for the human in such a continually changing present, the human as himself a function of the process of catalysis establishes the possibility of a new relationship – individual to individual, individual to society; the possibility of a truly human experiment (if the word might be permitted to describe a shift of consciousness itself rather than a mere shifting of the products of experience); an experiment in human consciousness if not in human responsibility.

Beyond this realisation nothing whatsoever might be expected to change. All that is required for change, now or whenever, is that in someone of us, somewhere, that apparently sourceless leap of consciousness will occur which might come to invest the obvious with a quality of miracle: the miracle of absolute quality.

Such a new relationship, individual to individual, individual to society already, as we know, provides the creative growing points of our culture, the living material of our writers and, thinkers, since it is not at the present moment institutions which cement and augment our cultural growth, but individuals – of whatever racial complexion – responding to the imperatives of the present, and not to those of a filialistic dependence on the Old World racial ancestor. I have claimed that Mittelholzer and Harris have respectively proposed and resolved the question of identity in the light of the nature of the ancestor. With Mr Harris's philosophic contribution to the Guyanese consciousness I hope to deal in the last of these lectures after having proposed, in my next lecture,

contrasts between African and Caribbean literature as each refers to an ancestral affiliation. That our society remains vital and does not collapse along interfaces created by the divisive activities of our several racial elements is to be attributed to the effects of catalysis generated by these elements, and the responses of particular individual Guyanese to such a situation as it changes from moment to moment. Such an intimate relationship between the individual and his present creates among us personal contrasts with the individual as subject to one filialistic relationship or another, and the resulting tension has its certain effect on literary activity in general and on the development of creative literature in particular. So that we cannot for instance at the moment hope for the literary stimulus of the little magazine among us, for one thing, quite apart from that of a national publishing house – the several cultural anchorages of our people are too disparate. It is an extraordinary situation for a nation. We produce writers yet might not develop the critical values, the national responses by means of which they might be defined and fully absorbed. To this degree the Guyanese and Caribbean writer does not truly serve his culture, whatever the degree of his accomplishments. This is a problem which it is quite outside the capacity of the writer to resolve even where, as now of course seems very desirable, the expatriate Guyanese writer might return to work among his people and from their common problems. It is of the greatest interest to observe, however, that for both Mittelholzer and Harris, who chose exile in order to refine upon their gifts, problems of blood and ancestry unknown in the countries of their adoption continued nevertheless to provide impulse in their creative work and thought.

In summary, then, these problems of blood and ancestry, being central to the Guyanese social structure, might be expected to be reflected, in direct or in sublimated form, in much Guyanese creative writing to come. Where for the present these problems are ignored by our artists, as indeed they appear to be ignored by very many others among us, Guyanese art takes on a superficiality and eclecticism to which there is, and ever will be in the nature of things, only limited response. The filialistic structure of our society has paradoxically

not produced individual art-idioms rooted in the corresponding ancestor-relationship – and this fact might in itself be the most eloquent comment on the real nature and value of the ancestor-relationships on Guyanese soil, for whatever our various protestations, there simply is not, nor will there ever be in Guyana an East Indian or a Chinese art or an African art *et cetera*. In their dependence on the cultures of the various racial ancestors however these various filialistic elements perpetuate those aspects of religion and mythology which an immigrant people might carry with them into their new homelands; other aspects of belief which are not easily subject to immigrant travel, such as architecture, sculpture, painting, pottery and even literature, therefore remain unknown in the new homeland. I have observed this process in Africa, where the Sudanese people have built a rather suffocating and self-denying culture on only the Word, and the observances, of the Holy Koran without having ever experienced the plastic and literary culture to which the Koran has given birth elsewhere. Except in the Caribbean, immigrants are not often culture-bearers; the creative tend to remain at home, as in this country we know from the experience of colonialism. But ancestral forms retained among us by our various immigrant elements remain of particular and of general reference in the Guyanese cultural scene. They are mutually unintelligible to their various factors; they are socially divisive since they are responses, in extensive or in intensive degree, to social pressures generated by other filialistic groups. These responses, however, by their very virulence promote among us that phenomenon of catalysis by means of which the obvious might come to be transcended in a reinterpretation of the present. This provides new ground, and the only ground, for genuine creative activity, in thought or in art, on the Guyanese scene. But because of the various racial affiliations of the constituent elements of our society this possibility of new thought, of a creative art assessed in our own critical terms, remains extremely limited and, what's more, is likely to remain so limited for as long as we care to think.

III IMAGE AND IDEA IN AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE[17]

I do not think that anyone among us would wish to claim *Green Mansions* to be a work of Guyanese literature any more than Epstein's famous carving of *Rima* in London's Hyde Park could be thought a work of Guyanese sculpture; but it is significant to us that this classic of English literature has evoked the essence of the Guyanese scene in the image of a nature-goddess. If ever we come to conceive of a Goddess of Guyana it would certainly be figured in this creation of Hudson's; already in just over half a century we feel her to be a part of our national heritage – as much a part of the image of this country as are Kaieteur or Roraima. In this way Hudson's romance unintentionally points up a characteristic of our culture which we have dealt with in the first two of these lectures. This is that, in Guyana, the forces of nature have never been conceptualised in the images of gods and goddesses as they have been for instance in West Africa. On our soil have arisen no ancestral gods. As Hudson was a naturalist and not an anthropologist he has left us no picture of the demons and monsters of the Amerindian imagination; but what is important to us is the literary capital which he has made of this material. It is the only one of our works of fiction in which a nature goddess appears as a protagonist: in fact the only work in which any aspect of Guyanese nature is anthropomorphised. It is not surprising that this symbolism should be the work of a foreign author for, as we have already noted, Guyanese, and New World peoples generally, do not stand, and have never stood, in this kind of relationship to nature in the countries which they today occupy. We conceive of no gods of this soil, since as immigrants we had already created our gods in our several ancestral homelands, it took an uncommitted outsider to symbolise nature for us in this way. The work is meaningful to us since it achieves universality, and inbuilt tragedy, in the treatment of one of the oldest themes in European mythology – the union of a mortal with a god. But since on this soil we do not conceive of immortals, I do

not think that this work could ever have been written by a Guyanese, or indeed by any other New World author. Conceivably though, in its sophisticated nature-symbolism, it could very much have been written by a modern West African – perhaps, say, the Senegalese author, Camara Laye.[18] This observation suggests a fundamental contrast in the thought and content of the two literatures – African and Caribbean – and it is this contrast which is the subject of our third lecture – 'Image and Idea in African and Caribbean Literature'. The contrast might, in addition, yield some notion as to the relevance of African literature to the Caribbean creative mind in so far as they share, or do not share, common attitudes.

In Tropical Africa, and in the Caribbean, creative writing is of very recent history; so recent in fact that in either case one might he justifiably hesitant to speak of a literature at all, since literature is made by time. But in both cases these works have been so readily cultivated and consumed in Europe that they already provide the substance of university curricula, and have stimulated a specialised criticism, a specialised scholarship, even a specialised readership.[19] Therefore it is even now too late to question whether we are considering national literatures or simply reviewing writing by West Indian and Tropical African authors. But since writing of one sort or another has been produced by black Africans and by West Indians for the better part of the last two centuries, it will be necessary to distinguish the products of the present generation of authors and to examine them for those qualities or characteristics which make them particular or original. Lacking the possibility of assessing this body of work in time it should at least be possible to define it in the light of its own attributes. The emergence of creative writing both in English- and in French-speaking Africa, as well as in the Caribbean, is first of all a comment on the deadening influence of the colonial circumstance; secondly it is a revelation of the effects of colonialism in each particular case. It is not to be wondered at that the colonial experience was not one in which a subject people could be stimulated to creative expression in literature – the reasons are many and obvious – but in its effect the colonial experience is

certainly of interest to us in determining the nature of literatures which would arise in any of the given areas. In the French-speaking regions of West Africa – in the Cameroons, in Guinea or in Senegal – as similationist policies, by placing a premium on the emergence of the *evolué* – the native African who in manners and in culture becomes virtually a Frenchman – had a generally detribalising effect in the eradication of traditional values and traditional culture. This situation stands in strong contrast to that in the British African colonies – Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone *et cetera* – where systems of indirect rule – that is to say systems of political administration through intermediary tribal chiefs – left tribal organisations, tribal values, and certainly tribal religion largely intact. With the end of the colonial era these opposed systems of administration, French and British, would determine the outlook of the literatures which arose in these regions. Where in the French-speaking territories assimilationist policies resulted in a wholly detribalised literature, this was not the case in the English-speaking West African countries. Among these latter, Nigeria has been by far the most productive in literature and in art, and here we find traditional themes in African belief absorbed without conscious effort into the body of modern literary expression. Where the literature of French-speaking West Africa readily became a province of French literature as a whole, both in idiom and in philosophic bias, West African literature in English emerged with a conceptual and symbolic apparatus rooted in undisturbed tribal values.

In both cases, however, French and British, the African author is almost obsessively concerned with one overriding theme – that of the conflict between traditional African and modern European values. In the Caribbean, and in Guyana, it is interesting to observe that, in effect, though clearly not in intention, British rule has had on society and on art, the same assimilationist influence as we observe in the French territories of West Africa. In the British Caribbean we do not speak of the *evolué* citizen, but this is precisely the expression, one imagines, that would occur to a Frenchman observing the patterns of our society – patterns in which, as in the French West African system, the base-structure of traditional values

has been overlaid, or entirely replaced, by those of the imperial overlord, and a social value placed on the individual acquisition of these alien values. The effect on our thought and our art has been the same as in the French African territories where a more or less thorough cultural assimilation is expressed in the manners and outlook of the native *evolué*. As we all know it is in the mind of such a culturally assimilated *evolué* native French Caribbean poet, Aimé Césaire, that the concept of Negritude was first figured. It is not surprising that the sentiment – it can hardly be called more than that – was immediately taken up, codified and disseminated by the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor. Peculiarly an expression of the frustration of the *evolué* Negro, French or British, who in Europe comes to realise that he is not after all quite so assimilated as he had supposed. I am a little bit puzzled to understand why in fact Negritude has not gained a wider currency in the English-speaking Caribbean – one would have thought the area fertile soil indeed. But very significantly it has never amounted to anything whatsoever in the English-speaking West African territories, where traditional cultures have remained untouched by assimilationist policies on the French pattern.

It is extremely difficult to describe to the West Indian mind the absolute and unreflective confidence which powers forth from the British West African in view of this undisturbed underlayer of traditional values on which he builds. With no intention at all of conscious arrogance the Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka once made the celebrated pronouncement. *"Negritude! does a tiger need to proclaim its Tigritude?"* The unshakeable confidence expressed in this attitude would be unthinkable to the detribalised French-speaking West African, or to the even more thoroughly detribalised West Indian. Assimilationism has dispossessed us both, in one way or another, of the cultural security of the English-speaking African. For the French West African Negritude has thus come to provide the mechanism by means of which he seeks to repossess his past. Thus nostalgically reconnected to his past he arrives at that consciousness of conflict between African traditional values on the one hand, and alien European values on the other, which we have noted to be an

overriding theme in all the literatures of modern Africa. It is a conflict in which, by the way, African traditional values invariably come off second best, but this is merely a reflection of social fact. However the observation provides our first line of contrast between modern African writing and that of the Caribbean – and at this point the comparison between the Caribbean and the French African assimilationist social pattern breaks down; for, even though detribalised and Frenchifed, the consciousness of the French West African writer hinges on a past whose values, whether classical African or Islamic, are to him heroic. The contrast is a profound one for, as we have observed in the first two of our lectures, the Caribbean author, in English or in French, might not look back with similar immediacy and comfort on a classical ancestry – the break with Africa has been, in this respect at least, absolute. Caribbean evocations of Africa in literature are general, romanticised, sentimental, often ludricrous. The Caribbean imagination envisages a romanticised Africa where the black African mind envisages the particular tribe. One observes this same generalised and superficial view in American Negro writing about Africa – the view is inevitably an imagined, and not an actual one.

Apart from this contrast in our relative emotional orientation to the past – our relative relationships to the ancestor as we have called it earlier – there is the obvious contrast, too, of language. While it is true that all the writers of Tropical Africa use European languages, as do all Caribbean writers, it must not be forgotten that for the African a European language is very much a second language, a language which he is not at home in using, a language which in certain cases he even resents using, and which he therefore employs with severe limitations and inhibitions. As a result it might be said that all African writing in English is ready-made and not spontaneous, that is to say it is language remembered from a spoken or a written model, and not language invented to the spontaneous dictates of feeling. So far is this the case that for many African writers in English one might mentally, as one goes along, supply the model for his prose – in some cases it is the prose of the nineteenth-century English novel studied

in the universities, in others it is the prose of the Civil Administration of a colonial day whose bureaucratic utterances might be anything but literary models,[20] in yet others it is the prose of the Holy Bible – expressions such as "*wax strong in faith*", "*grew in wrath*", *et cetera* from the Kenyan novelist, Ngugi.[21] The earliest African fiction, in South Africa, was in fact directly mission-inspired and published from mission presses in the nineteen-twenties. In any case, for the African author his native language is the medium in which he naturally thinks and dreams and has his being, and the use of any other always entails conscious effort. Limiting as this obviously is in the strictly utilitarian sense, we must remember too that all African languages are rich storehouses of traditional literary and cult-material – proverbs, fables, praise-songs to various deities, ancestors or heroes – and that these are often untranslatable. The resulting frustration in English composition have been aired from time to time by writers from various parts of the continent, many of whom as I have said, resent the need to use a European language at all. An ambitious compromise has recently been attempted by the Nigerian author Gabriel Okara in literal translation from his native Ijo in the composition of his novel *The Voice*. The results are sometimes charming, sometimes quaint, often curious and distracting. He talks for instance of the "*know-nothing footsteps*" (p. 25) of those "*church-people*" (p. 19), "*know-God people*" (p. 21) with the "*surface-water*" laugh (p. 28) – images which while being not too unfamiliar to the West Indian reader nevertheless run the risk of becoming irritating.[22]

The Caribbean writer, needless to say, experiences none of those difficulties and frustrations. But it is certainly a severe loss to him that he cannot work out of the imaginative repositories of a traditional language. We know for example that Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is set in "*days of unknown year*" – the ancestral time of Yoruha traditional fable.[23] This backward half-look of Tutuola's is one which the Caribbean writer is not privileged to take, and he is so much the poorer for it. The Nigerian writer, the late O. O. Fagunwa, never wrote in any but his native Yoruba, even though his spoken English was fluent; but some of his writing, very much in the vein of Tutuola's direct English composition, has been

translated. We might recall here the creative use to which the Welsh poet, Wilfred Owen, and in a more indirect way Dylan Thomas and the virtually unknown novelist and short story writer Caradoc Evans have put the Welsh language while writing in, to them, the foreign English language. There is in certain Caribbean writers, notably Vic Reid (*The Leopard*) a certain music in prose expression which might possibly have to do with their once having spoken a West African tonal language – but this is a speculation which it would take a very specialised linguistic mind to establish. Certainly it is an asset in Caribbean writing which nowhere appears in the English prose of Tropical Africa. The reason for this might perhaps be the lack of freedom and plasticity in the English at present employed by all Africans a situation which, however, might be subject to change; the spoken language of Wole Soyinka, for instance, could put many a native Englishman to shame, even though his literary prose is stilted and rigid and almost archaic.[24] The verbal music of some Caribbean writers which I have just noted might perhaps be paralleled in the Welsh-speaking authors just mentioned. Caribbean or at any rate Guyanese English pronunciation is often regarded as indistinguishable from that of the Welsh, a similarity which might certainly have arisen in the reactions of a traditional native tongue to foreign English.

These are major differences between the writing of Tropical Africa and that of the Caribbean. We have seen that on the one hand the conflict between traditional values in confrontation with the values of the modern Western world is a distinguishing theme in African creative writing, where for us of the Caribbean no such conflict exists. On the other hand the African author experiences limitations and inhibitions in the use of a European language which are unknown to the author in the Caribbean. There are other differences which, springing from traditional belief, unify the writing of all regions of Tropical Africa. Whether, as in Senegal, tribal organisation had broken down under the assimilationist policies of the French; or whether, as in Kenya, tribal values were consciously invoked in support of armed conflict with the British, we find the mind of the African writer determined by certain attitudes developed in his traditional past, and these define the very nature and content of his work.

The first of these bears once more on the subject of the previous two lectures – this is the concept of the ancestor as it is projected in one form or another in modern African writing, English or French. Before we note its occurrence in the literature let us briefly examine the idea of the ancestor as it is held among the peoples of Tropical Africa. Very broadly speaking the ancestor principle hinges on the nature of man, of matter and of time itself as conceived in traditional African belief. "*Every person, animal, plant and thing has its guiding spirit, and people in their turn are moved by the multitude of their own guiding spirits*."[25] It is a concept of Vital Force indwelling in all creation, and with which all matter is charged. A community is made up not only of the living, but of the dead as well, the greater part of the community being the multitude of the dead. And this multitude of the dead is forever linked with the life of the tribe through the soil shared by all. As Jomo Kenyatta has remarked of the Gikuyu: "*Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried. The Gikuyu consider the earth as the 'Mother' of the tribe. It is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. The earth is the most sacred thing, above all that dwell in or on it. An everlasting oath is to swear by the earth.*"[26] Among the Yoruba of Nigeria this relationship is represented in the *Ogboni* sacred system to the Earth-Principle, Ilé. (see note 13). It is a relationship to Earth which is universal in Tropical Africa; as the Yoruba say, "*Earth existed before the Gods, and the* ***Ogboni*** *system before kingship*." Since spirit is immanent in all matter, it is only the forms in which it is invested that are subject to decay. So that, among the Yoruba, on his death the vital essences of a man – that which made him a man – are ritually reclaimed by the *Ogboni* on behalf of the Earth-Mother; the body that goes into the grave is considered 'empty.' In the spirit world the dead will preside over the destinies of the living. As there is no distance between the living and the dead, the dead will constantly be invoked to speed the affairs of the living.[26] Césaire therefore sings of

> […] the dead who circulate in the veins of the earth
> and who sometimes come and knock their heads
> against the walls of our ears.

So the traditional African view of time might be figured as an eternal present in which spirit ceaselessly manifests itself in the changing forms of matter while remaining inherently indestructible; and human life is seen as endlessly proliferating being in which the community, as the meeting-point between the living and the dead, is the eternal centre. As the Western mind has conceived of the indestructability of matter, so the African mind has conceived of the indestructability of spirit. In all matter spirit is present with potential power for good or ill, depending on the manner of its propitiation. "*Anything can become a god,*" a Yoruba informant once remarked to me, "*This button,*" pointing to a knob on the dashboard of a car I was driving, "*It only needs to be built up by prayer.*" All matter is therefore potentially active by virtue of the indwelling of Vital Force; through the forms of matter union is maintained with the ancestor. In this vital function, incidentally, sculpture plays an important role as the vessel of the spirit – which is one reason that African sculpture is so different in its conception of form from that of the European. Where the European sculpture *represents* a man the African sculptor, in communion with that spirit which he knows to be indwelling in his wood, is trying to *make* a man. European sculpture, you might say, attempts a continual equivalence, where African sculpture attempts to be an established actuality. And this explains an aspect of the ancestor-image in African literature, traditional or modern: it is that *once invoked* the ancestor brings all his attributes with him ready-made. But characterisation in the European sense demands in literature an attitude very different from this. The ancestor is a total of virtues described in the praise-songs continually sung to him: his image is as inflexible as that of a statue, though he is as potent as a god. Collectively the ancestors of the tribe constitute a massive super-ego determining the morality of the tribe as a whole. Prince Modupe of Senegal describes an ancestor ceremony as a form of group or collective conscience, the feeling of ancestral approval being a measure of the rightness, the morality of an act.[27]

How does this relationship to the ancestor affect the creative literature of the African? As I have said, though it is one of the principal defining themes in African literature, its

use is not always conscious and direct – its expression might range from direct presentation, as in the Kenyan author Ngugi, to the extremely sophisticated symbolic imagery of the Senegalese Camara Laye. From Kenya Ngugi tells us:

> If a man had plenty of money, many motorcars but no land, he could never be counted as rich […] Land is bound up with the very concept of creation […] When a man is severed from the land of his ancestors – where would he sacrifice to the Creator!

In this work, *Weep Not, Child*, the ancestor theme provides dramatic motivation in the father-figure who is broken through alienation from the land; it is "*the revenge of the hills*," the ancient hills being pictured by the author as the shrine of the ancestors.[28] In an infinitely more subtle treatment the consequences of alienation are presented in Camara's Laye's brilliant short story, *The Eyes of the Statue*, in which the nameless quest of a young woman is fatally solved in the evoking of a depthless loneliness which she finds in the eyes of the statue – and of herself. Her mute cry of anguish is uttered through the mouth of the statue as the rising ocean of natural disorder overtakes them both. Here alienation is seen as destructive to ancestor and descendant alike, to the dead as well as to the living, for it is only by means of the prayers of the living that the dead remain potent in the spirit-world.[29] As Prince Modupe says:

> If our people left the old sacred ways the angered spirits of our deceased ancestors would have their revenge. Calamity past calamity would befall us.[30]

Ulli Beier has written a long essay on the theme of the ancestors in Senghor's poetry which he presents as a cardinal distinguishing element between Senghor's work and that of the European poet.

In much modern writing from Tropical Africa we find the ancestor sublimated, as it were, in the image of the hieratic and revered father. Here we come to the vexed question of characterisation in African Literature. It has again and again

been claimed, with more or less justice, that the African novel lacks character-drawing: the novel of Equatorial Africa, that is to say, since Alex la Guma's South African novel *A Walk in the Night*, for example, is justifiably free of this criticism.[31]

To the degree in which this criticism is justified of the Tropical African writer his predicament is illustrated in his relationship to the ancestor. Whatever figure in tribal life rises above the ordinary and merits being remembered by his posterity – be he ancestor or warrior, hero or king – he is remembered for precisely those virtues which in life had marked him out among men. The praise-song is the medium through which his virtues are continually addressed back to him by his posterity. He becomes an immobile image clothed in the virtues through which, after death, he lives among men. It is only necessary to invoke such an image, and all its virtues will body forth with it. It is easy in this way to understand the emergence of the stereotype in African writing.

The stereotype is a traditional fact of all forms of African art; it appears in sculpture and in music no less than in the oral literature. The Nigerian composer Fela Sowande claims that for traditional man sound itself is stereotyped in 'words of power' used to produce tangible results, terrible vocal forms handed down by the forefathers, through whose mediumship he might invoke and handle psychic forces of tremendous potency which his will could then direct as suited his purposes. In sculpture too, the African artist does not work from an inner inspiration or from a natural model as does the European artist, but always from an established standard of traditional carving set before his eyes. As one observer has remarked, "*If dream there is, it is a given dream*." This dominance of the stereotype in the African creative mind will naturally be produced in the forms of literature. We find it over and again in the hieratic and revered father, whom I read as a sublimation of the traditional ancestor-image. Achebe describes his hero's father:

> He was not exactly remote from his family, but there was something about him that made one think of patriarchs, those giants hewn from granite. [32]

This hieratic and revered father, as he occurs in African fiction, is the sum of attributes just as the ancestor is the sum of those virtues rendered in the praise-song. We find him again in Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*[33] a total of ideal attributes. Even in Mongo Beti's modern novel of extremely sophisticated attitudes, we will find the hero's action determined by an unreflective tribal respect for an 'oninipotent' father. Within what he calls "*this powerful orbit of my father*," this is his predicament:

> Imagine a defenceless adolescent whose father has always been in his eyes a terrible and omnipotent god […] what weight has the desire not to hurt a girl's feelings when set in the scale beside the fear of incurring Jove's own thunderous wrath.[34]

Again in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* – far and away one of the most sophisticated African novels ever – the hero's destiny pivots on a powerful early relationship to his father from whom he eventually runs away. At the limits of subjectivity he reflects on that most appalling act possible to an African: *"I thought of killing my father."*[35] Remember that in these French African novels we are dealing with awake sensibilities, very conscious craft, fine philosophic minds. Yet even here, as of course in the far more prosaic English African novels, we find this limitation in characterisation, this facile compliance with the demands of the stereotype. The reason must surely seat in impulses that run deeper than the course of the awake sensibility or conscious craft or the resources of the philosophic mind

Certainly it is not that the African person, traditional or modern, is unaware of the individual variation and human colour that define personality, any more than that the African sculptor is unable to see that people flex their muscles and sometimes destroy the balances of a rigid bilateral symmetry. It is not that the African writer or praise-song singer does not believe the evidence of his senses, or is too lazy to express the deviousness which he observes in people – these attitudes are in fact subsumed in the quality of his outlook. It is that since experience is so variable, so contradictory in the evidence it

supplies, then constants must be found, and these constants must be as easily apprehended as is a slogan or the message of a poster. The African ancestor portrait tends therefore to be heroic, as a poster is heroic, and not personal and particular. Furthermore a morality is implied; for the subject of the ancestor portrait is constantly brought into contact, within his own being, with the imperatives of the ideal. In terms of the novel, personal conflict is not therefore reduced by this apparent failure of characterisation, but rather increased, as we find in the dilemma of Achebe's Okonkwo. The dramatic possibilities are therefore great. As we know, however, these are not possibilities open to the Caribbean writer.

Along with the ancestor stereotype goes the stereotype of the infinitely wise and all-loving mother. She possesses miraculous attributes, she is endlessly benevolent, her wisdom and shelter are all embracing. This literary stereotype I see as the sublimated Earth Mother of African traditional belief. Earth seen not as the abode of the ancestral spirits, but in her own right in all her bountiful significance for human being. She is the mother of all that lives, and to her therefore, life and particularly human life symbolised in blood, is sacred. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria the Earth-goddess, Ilé, thus becomes the supreme judge of human conduct systems of ecclesiastical and civil law have their sanctions in her. No drop of human blood might be shed on Earth without her exacting retribution. In Senegal we encounter the same mystic value of human blood:

> Blood has a mystic significance to an African. Blood is lifestuff; life drips away with it. A tribesman will endure enormous welts and bruises without a whimper if the skin is not broken; but let someone draw blood, even a bead of blood, and the matter takes on enormous proportions and gravity. [36]

The power of Earth as the mother of all life is not a concept which it would be easy for a Caribbean writer to grasp, let alone try to translate into fictional terms. Her sublimated image however will appear as a literary stereotype of wide distribution in the African novel. As with the ancestor-image

she brings all her attributes with her ready-made; once invoked no vagaries of plot or circumstance will alter her image in the reader's mind – the stereotype demands unconditional, unreflective respect. It is not painted with the discriminating eye required in the delineation of character with its implications of history, of the essential 'on-going' nature of being; the mother-stereotype, as we find her in for instance *The Dark Child*, remains as static and uniform through all dramatic development as does the statue in Camara Laye's short story – the same on each invocation just as, to his issue, the ancestor image remains the same forever. It has been remarked, in this connection, that the African writer is usually unsuccessful in his portrayal of women. I have not examined the virtues of this claim, but if it is justified, the reasons would surely not be far to find. It would be interesting on this point to contrast for instance Mittelholzer's wide and successful range of observations of the female mind, but for more immediate contrast let us look at the precision and particularly of this sketch of a mother by Wilson Harris:

> I caught a glimpse of my mother's face in a mirror looking like the face of an impossible shadow. Yet it was she, I reminded myself. The door of her room was part-open. My step grandmother and grandfather were addressing her in an ominous persuasive tone and she was weeping bitterly and hollowly, the tears streaming down her cheeks to mingle like beads of glass in the reflection of her hair. Her fleeting distraught appearance was that of someone in process of being devoured by, and in process too of devouring a strangled sensation of love. It was the quickest incredible chain of reaction I saw for they saw me too and quickly closed the door.[37]

To these two great figure-types then, the ancestral father and the all embracing and ever-loving mother, the African author acknowledges subjection. He does not attempt, for these, the individual portrait in all its arbitrariness and ambiguousness. Character drawing in the European sense implies a position of dominance in regard to the object which the African rarely seems willing to permit himself, a

position of inquiry and analysis in the face of natural phenomena which forms no part of his tradition.

A relationship of dominance to the object, a *disbelief* in the union of object and observer, an essential negation of the spiritual reality that is an object – any object at all is, in contrast, a legacy of the European consciousness to Caribbean literature. No West Indian could conceive of the expression: "*The door doesn't agree to open*" – yet such is a commonplace of West African speech. It is an attitude that acknowledges the *capacity for response* vested in the object – the object (or person) seen as instinct with life which in the nature of things involves the beholder, and to which the beholder is therefore precluded from standing in analytical relationship. The door doesn't *agree* to open! The stick, or the stone, *moves*! Fundamentally – though the African is not a bit conscious of this – it is not the object (slick or stone) that moves, but processes inside himself, over which he seeks to exercise control, that move. The African writer does not therefore need the apparent mobility of literary characterisation, any more than does the African sculptor need the apparent mobility realised in the study of muscular anatomy. It is the union which he establishes with the object, *in belief*, that matters, and through which he, and perhaps his readers, might come to self-realisation. If, to the subject, the door does not agree to open then the subject must, in some degree and by recourse to whatever means, augment the power of his own Vital Force. Because of the spirit universally considered indwelling in all matter, union with matter is continually potentially possible. For the Caribbean individual a woman and a television set provide discrete sensory experiences: one is organic the other is inorganic. The Nigerian writer Tutuola will however conceive a "*television-handed goddess*" in his apprehension of a reality that exists neither above nor beneath the ordinary any more than do heat or light exist above or beneath the ordinary.

This immanence of spirit which characterises the nature of African ontological belief might stimulate a view of causality alien or even absurd to the Europe-dominated Caribbean mind. In Okara's novel. *The Voice*, two characters, Okolo and Tuere, secretly flee the anger of their village in a canoe and set

out for the haven of another village some miles upriver. But having travelled all night they arrive the next morning only to find the natives of this new village quietly waiting to apprehend them! I once asked a postgraduate student of literature in an African university how he would explain this striking improbability. Why should it be explained at all, he wanted to know, it *is* the Improbable! Of course, though in the Western world we pretend to take no notice, the Improbable does play its sure and secret part in determining the affairs of men. The Yoruba have wisely named a god – the trickster-god, Esu – to this uncertainty-principle in human affairs. He is a very important god and stands in intimate relationship to their Oracle of Divination – he who controls the destinies of men. The Improbable is thus causally accounted for. The driver of my Land Rover has locked the door each time we have stopped in the African bush. Each time he has re-inserted his key in the lock, opened the door, and we continue on our trek. It is improbable that key might be applied to lock without the usual favourable effect. But the improbable does occur: the door doesn't agree to open! This event is no more surprising than any other for being improbable whatever the consequences – the Improbable is accounted for in the total scheme of things. So that to the African writer the world-around is activated by forces which might, as well as anything else, assume the guise of the Improbable, and these forces, since he is by nature linked to them, impose the severest limitations on his characters' areas of action, and consequently on their concept of free will. The quotation which we have just read of Mongo Beti's hero ditching an innocent girl for fear of provoking "*Jove's thunderous wrath*" is an illustration. It is also the theme of Gabriel Okara's entire novel, *The Voice*, in which in fact the hero, Okolo, can be seen as almost ritually immobile in the face of inimical powers, spiritual and social. It is the theme too of Tutuola's first two novels *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. It might he noted in this connection that many African novels are episodic and uncausal – as are in fact most African folk-tales and fables – even some of those novels with aspirations to structure in the European sense, as for instance Lenrie Peters's *The*

Second Round[38] in which, as usual, there is no character-drawing, no prior dramatic explanation of, or reason for, the string of corpses that tax the reader's credibility towards the close of the book. This is perhaps due to the African's reluctance to forge any rationale – psychological, sociological, environmental – for the explanation of the various aspects of human behaviour, where by tradition he places far less emphasis on individual will and far more on the reactions, even apparently illogical ones, exercised between the subject and the forces of nature which control him, and over which in turn he continually seeks to exercise, even a fleeting, control.

It is obvious that characterisation in the European analytical sense cannot be the preoccupation of the African author at any particularly profound level. Yet how effortlessly in contrast our writers realise character-drawing might be gauged in for instance the sophisticated dialogue-exposition of Roger Mais. This comparison by no means implies a value judgement: it is meant to reveal why I think the much-lamented lack of character-drawing in the African novel exists, while no one has ever made the same criticism of the West Indian novel. I suggest in brief summary that the contrast lies in essentially opposed views of the person in our respective literatures – person-as-subject in the African experience, person-as-object in the Europe-dominated Caribbean experience.

We have recently been enlightened by Richard Allsopp on the richness and inventiveness of the Guyanese and West Indian proverb, and have been made aware of its colour and imagery when contrasted with those of the English. Strangely though, we find scant use made of our proverbs in Caribbean literature. I know of no case in which a proverb of ours provides the leitmotif of a literary work. The reason for this might be a fear in the author's mind of being incomprehensible to the foreign publisher's reader and to the foreign reading public to whom our writers must chiefly address themselves. In Negro Africa there is no African publishing: as in the Caribbean, all publishing activity is European – most of the large English houses have in the past five years or so established expensive footholds in the major African cities. So that for the African author the same inhibiting circumstance of a foreign publisher's reader must determine much of what

he thinks and writes about. Yet in the African novel we find far greater freedom in the use of traditional proverbs, fables, the wisdom of the praise songs, *et cetera*. Many of these novels are published with glossaries of African expressions or explanations of ritual concepts. In the plays we find dramatic use made of various spirits – patron-spirit of the Ore-Grove, patron-spirit of the workers of wood and iron, *et cetera*. One of the most moving experiences I have had in the African Theatre was a dance of spirits in Ogumola's production of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Then there is the myth as it supplies the content of traditional drama among the Yoruba traditional drama of the cult-festivals, of re-enactment ceremonies, and of the court. These are all sources on which the Caribbean author might not draw, notwithstanding our various cult-survivals, worksongs, calypsoes and the body of folk-literature which has come down the generations. But there are certain images of our childhood and ancestry which in Guyana do not appear as themes in our literature – the Old Higue, the Jumbie, the Obeah man. Even though the sophisticated generally consider the Obeah man a charlatan his continued presence among us is certainly to be seen as a survival of that traditional African attitude which seeks control over the forces of nature by means of the universal union of man with matter. I am not discussing a folk-attitude to literature, or a literature of local colour or anything of the kind – I am not interested in either, and I know very well that it is not for me to tell anybody what to think or to write about, but it seems to me that these survivals of our past might possibly enrich the imagery of much Guyanese literature and painting of the future.

For dramatic effect the African often also turns to the use of the supernatural in the Shakespearean sense – a rather different thing from the localising of the supernatural within the pattern of the natural in the Tutuola sense. But the African writer is not afraid of natural portents, monsters, and even the miraculous to heighten a dramatic situation or to release a meaning. In this respect the Caribbean author seems very prim and protestant by contrast – absolutely *evolué* if you like.

It seems to me that this *evolué* outlook in our culture as a whole is not resolved merely in having recourse to the

folkloric and the local – we need to take a far more creative view of the psychic attitudes revealed in those elements of folklore which survive among us. Balls of fire across the Canje night sky might be as profoundly symptomatic of psychic states as are other unidentified flying objects. With one of two literary exceptions I venture to suggest that outside our music – our very recent music – the Caribbean artist has simply not begun to tap his unique psychic resources; but this I hope to deal with more fully in our final lecture.

Our present review has outlined the areas of contrast which distinguish Tropical African and Caribbean literatures from each other. We have seen that the persistence of traditional tribal values in African creative writing reveals in that body of work characteristics not shared by the writing of the Caribbean. In very fundamental respects the African author is continuously connected to an ancestral past which for him is heroic, and which necessarily determines attitudes present in his work. For the Caribbean writer such a connection is now out of reach; the nature of his craft, and of his vision are, and will be, determined by quite other circumstances. While it is doubtful from this review that African literature can have any very particular relevance for the writer in the Caribbean, the sources of its images and ideas are certain to be of the profoundest interest to us for a very long time to come.

IV IMAGE AND IDEA IN THE ARTS OF GUYANA

In this fourth and final lecture – 'Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana' – I shall attempt a summary review of propositions raised earlier, whilst endeavouring to examine their significance for the Guyanese people and the Guyanese creative mind. In this distinction between the Guyanese people and the Guyanese creative mind it might realised that where there are in fact several Guyanese peoples in the social sense, the creative mind of the Guyanese people – that total which is greater than the sum of parts – is unalterably the one which we image in the coat-of-arms of this country. This must be so, since as we have observed earlier, our society is a healthy and vigorous one and does not come apart at the interfaces created by the divisive activities of its constituent racial elements. I have proposed that these socially divisive elements are paradoxically dynamic and creative in the cultural sense; that by virtue of their individual filialistic orientation to parent-cultures in the Old World they promote among us that phenomenon of catalysis which I hold to be the distinguishing mark of New World, and particularly Guyanese, cultures. I have observed that the fact of miscegenation on the one hand, and conservative reaction to miscegenation on other, release tensions in our society which go to make it what it uniquely is. By existing each racial element qualifies, and at the same time diminishes, the self-image the of other. We have noted that the resulting uneasiness, the resulting sense of psychic erosion, the resulting constant self-questioning – these are all symptoms of the process catalysis continually generated within the being and substance of our society.

Guyanese society might be seen, then, as a complex plurality in continual process of achieving a complex singularity – a singularity which is always itself open to change. By virtue of the action of the several catalytic elements ceaselessly modifying and qualifying it, the nature of this singularity cannot remain static. This could hardly be otherwise, since the effects of the various elements which at any moment

determine content and fabric of this singularity can never be predicted. So that the fact of miscegenation, and conservative reaction to miscegenation, while providing the dynamics of our culture, neither explain nor define the nature of this culture. Explanation or definition of the nature of our culture must rest, from moment to moment, in the relative potency of the various elements constituting it. Our past can never therefore provide any guarantee whatsoever for our future; as we have noted earlier, we can have no charter for a destiny in the Old World sense. In crude physical terms this should be obvious in the historically changing pattern of the numerical distribution of our several races – a pattern over which at any given moment we might exercise only very limited control. For while it is obvious that it is people who make culture, it should at least equally obvious that it is culture which makes people. To what degree for instance is the fact culturally important that the Dutch language has been spoken on this soil for more years than has the English? To what degree might such a fact account for temperamental differences between us, say, and our Trinidadian neighbours with their Latin heritage? If we cannot be certain of the degree to which culture makes people we can at least be certain that culture is a function of the human presence, whatever the nature of this human presence. But for us of Guyana this human presence has been, and of course continues to be, a polyglot and not an homogeneous one. The numerical composition of this human presence at any temporal cross-section in our history will determine the nature of the culture generated at that moment. But it would be wrong to suppose that this numerical composition remains constant for any length of time in unchanging balances. It does not. Thus the nature of the human presence also changes, and with this also changes the nature of the culture generated. This is to say that in one degree or another, by virtue of their significance as catalysts, each filialistic element in our society, in spite of its particular intentions, involuntarily contributes to change in the general nature of our culture. This change – this process of catalysis – achieving manifest expression in social forms, in turn exercises pressure for change, in extensive or in intensive measure, on all elements in our society. Change therefore

returns upon itself in forms not anticipated by its individual factors.

But the measure of such change will not necessarily be a function of the numerical strength of particular factors. This could be, but it is not necessarily so, as we might gauge, for example, from the extraordinary social and spiritual potency of the Negro in the United States – a one-tenth minority group in continual process of cultural catalysis. Such potency would seem an imponderable in the pluralistic society if we did not in one way or another attempt to explain it in terms of this phenomenon of catalysis. In an earlier lecture I have claimed that there are no Africans in the New World, that there is only the African sperm in various stages of catalysis. This is perhaps the reason that the tribal African of Africa – the ancestral man – uses the word 'Negro' for all blacks born outside Africa but not for himself. That is to say, 'Negro' for him equals African-in-process-of-catalysis; African as he is not known anywhere in tribal Africa. Not that the tribal Africa is not himself subject to change; he is, in ways in which everyone is today subject to change before the European Machine. But while this is true for everyone of us, it is not the only type of change observable in the New World Negro. The New World Negro is subject to change in more profound ways by virtue of being placed in intimate physical and psychic relationship with other, mainly conservative, races. Such a physical conjunction would seem to have had a much more penetrating effect on the Negro psyche than on that of any other New World people, or, put into the terms under discussion, the New World Negro appears more readily to have suffered the process of catalysis within himself than has any other New World people. This must be so, since the forms in which he expresses himself, and at the same time expresses the deeper impulses of other New World peoples, are not tribal African at all. We might think of the image of water-vapour separately drawn from every terrestrial source returning as universal rain to all these individual sources. Ghilberto Freyre's observation on the cultural potency of the Brazilian Negro, which I have quoted earlier, might thus carry implications for the hemisphere far beyond those which he might have supposed.

The New World Negro might therefore be seen as at one and the same time symptom and symbol of this process of cultural catalysis which distinguishes all our American societies from those of the Old World. Symbol though by no means of course the only figure subject to the process: all our races are in some numerical degree subject to catalysis. The point needs to be maintained though that while at any given moment the process is a result of a particular distribution of racial elements, the effect of any given constituent element upon the whole society does not appear to be a function of its numerical strength. For this reason, if for no other, we might not image the nature or quality of our tomorrow, even though the numerical distribution of our constituent races might plausibly be predictable for sometime to come.

It seems to me that the creative potential of a given racial element in Guyana stands in direct relationship to its subjection to the process of catalysis, and that where this is true of races it is even more true of individuals. There can be no warrant therefore, for the future of the society which paradoxically we are engaged in building – it could come out simply any way, depending from moment to moment on the relative vigour of particular elements within it. And such vigour is of course nothing which anyone might hope to control anymore than one might hope to control the process of life itself.

Since we have no warrant for the form or racial skin in which the sperm will present in our descendants, we can therefore have no warrant at all for a destiny except that perhaps this very condition in itself constitutes the image of a destiny. I wish to propose that it does – that in Guyana our sense of the nature of culture remains today as open-ended as it has ever been historically, that our self-image is therefore essentially different from that of Old World man, and that it is a diminution of this self-image – an aspect of self-annihilation – to gauge or assess our condition in the light of values and institutions created by Old World man. Reality for us hinges in the fact of the human in infinite process of catalysis. And this is to say that we have no guarantee whatsoever for anything but our present. It is the minute nature and definition of this present viewed in the

fluctuating individual consciousness that seems to me crucial in assessing our cultural situation and in realising this situation in our works of art.

I think that I have defended my claim that Edgar Mittelholzer was in idiom and in attitude and in the context of the day a colonial artist, that in turning to Guyanese history with his comic questioning – with the sense of a man who has been deeply wronged – Mittelholzer returned only the responses of contaminated blood, contaminated soul; that his conception of the tragic inevitably involved an element of the absurd, since the predicament of his *Kaywana* protagonists admitted of alternatives depending on the quality of consciousness in which that predicament was viewed; that Mittelholzer's apparatus of tragedy hinged entirely on the biases of pedigree man, and that his proposition of the purity of blood could therefore be resolved only in pedigree terms. I have proposed that for Edward Rupert Burrowes, the Barbadian who fathered the plastic arts in Guyana in terms of a European ancestry, no such conflict existed, and that these two artists reflected opposed attitudes to the colonial past – an attitude of revolt on the one hand, and an attitude of acceptance on the other. I hope that the substance of our first two lectures has suggested that those two responses are not the only ones open to us as impulsive in creative action, and that the human seen as himself a function of the process of catalysis establishes for us the possibility of a further response to the facts of our past, and a guarantee of the emergence of a truly self-conscious art.

The mechanics of such a further response, it seems to me, rests in the possibility of a shift of consciousness in viewing the obvious and prosaic facts of our condition, a shift of consciousness in which the obvious might perhaps come to be invested with a quality of miracle. Our third lecture, attempting relative contrasts between impulse and idea in Tropical African and Caribbean literature, sought to reveal in these two bodies of work opposed reactions to the facts of the obvious, opposed interpretations of the prosaic. Here we observed that for the Tropical African the obvious is transcended in a peculiar view of the nature of matter – which is apprehended as universally charged with Vital Force; and a

corollary peculiar view of the nature of man who, in all his works, is seen as standing in compliance with, or in reaction to, the operation of this Vital Force. The Europe-dominated Caribbean author and person, on the other hand, experiences a very different relationship to the obvious characterised by his responses to the object which is seen as merely the passive raw material of human experience, without any instinct life of its own and therefore without a capacity for response. These opposed views are expressed in the relative literatures as differences in the conception of the person: person-as-subject in the African view, person-as-object in the Caribbean; the sublimated ancestor-stereotype in African modern literature, the individually realised character-portrait in that of the Caribbean.

Apart from differences in belief and outlook between Tropical African and Caribbean man we face in Caribbean societies problems of blood and ancestry unknown anywhere in Tropical Africa. One might have expected these problems of blood and ancestry to have determined much of the nature of Caribbean writing, at least in so far as these are functions of the colonial experience. But as a general thing our writers do not seem greatly interested in structuring responses to the colonial experience, or in exploring the peculiar nature of the reality in which we live as a result of this, to us, most important of experiences. Our writers seem generally either to ignore, or to reject, all possible effects of the colonial past on our consciousness of the nature of the present. It is as though this present in all its complex singularity were wholly independent and autonomous experience, an experience whose factors we know nothing about, or can do nothing about beyond description or objective comment. The reason for this is very difficult to understand. Might it be that to the Europe-dominated Caribbean mind the present itself, regarded as object, is therefore necessarily seen as mere passive raw material and nothing else?

And yet the problem of art in all its media of expression is always and principally a problem of its relationship to ancestry. That is to say it is essentially a problem of its interpreting, or at least of its interrogating, the nature of the present – that is to say, the nature of time itself. Where such

an interrogation of the present does not exist I suggest that art becomes a mere professional exercise, eclectic and technical. It is my view that the greater part of Caribbean literature and art is eclectic and technical in this way; that both for the writer and the painter idiomatic expression is a matter of choice exercised among the products of various historical or modern schools, and not a matter of inherent necessity or of profound inner compulsion.

I have been quoted in print as having once remarked that Caribbean literature is necessarily a province of English literature. In the light of my thinking on the nature of our present since returning home, this is an opinion which I would now retract. It was based on what I had conceived at the time to be our unavoidable filialistic dependence on English literature and its norms. This dependence will continue to be reflected in the idiom of much Caribbean writing yet to come, if only because, as Mr Seymour has observed, we do not have our own publishing, and – I might add – our own consumption. But it is already obvious that all Caribbean writing is not filialistic and eclectic, that our scrutiny of the nature of the individual consciousness in the hands of Wilson Harris, for example, is original and profound and our very own.

When Wilson Harris's first book appeared in 1960, I wrote to him, I remember, from the Sudan to comment, "*Well done Wilson, but you realise that* ***Palace of the Peacock*** *is not a novel at all, don't you?*" I cannot now remember what he thought of this very filialistic judgment, but by the end of 1965, on the publication of *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, I was pleased to write to him from Nigeria, "*Thank you, Wilson, for having made a man of Caribbean writing*!" For it seemed to me that here the Caribbean, or more essentially the Guyanese vision, nurtured through his intervening four novels, had achieved maturity in its own unique right – that is to say in the light of what we in this country uniquely are. In these enigmatic and obscure books I think lie the truest outlines of the Guyanese self-image ever drawn. Harris's work is like nothing else in literature since the Guyanese people are like no one else in history and it is Harris's peculiar genius that he successfully explores for us the intimate heartland of this uniqueness of ours. It is an utter waste of time to attempt to judge this work

in the light of critical norms applicable to any other – which is what I had initially found myself doing with *Palace of the Peacock*. We shall need to forge an entirely new critical apparatus for assessing these works. So that just now it would be a bold man indeed who would attempt a comprehensive exegesis of Harris's thought, imagery and technique, inseparably fused as these individually complex elements are in his work. Mind you, it isn't that Harris doesn't help his reader along to the very limits of his capacity – the various phases of his thought all are introduced by quotations from the Bible, from European poetry and Classical literature, clues meant to point to the development of his several themes; and in addition there is endless repetition and restatement of argument. But it is the manner of his development, alas, which confounds the understanding – the understanding bred on the intellectual conventions of the European novel. For these conventions Wilson Harris has no use whatsoever; he stands in no kind of relationship at all to the European novel. And this is essentially the result, I would say, of his view of the nature of the individual consciousness. "*The stillness of consciousness*," he says, "*(which stillness is always penetrating itself in its own activity) is not the contrived or self-created stillness of a property of the physical world.*" This is to say that his apprehension of the object in experience is very different from that encountered in the run-of-the-mill Caribbean novel. The object *as object*, for Harris, *does not exist!* In his work the particular object, far from being held to enjoy a discrete existence, *appears*, or assumes life, only in conjunction with the subject, the beholder, in a metaphysical union reminiscent of certain aspects of African belief though not quite parallel. For where in African belief this union is a spatial one, effected by virtue of the universal indwelling of Vital Force in all matter, for Harris the union of object and subject is temporal in its power ceaselessly to modify the present in free association with the past. Through the agency of the object the past is rendered continually alive in the present. In this function the object continually therefore annihilates itself; annihilates itself in order continually to release in the subject what he calls "*a stranger animation one senses within the cycle of time [...] the hub of another state of apparent awareness*." Let me

give an example of Harris's highly personal interpretation of the individual relationship to the object:

> I began to discover a force of obsession in things I had only dreamt before (it seemed to me now) to question, things and persons I had accepted too easily (it seemed to me now, once again) for what they were supposed to be and what they were instinctively supposed not to be. Things and persons whose life of obsession lay less within themselves and more within myself, within my lack of a universal conception, of their conception.

In contrast, here is George Lamming's view of the object (*The Immigrants*) in the European-Caribbean sense – as passive support for what is presented as reality:

> Nothing mattered outside the cage, because there was no-THING. So they remained inside the cage unaware of what was beyond, without a trace of desire to inhabit what was beyond. It was unnatural and impossible to escape into something that didn't matter. Absolutely impossible, for within the cage where they were born and would die, the only tolerable climate of experience was reality which was simply an irreversible instinct to make things matter. Only where things mattered could they breathe, and suffer [....]

Harris's view of the intimate union of object and subject seems to me to lead very much in the direction of traditional African metaphysical belief, but, as I have just pointed out, for the African the implications are spatial where for Harris they are temporal. Where for the African the object is activated in space by virtue of the operation of the Vital Force operating in all nature, for Harris the object is animated in time, in memory, as a function of that free association generated in its capacity for response. Harris himself illustrates the point:

> If […] one were to conceive of each growing point in the judgment of experience […] as an intimate transplantation of the broken texture and fruit of time in oneself – pointing towards the ultimate uprooting of all preoccupations in the humility of consciousness one is bound to marvel at the

> stubborn renascence and proliferation of the past returning out of every desired goal of nothingness, out of the pitiful seed of vanquished memory, in the midst of evacuation and detritus cast forth from a hollowness of spirit in the service of science or art, law or love. Is it that within the rubble of oneself still lies the key?

In the annihilation of the object (person or thing) Harris realises a free construction of events emerging in the medium of phenomenal associations all expanding into a mental distinction and (new) life of their own (E. S. p. 13) – a long thunderous train, he calls it, which still runs through this short timeless day (E. S. p. 76).

It is a theme which returns over and again in image, in action and in statement, a theme which, finally, accounts for much of Harris's apparent contrariness in verbal expression, and above all for the structure and fabric of the novels themselves. Mariella, the desirable young woman, lives too as Mariella the mission place upriver from which the folk are pursued; not transformed, lives – for the folk are symbol of that phenomenon of what Harris calls 'arousal', in which the annihilated object is reanimated within the far-reaching capacity of consciousness. I know of no word in the language which might describe this process – transformation, transfiguration metamorphosis: it is none of these. In its apparent or surface 'life' the subject continually suffers conjunctions with other objects (or persons) which 'kill' it; but in this very death it will appear, or re-appear, charged with the meaning of a previous conjunction or alternative arrangement or parallel pattern. The 'dislocated image' (as he calls it himself) assumes a fluid potency whose 'life' rests always less within itself than in the awareness of the subject. Each object thus becomes the agent or instrument or the vehicle of the endless capacity of expanding awareness in the subject. A road-crash, for example (blatant conjunction of discrete and identifiable objects) will become any road-crash, the victims any victims, since all consequences bear only towards one end – "*the flaming settlement and page of truth,*" or self-kinship, as he elsewhere calls it, a self-kinship in which consciousness centres around an essential *but always*

changing union with "*agents and persons unknown and things and places unapprehended*," with "*departed lives fired again to ricochet like bullet within the corridors of the mind.*" (E. S. p. 21).

Now this is not filialistic and eclectic thought in the Caribbean novel: it is the Caribbean novel in most intimate and intricate and original connection with the being of Caribbean man. In Wilson Harris we find the concept of person-as-object whittled down to the point of apparent de-humanisation; the person continually stops short of being fully an object only in the miraculous heritage of consciousness, the link by means of which he establishes union, and realises unity, with the object. Harris therefore has no interest in characterisation in the sense of the European novel; he does not assume that position of dominance with regard to his characters which has developed in an analytical tradition; his characters are so barely realised, so close to becoming objects that their identities sometimes slide into each others' skins, hide beneath each others' name. Only through the gift of consciousness do they stop short of being objects in the inanimate sense. As we know, nothing could be further from the European approach; nothing too could be further from that of the African. Harris's vision is an entirely Caribbean one. As in our history the character, the individual, lives only with the surface 'life' of any other object, subject always to the vagaries and accidents of conjunction with other objects, subject to the 'killed' continually in that very drama of consciousness which saves him from being fully an object and in which he is involved "*part-knowing, part-knowing, dim and voluntary, illuminating and involuntary*" (E. S. p. 81) – killed in order to appear again in yet other conjunctions, "*counselled or pushed, wittingly and unwittingly, fairly and unfairly, by someone and something other than himself whether apparently conservative and old or revolutionary and young […]*"(E. S. p. 69).

The comprehensive study of Harris's thought will embrace a great deal more of reality than I have touched on here, but this brief analysis will serve I hope to illustrate the nature of the present as conceived by him, the peculiar nature of his view of time, consequently his very original conception of the

nature of the individual consciousness in the Caribbean situation. I have claimed earlier that the human seen as himself a function of the process of catalysis in our society establishes the possibility of a response to the colonial circumstance different from that of revolt in the Mittelholzer sense, or of acceptance in that of Burrowes. It is this possibility of a further response, in terms of the nature of the individual consciousness, which I feel to have been realised in the thought of Wilson Harris. I think this last quotation illustrates the various historical conjunctions to which Guyanese man has been subject in the nature of his past, "*counselled or pushed, wittingly or unwittingly, fairly or unfairly, by someone or something other than himself, whether apparently conservative and old or revolutionary and young.*" I think this to be the most accurate evocation possible of our situation, and a faithful image at the same time of the principle of human catalysis which has provided the central theme of this second series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures. I have said that in Harris's thought we find the concept of person-as-object, which we have inherited from the European analytic tradition, to have been tied down almost to the point of dehumanisation. It was perhaps necessary for peoples to have suffered such a human extreme in order finally to have faced the ancestral imperative, whether in terms of the conservative and old or in those of the revolutionary and young. This unique experience of history has in any case given birth to the original view of the individual which we find in the vision of this greatest author among us – our very own Wilson Harris.

A SHORT LIST OF CRITICAL WRITING ON TROPICAL AFRICAN AND WEST INDIAN LITERATURE

1. Couthard, G. *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature* (OUP, 1962).

2. Dathorne, O. R. (ed.). *Caribbean Narrative* (Heinemann, 1966).

3. Gleason, Judith. *This Africa: Novels by West Africans in English and French* (Northwestern University Press, 1965).

4. Moore, Gerald (ed.). *African Literature and the Universities* (Ibadan University Press, 1965).

5. Press, John (ed.). *Commonwealth Literature* (Heinemann, 1965).

6. Tibble, Anne. *African English Literature* (Peter Owen, 1965).

ENDNOTES:

[1] A. J. Seymour, *Edgar Mittelholzer – the Man and his Work*. (Ministry of Education, Guyana, 1968), p. 14
[2] A. J. Seymour, *ibid*., p. 10.
[3] *The Mimic Man*, (*Guyana Graphic*, 2 December 1968).
[4] *Daily Graphic*, 24 November 1968.
[5] The pre-Columbian peoples cannot strictly be regarded as indigenous to the Americas: they have taken root and created forms and built institutions as none other of us have, but they are not of the soil as are the native African or European or Asian.
[6] Mittelholzer, E. *Kaywana* trilogy (New English Library, 1968), pp. 1, 20.
[7] It is perhaps understandable among whites that the concept of the ancestor is most bitterly defended in precisely those areas where they have inherited no ancestral code: where restraining institutions, sanctioned in the ancestor, do not exist the sperm must be protected by force alone.
[8] [Editor's note: for many years Williams worked on drafts of what he called he called his 'Caribbean novel' with the title *The Sperm of God*. See my essay, **'Preparing the palette: the artist in words'**, in *Denis Williams: A Life in Works. New and Collected Essays* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 125–141.]

[9] Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960).
[10] Michael Swan, *British Guiana: The Land of Six Peoples* (London, HSMO, 1954). Writing from the Mazaruni I am unable to consult this work.
[11] [Editor's note: the six peoples to whom Swan refers are African, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Amerindian and European. While there is arguably a case for regarding the Portuguese as European, I suspect Williams is being disingenuous here in order to reinforce the point he is about to make.]
[12] [Editor's note: this is a point that Wilson Harris went on to discuss at some length in his 1970 lecture.]
[13] A relationship which the Yoruba of Nigeria exteriorise in the worship of the Earth-Principle, Ilé.
[14] The thought content of the American Negro Spiritual is not syncretic since it lacks a base in traditional African belief.
[15] One is regrettably but necessarily vague on matters of Oriental religion, philosophy, art and literature in this country – a situation which our Caribbean institutions of higher learning can no longer reasonably afford to ignore.
[16] As elsewhere, but for different reasons, the most original works of art among us are popularly the least regarded. In fiction for example Vic Reid's *The Leopard*, and all the novels of Wilson Harris.
[17] [Editor's note: on the front cover of the published booklet the title of this lecture is printed as '**Image and Idea in the Arts of the Caribbean**', which is clearly an error that has somehow been overlooked. The title given here is obviously the one that Williams intended, because he repeats it towards the end of his first paragraph.]
[18] Author of *The Dark Child* (Collins, 1955); *The Radiance of the King* (London, 1960); '**The Eyes of the Statue**', in *Black Orpheus* (No. 5. Lagos, May, 1959).
[19] At the end of these lectures I append a brief bibliography of African/Caribbean critical writing.
[20] As in the novels of the Nigerian, Onuoro Nzekwu.
[21] James Ngugi, *The River Between* (Heinemann, 1965). See also his earlier novel *Weep Not Child* (Hutchinson, 1964).
[22] Gabriel Okara, *The Voice* (Hutchinson, 1965).
[23] Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (Faber, 1955).
[24] See *The Interpreters* (London, 1965).
[25] R. Horton, *Kalahari Sculpture* (Lagos 1965), pp 4–8.
[26] Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (Secker and Warburg, 1953), p. 21.
[27] Prince Modupe, *I was a Savage* (London: Museum Press, 1958), p. 136.
[28] James Ngugi, *Weep Not, Child* (Heinemann, 1964).
[29] Camara Laye, '**The Eyes of the Statue**', in *Black Orpheus* (No. 5. Lagos, May, 1959).
[30] Modupe, *ibid*., p. 66.
[31] Lagos, 1962 (?) [Editor's note: *Walk in the Night and Other Stories* was republished by Northwestern University Press in 1967 and Heinemann in 1969.]
[32] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann, 1958), p. 134.
[33] Camara Laye, *The Dark Child* (Collins, 1955).

[34] Mongo Beti, *Mission to Kala* (Heinemann, 1964), p. 159.
[35] Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy* (Heinemann, 1966).
[36] Modupe, *ibid.* Modupe also writes of the great Mother Earth: p. 63.
[37] Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 42.
[38] Lenrie Peters, *The Second Round* (Heinemann, 1965).

Third Series, 1970

History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas

Wilson Harris

INTRODUCTION

The central themes of this Third Series of the Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures are stated by the author early in his first talk as being conceived in the light of a quotation from Merleau-Ponty:

> The act of the artist or philosopher is free but not motiveless. Their freedom [...] consists in appropriating a *de facto* situation by endowing it with a figurative meaning beyond its real one.

As a result, Wilson Harris points to significant vestiges of the subconscious imagination of Caribbean man, in spite of his apparent historylessness, which the lecturer feels have figurative meaning and will act as part and parcel of the arts of the imagination. He holds that a "*cleavage exists between the historical convention in the Caribbean and Guianas, and the arts of the imagination*" and part of his aim is to show that a philosophy of history may well lie buried in these vestiges.

Dealing with these traces of African and Amerindian legacies hidden in, for example, our apprehension of *limbo* from the African past, Haitian *vodun* and Carib bush-babies, Wilson Harris claims that the rise of the individual and integrated artist in the Caribbean took place against a background of censorship and suspicion. He links the artist with Anancy and he speaks of "*the risk which identifies the artist with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples [which] [...] requires of him in the same token, alchemic resources to conceal, as well as elaborate, a far reaching order of the imagination, which being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. He (the artist) stands therefore at the heart of the lie of community and the truth of community. And it is here, I believe, in this trickster gateway – this gamble of the soul – that there emerges the hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale.*"

I'm happy that the risk has begun to recede in certain parts of the Caribbean area.

There are two links I would like to make in this short introduction. In the first place, one may discern at least one thread of continuity emerging from the three series of Lectures that have so far been delivered.

In the first set of talks, the point was made that the writer's true self was manifested in his books alone and that the body of his work constitutes the secretion of that true, innermost self; and one of the questions asked was "*Does the writer find any literary or philosophical ancestors with whom he has special affinities?*"

In the second series, the statement was made that

> [...] we are all shaped by our past; the imperatives of a contemporary culture are predominantly those of a relationship to this past. Yet in the Caribbean and in Guyana we think and behave as though we have no past, no history, no culture. And where we do come to take notice of our history, it is often in the light of biases adopted from one thoroughbred culture or another, of the Old World [...] perpetuating what we might call a filialistic dependence upon the cultures of our several racial origins, while simultaneously inhibiting us from facing up to the fact of what we uniquely are.

This third set of Lectures points to the recognition of the value and importance of sensitive undercurrents from the past of our Caribbean life, bringing into play perspectives of renascence which may be reconstituted by what the lecturer calls a new treaty of sensibility between alien cultures into a new architecture of culture; and it seeks to request a philosophy of history correlative to the arts of the imagination.

The second link is with the series of novels written by the lecturer. In these lectures may be discerned the working of the same poetic and philosophic imagination which conceived and expressed the novels. There is the same vocabulary and private use of words which invests a logical reaction with the same emotional authority and the poetic linkage of associations of seemingly dissimilar things, the same examination of inner and outer horizons. The concept of architectural time containing a series of rooms in consciousness which may be

inhabited simultaneously or successively by the liberated spectre of man, and the concept of space involving the vision of the poet as a drama of consciousness which is a slow revelation or unravelling of obscurity, revelation or illumination within oneself. (Space is also what he calls "*our weakest resource in that we appear to move freely through it or bend it freely to our will")* – these are central to the appreciation of the peculiar Harris mode of creative imagination in the novels.

One direct example of this link lies in the reference to the three philosophical orders of the pre-Columbian dream of the Caribs – *nigredo* (the undiscovered realm), *albedo* (the inner perspective or illumination, the dawn of a new consciousness) and *cauda pavonis* (the colours of the peacock) concerning which last Harris says "*the colours of the peacock may be equated with all the variable possibilities or colours of fulfilment we can never totally realise*." This is a link with the philosophy behind the author's first novel poem and "*the priceless tempting jewel I dreamed I possessed."*

The lectures make for stimulating reading and will undoubtedly influence for good the quality and direction of our national and regional intellectual development, and if one does not immediately grasp their plain sense meaning, it is because the lecturer never ceases to be a poet throughout the whole of his dialogue with the ideal reader and throughout his life's work as a committed artist.

A. J. SEYMOUR

I HISTORY, FABLE AND MYTH IN THE CARIBBEAN AND GUIANAS

It occurred to me as I contemplated this series of talks entitled 'History, Fable and Myth' that it may prove illuminating to look first of all at J. J. Thomas' rebuttal of the nineteenth-century historian Froude in his book *Froudacity*. *Froudacity* was first published in 1889 and has been reprinted by New Beacon Books in 1969. It is not my intention to review *Froudacity* at this time but rather to highlight the crux of the dispute between Froude and Thomas as I believe this will help to make clear the kind of historical stasis which has afflicted the Caribbean I would suggest for many generations.

The crux of the dispute between Froude and Thomas appears to me to have been set forth by C. L. R. James in his introduction to the 1969 republication of *Froudacity*.

In that introduction James quotes Froude as follows:

> In Egypt or India or one knows not where, accident or natural development quickened into life our moral and intellectual faculties; and these faculties have grown into what we now experience, not in the freedom in which the modern takes delight, but under the sharp rule of the strong over the weak, the wise over the unwise.

James then goes on to say that Thomas now "*has him (Froude) in the historical prison in which he had placed himself, and he (Thomas) overwhelms the great historian.*" This overwhelming rebuttal, as James sees it, springs from Thomas's insight into a controlling law of history in contradistinction to Froude's emphasis on the dicey, accidental character of nature and society. In fact James sums it up in this way:

> What is important is not the difference in tone and temper of the two writers. It is that Thomas bases himself on a sense of history which he defines as a controlling **law.** And if you have no sense of historical law, then anything is what you choose to make it, and history almost automatically becomes not only nonsense, i.e., has no sense but is usually a defence of

> property and privilege, which is exactly what Froude has made of it.

The question nevertheless arises – does Thomas's stress on law – as C. L. R. James implies – dispense with Froude?

In order to answer this let us look first of all a little more closely at Froude's position and after that come back to Thomas.

As I read Froude I am reminded of a certain dilemma which was put brilliantly by Darwin in his *Descent of Man*. Darwin begins by speaking of the horns of certain beetles then he moves on to look at crests and knobs on other creatures:

> The extraordinary size of the horns, and their widely different structure in closely allied forms, indicate that they have been formed for some important purpose: but their excessive variability in the males of the same species leads to the inference that this purpose cannot be of a definite nature. The horns do not show marks of friction, as if used for ordinary work. Some authors suppose that as the males wander much more than the females, they require horns as a defence against their enemies; but in many cases the horns do not seem well adapted for defence […] The most obvious conjecture is that they are used by the male for fighting together; but they have never been observed to fight, nor could Mr Bates, after a careful examination of numerous species find any sufficient evidence in their mutilated or broken condition of their having been thus used […] The conclusion which best agrees with the fact of the horns having been so immensely yet not so fixedly developed as shown by this extreme variability in the same species and by their extreme diversity in closely allied species – is that they have been acquired as ornaments. This view will at first appear extremely improbable; but we shall hereafter find with many animals, standing much higher in the scale, namely fishes, amphibians, reptiles and birds, that various kinds of crests, knobs and horns have been developed apparently for this sole purpose.

This ornamental stasis with implications that point to the wasteland – to excess baggage from cradle to grave – depicts rather ironically but accurately Froude's relationship to property as something so sovereign, so accidental, so

fortuitous, it serves to eclipse all sensibility. Such an eclipse of sensibility may well be an omen of an age in which, not long before, the person had been property (slave property). And this area of eclipse of sensibility held Froude unwittingly, I would imagine, in its toils – in its historical prison. Indeed it is in this way, in terms of sovereign object or prison eclipse of the person in slave property – eclipse of the resources of sensibility – that I find myself re-reading James' remark (re-reading it with a different slant, in a different way, I must confess) that history makes non-sense or no-sense, non-sensibility or no-sensibility.

Froude's defence of property – property implying both flesh-and-blood (in the fetish of the slave) as well as inanimate conviction (the world of things) was a historical prison and Froude – as prisoner of his age – may well have taken a malicious and pessimistic view of nature and society. The world of objects, the world of achievement for him – in its ornamental stasis – was fortuitous, dicey (and therefore fundamentally precarious, fundamentally inclined to be wasteful or purposeless) and the human person was an object to be measured, validated, pronounced fit or unfit in an economic ruling context. Froude therefore could see no merit in change. He prized stability as so fortuitous, so accidental that any society which 'worked', which held itself together in some shape or form should be safeguarded against change. In this context Anglo-West Indian Society of the nineteenth century appeared to him to 'work', to hold itself together. Froude distrusted change since in his estimation everything was so dicey, so fortuitously consolidated, that change, in fact, was likely to rob it of any conservative historical shape it already possessed.

All of Froude's biases and aberrations in his reports on the Caribbean sprang, I would suggest, from this central dilemma. A dilemma we have not yet solved and which presses in on us – in the late twentieth century – in many forms. It resides at the heart of economic fascism wherever this is practised. Rhodesia and South Africa are glaring examples.

And now I would like to return to Thomas. When C. L. R. James says with brilliant polemic that Thomas overwhelmed the great historian Froude I take it he means that Thomas broke

out of Froude's prison of history by visualising a law in contradistinction to a philosophy of fortuitous achievement, dicey establishment, realm of accident.

But (with all due respect to C. L. R. James) we must ask ourselves – did Thomas really achieve such a breakthrough? The answer to this may well lie in the way Thomas wrestled with the law in terms of the existing magistracy of his day and in terms of various Governors of Trinidad and other nineteenth-century figures.

It is here that – beyond a shadow of doubt – the unwitting irony of Thomas's book is laid bare. For the scale of Froudacity upon which Thomas measures his magistrates and governors is consistent with a comedy of manners. In that comedy of manners the law consolidates itself – as a just instrument – around noble or benevolent figures which include Chief Justice Reeves of Barbados, certain good and conscientious Governors of Trinidad and Gordon of Khartoum. On the other hand it consolidates itself into a bad instrument around bad magistrates, Governors etc. Because of these fluctuations in Thomas's comedy of manners the law comes into close *rapport* with Froude's ornament and ironically reinforces fortuitous idols on the side of heaven or on the side of hell.

According to Thomas, had such-and-such a Governor remained things might have been different. Had such-and-such a Governor never arrived things likewise might have been different. In the same token in the twentieth century had Kennedy not been assassinated things might have been different in the United States. In short, Thomas's wrestle with the law would seem to consolidate a fortuitous destiny or ornament of history.

In support of what I have been saying let us look at the implications in these key passages in Thomas's *Froudacity*:

It is almost superfluous to repeat that the skin-discriminating policy induced as regards the coloured subjects of the Queen since the abolition of slavery did not, and could not, operate when coloured and white stood on the same high level as slave owners and ruling potentates in the colony.

Thomas expands on this in the following:

> History, as against the hard and fast White-master and Black-slave theory so recklessly invented and confidently built upon by Mr Froude, would show incontestably (a) that for upwards of 200 years before the Negro Emancipation in 1838, there had never existed in one of those then British colonies […] any prohibition whatsoever, on the ground of race or colour, against the owning of slaves by any free person possessing the necessary means, and desirous of doing so; (b) that as a consequence of this non-restriction, numbers of blacks, half-breeds, and other non-Europeans, besides such of them as had become possessed of their 'property' by inheritance, availed themselves of this virtual licence, and in course of time constituted a very considerable proportion of the slave-holding section of those communities; (c) that these dusky plantation owners enjoyed and used in every possible sense the identical rights and privileges which were enjoyed and used by their pure-blooded Caucasian brother-slave-owners. The above statements are attested by written documents, oral traditions, and, better still perhaps, by the living presence in those islands of numerous lineal representatives of those once opulent and flourishing non-European planter-families.

According to Thomas, therefore, it would appear that with the decline of capital 'slave-property' – with the decline of investment in human persons owned by blacks and whites alike – a hard and fast White-master and Black-slave-substitute theory came into force. This substitute highlighted pigmentation differences as never before as part and parcel of the ornament of society to which the law conformed. In short, the whole society remained an economic commodity though this time a new sophistication, pigmentation, came into force.

Thomas is not an apologist for slavery – in fact he indicts slavery with great passion – but the trap into which he falls is in most ways identical to the stasis (the stasis of ornament, of property as accident, as fortuitous establishment or comedy of manners) to which Froude conforms. Froude and Thomas, in this respect, were children of the nineteenth century and neither possessed the genius to penetrate intuitively or otherwise the ironic trap of the ornament, of the prison of the wasteland.

Clearly Thomas failed to deepen the ornament of his age in such a way that unpredictable intuitive resources would

affect the *prison* of the object and therefore the *person* of the object. *Prison* and *person* had become locked together as uniform property and both Thomas and Froude played on this synonymous condition in their individual comedy of manners. This meant, in fact, that Thomas – passionate as he felt about objects of injustice – could not supply a figurative meaning beyond the condition he deplored.

It is my view therefore that Thomas does not really overwhelm Froude. The duel which they fought is nevertheless a very instructive one in pointing up the historical stasis which afflicts the West Indian sensibility and which may only be breached in complex creative perspectives for which the historical convention would appear to possess no criteria. Oddly enough James ends his introduction to *Froudacity* with a quotation from Merleau-Ponty which helps to make the view I have been expressing more clear:

> The act of the artist or philosopher is free, but not motiveless. Their freedom [...] consists in appropriating a *de facto* situation by endowing it with a figurative meaning beyond its real one.

In this connection we must note that both Thomas and Froude shared a common suspicion of Haitian *vodun* and other primitive manifestations which signified for them a *"relapse into obeahism, devil-worship and children-eating"*. Therefore they consolidated an intellectual censorship of significant vestiges of the subconscious imagination which they needed to explore if they were to begin to apprehend a figurative meaning beyond the real or apparently real world.

It is my intention in these talks to concentrate in some degree on those vestiges as part and parcel of the arts of the imagination. In this respect I believe the possibility exists for us to become involved in perspectives of renascence which can bring into play a figurative meaning beyond an apparently real world or prison of history.

I want to make as clear as I can that a cleavage exists in my opinion between the historical convention in the Caribbean and Guianas and the arts of the imagination. I believe a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the

imagination. Needless to say I have no racial biases and whether my emphasis falls on *limbo* or *vodun*, on Carib bush baby omens, on Arawak *zemi*, on Latin, English inheritances – in fact within and beyond these emphases – my concern is with epic stratagems available to Caribbean man in the dilemmas of history which surround him. There are two kinds of myths related to Africa in the Caribbean and Guianas. One kind seems fairly direct, the other has undergone metamorphosis. In fact even the direct kind of myth has suffered a 'sea-change' of some proportions. In an original sense, therefore, these myths which reflect an African link in the Caribbean are also part and parcel of a native West Indian imagination and therefore stand, in some important ways I feel, in curious *rapport* with vestiges of Amerindian fable[1] and legend.

Let us start with a myth stemming from Africa which has undergone metamorphosis. The one which I have in mind is called *limbo*. The *limbo* dance is a well-known feature in the Carnival life of the West Indies today though it is still subject to intellectual censorship as I shall explain as I go along in this paper. The *limbo* dancer moves under a bar which is gradually lowered until a mere slit of space, it seems, remains through which with spread-eagled limbs he passes like a spider.

Limbo was born, it is said, on the slave ships of the Middle Passage, There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders. *Limbo*, therefore, as Edward Brathwaite, the distinguished Barbadian-born poet has pointed out is related to Anancy or spider fables. If I may now quote from *Islands*, the last book in his trilogy:

drum stick knock
and the darkness is over me
knees spread wide
and the water is hiding me
limbo
limbo like me

But there is something else in the *limbo*-Anancy syndrome which, as far as I am aware, is overlooked though intuitively

immersed perhaps in Edward Brathwaite's poems, and that is the curious dislocation of a chain of miles reflected in the dance so that a retrace of the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas and the West Indies is not to be equated with a uniform sum. Not only has the journey from the Old World to the new varied with each century and each method of transport but needs to be reactivated in the imagination as a *limbo* perspective when one dwells on the Middle Passage: a *limbo* gateway between Africa and the Caribbean.

In fact here, I feel, we begin to put our finger on something which is close to the inner universality of Caribbean man. Those waves of migration which have hit the shores of the Americas – North, Central and South – century after century have, at various times, possessed the stamp of the spider metamorphosis in the refugee flying from Europe or in the indentured East Indian and Chinese from Asia.

Limbo then reflects a certain kind of gateway or threshold to a new world and the dislocation of a chain of miles. It is – in some ways – the archetypal sea-change stemming from Old Worlds and it is legitimate, I feel, to put on *limbo* as a kind of shared phantom *limb* which has become a subconscious variable in West Indian theatre. The emergence of formal West Indian theatre was preceded, I suggest, by that phantom limb which manifested itself on Boxing Day after Christmas when the ban on the 'rowdy' bands (as they were called) was lifted for the festive season.

I recall performances I witnessed as a boy in Georgetown, British Guiana, in the early 1930s. Some of the performers danced on high stilts like elongated limbs while others performed spread-eagled on the ground. In this way *limbo* spider and stilted pole of the gods were related to the drums like grassroots and branches of lightning to the sound of thunder.

Sometimes it was an atavistic spectacle and it is well known that these bands were suspected by the law of subversive political stratagems. But it is clear that the dance had no political or propaganda motives though, as with any folk manifestation, it could be manipulated by demagogues. The whole situation is complex and it is interesting to note that Rex Nettleford in an article entitled '**The dance as an art form**

– its place in the West Indies'[2] has this to say: "*Of all the arts, dance is probably the most neglected. The art form continues to elude many of the most intuitive in an audience, including the critics.*"

It has taken us a couple of generations to begin – just begin – to perceive, in this phenomenon, an activation of subconscious and sleeping resources in the phantom limb of dismembered slave and god. An activation which possesses a nucleus of great promise – of far-reaching new poetic synthesis.

For *limbo* (one cannot emphasise this too much) is not the total recall of an African past since that African past in terms of tribal sovereignty or sovereignties was modified or traumatically eclipsed with the Middle Passage and with generations of change that followed. *Limbo* was rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures. For example, the theme of the phantom limb –the re-assembly of dismembered man or god – possesses archetypal resonances that embrace Egyptian Osiris, the resurrected Christ and the many-armed deity of India.

In this context it is interesting to note that *limbo* – which emerged as a novel re-assembly out of the stigmata of the Middle Passage – is related to Haitian *vodun* in the sense that Haitian *vodun* (though possessing a direct link with African *vodun* which I shall describe later on) also seeks to accommodate new Catholic features in its constitution of the muse.

It is my view – a deeply considered one – that this ground of accommodation, this art of creative coexistence – pointing away from apartheid and ghetto fixations – is of the utmost importance and native to the Caribbean, perhaps to the Americas as a whole. It is still, in most respects, a latent syndrome and we need to look not only at *limbo* or *vodun* but at Amerindian horizons as well – shamanistic and rain-making vestiges and the dancing bush baby legends of the extinct Caribs which began to haunt them as they crouched over their campfires under the Spanish yoke.

Insufficient attention has been paid to such phenomena and the original native capacity these implied as omens of rebirth. Many historians have been intent on indicting the Old Work of Europe by exposing a uniform pattern of imperialism in

the New World of the Americas. Thus they conscripted the West Indies into a mere adjunct of imperialism and overlooked a subtle and far-reaching renascence. In a sense therefore the new historian – though his stance is an admirable one in debunking imperialism – has ironically extended and reinforced old colonial prejudices which censored the limbo imagination as a 'rowdy' manifestation and overlooked the complex metaphorical gateway it constitutes a *rapport* with Amerindian omen.

Later on I intend to explore the Amerindian gateways between cultures which began obscurely and painfully to witness (long before *limbo* or *vodun* or the Middle Passage) to a native suffering community steeped in caveats of conquest. At this point I shall merely indicate that these gateways exist as part and parcel of an original West Indian architecture which it is still possible to create if we look deep into the rubble of the past, and that these Amerindian features enhance the *limbo* assembly with which we are now engaged – the spider syndrome and phantom limb of the gods arising in Negro fable and legend.

I used the word 'architecture' a moment or two ago because I believe this is a valid approach to a gateway society as well as to a community which is involved in an original reconstitution or recreation of variables of myth and legend in the wake of stages of conquest.

First of all the *limbo* dance becomes the human gateway which dislocates (and therefore begins to free itself from) a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic. This dislocation or interior space serves therefore as a corrective to a uniform cloak or documentary stasis of imperialism. The journey across the Atlantic for the forebears of West Indian man involved a new kind of space – inarticulate as this new 'spatial' character was at the time – and not simply an unbroken schedule of miles in a log book. Once we perceive this inner corrective to historical documentary and protest literature which sees the West Indies as utterly deprived, or gutted by exploitation, we begin to participate the genuine possibilities of original change in a people severely disadvantaged (it is true) at a certain point in time.

The *limbo* dance therefore implies, I believe, a profound art of compensation which seeks to replay a dismemberment of tribes (note again the high stilted legs of some of the performers and the spider-Anancy masks of others running close to the ground) and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic reassembly of the parts of the dead god or gods. And that reassembly which issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth – and to point to the necessity for a new kind of drama, novel and poem – is a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates.

One cannot overemphasise, I believe, how original this phenomenon was. So original it aroused both incomprehension and suspicion in the intellectual and legal administrations of the land (I am thinking in particular of the first half of the twentieth-century though one can, needless to say, go much farther back). What is bitterly ironic – as I have already indicated – is that present day historians in the second half of the twentieth-century – militant and critical of imperialism as they are – have fallen victim, in another sense, to the very imperialism they appear to denounce. They have no criteria for arts of originality springing out of an age of *limbo* and the history they write is without an inner time. This historical refusal to see – this consolidation of an incomprehension of the past – may well be at the heart of the 'terrified consciousness' which a most significant critic to emerge in the West Indies at this time, Kenneth Ramchand, analyses brilliantly in his essay in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.[3] One point which Kenneth Ramchand did not stress in his essay – but which is implicit in what he calls the 'nightmare' in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* – is that Antoinette is mad Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and that Jean Rhys, intuitively rather than intentionally, is attempting to compensate a historical portrait of the West Indian Creole – to bridge the gap, as it were, between an outer frame and an inner desolation. It is this that sharpens the pathos of her novel and makes for that terrified consciousness which Ramchand sees now as a universal heritage.

It is this cleavage between a statistical frame and the inner portrait of reality that makes for unwitting irony in the

so-called new emancipated writer and Gerald Moore in his new book *The Chosen Tongue*[4] brings it into sharp focus when he states:

> Both M. G. Smith, the Jamaican anthropologist, and V. S. Naipaul appear to believe that the West Indies possess no genuine inner cohesion whatever and no internal source of power. Having no common interests to cement them, the inhabitants of the area can be held together only by external force. Professor Elsa Goveia reaches an opposite but equally depressing conclusion. She argues that the West Indies had one integrating factor historically, and this has been "*the acceptance of the inferiority of Negroes to the whites.*"

In this context it is illuminating to recall that Froude was doing on behalf of imperialism what many contemporary historians are doing in a protest against imperialism. Namely he, too, set out to demonstrate that the West Indies had no creative potential. His view sprang out of the arrogance of the nineteenth-century civilised European whereas there would appear to spring out of what Martin Carter, the distinguished Guyanese poet, calls the 'self-contempt' of the exploited, formerly indentured or enslaved, West Indian.[5] Such a dead-end of history in which nineteenth-century imperialist and twentieth-century anti-imperialist come into agreement is material for a theatre of the absurd.

I believe that the *limbo* imagination of the folk involved a crucial inner re-creative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest, and needed its critical or historical correlative, its critical or historical advocacy. This was not forthcoming since the historical instruments of the past clustered around an act of censorship and of suspicion of folk-obscurity as well as originality, and that inbuilt arrogance or suspicion continues to motivate a certain order of critical writing in the West Indies today.

Capitalism and Slavery (a brilliant and impressive formal thesis of research written when he was at Oxford by Eric Williams, who is now Prime Minister of Trinidad) would seem to be the model British West Indian historians have elected. And I must now draw to your attention something which, I believe, confirms my view of the inbuilt censor in West

Indian historical convention. Professor Elsa Goveia regards Dr Williams as "*the most influential writer on West Indian history to emerge from the West Indies during the present century.*" Yet in an article entitled '**New Shibboleths For Old'**[6] she has this to say of his recent work:

> In spite of all Dr. Williams' protestations about the need for cultivating a West Indian inspiration, in spite even of his own authorship of a *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, can the reader be expected to draw any other conclusion than that a West Indian subject-matter is somehow worthless? Dr. Williams cannot have it both ways. If he ignores or devalues writers because they write about the West Indies rather than about other subjects, then he is perpetuating the very attitudes of mind which have in the past led to the neglect of West Indian studies which he himself constantly condemns. The combination of omissions and hasty dogmatism which mars his present book will not remedy the unhappy conditions which have for so long retarded the development of our understanding of "*the unique antecedents of the people of the West Indies.*"

This I fear is lamentably true. Until the gap is visualised, understood and begins to close, the West Indian historian and anthropologist will continue to reinforce a high level psychological censorship of the creative imagination and to consolidate a foreboding about the risks involved in every free election of spirits.

As such the very institutions of the day will become increasingly rigged by fear and misgiving, and political deterioration is the inevitable corollary. And this indicates to me that in the absence of a historical correlative to the arts of the dispossessed, some kind of new critical writing in depth needs to emerge to bridge the gap between history and art. Denis Williams stated the dilemma very effectively in *Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana.*[7] I now quote:

> Yet the first fact of the Caribbean situation is the fact of miscegenation, or mongrelism. What are the cultural implications of this mongrel condition? It is important to have experienced the homogeneity, richness, the integrity of the racially thoroughbred cultures of the Old World in order

> properly to take the force of this question. It is important if only as a means of discriminating between our condition and theirs, of assessing the nature and status of our mongrel culture when contrasted with the cultures of the thoroughbred, of realising the nature and function of the ancestor as he determines our cultural destiny. For we are all shaped by our past; the imperatives of a contemporary culture are predominantly those of a relationship to this past. Yet in the Caribbean and in Guyana we think and behave as though we have no past, no history, no culture. And where we do come to take notice of our history it is often in the light of biases adopted from one thoroughbred culture or another, of the Old World. We permit ourselves the luxury, for one thing, of racial dialectics in our interpretation of Caribbean and Guyanese history and culture. In the light of what we are this is a destructive thing to do, since at best it perpetuates what we might call a filialistic dependence on the cultures of our several racial origins, while simultaneously inhibiting us from facing up to the facts of what we uniquely are.

I would now like to resume the earlier thread of my argument in the dance of the folk – the human *limbo* or gateway of the gods – which was disregarded or incomprehensible to an intellectual and legal and historical convention. I had begun to point out that, first of all, the *limbo* dance becomes the human gateway which dislocates (and therefore begins to free itself from) a uniform chain of miles. In this context I also suggested that the gateway complex is also the psychic assembly or re-assembly of the muse of a people. This brings me now to my second point about *limbo*, namely, that it shares its phantom limb with Haitian *vodun* across an English/French divide of Caribbean cultures. This is a matter of great interest, I believe, because Haitian *vodun* is more directly descended from African myth and yet – like *limbo* which is a metamorphosis or new spatial character born of the Middle Passage – it is also intent on a curious re-assembly of the god or gods. Therefore I ask myself – is *vodun* a necessary continuation of a matrix of association which had not fulfilled itself in the Old World of Africa? If so that fulfilment would be in itself not an imitation of the past – much as it is indebted to the past – but a new and daring creative conception in itself.

If Haitian *vodun* is a creative fulfilment of African *vodun* one must ask oneself where do the similarities and differences lie. The basic feature they hold in common lies in 'possession trances' – trance features, I may add, which are not the case with *limbo*.

Pierre Verger, in an essay appearing in *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*[8] writes

> Possession trances occur regularly among the Nago-Yoruba and Fon people of Dahomey during rites for *orisha* and *vodun* […] They are the culmination of an elaborate ritual sequence. Seen from the participant's point of view, such trances are the reincarnations of family deities in the bodies of their descendants – reincarnations which have taken place in response to the offerings, prayers, and wishes of their worshippers.

In a footnote to his essay he defines *orisha* and *vodun* as

> […] the general names given by the Yoruba and Dahomean people respectively to the deities worshipped by them. They are generally considered to be the very remote ancestors who dealt during their lifetime with some force of nature, and who can still do so on behalf of their worshippers.

Pierre Verger has been speaking here of African *vodun*. I would like now to give my definition of Haitian *vodun* which appears in *Tradition, The Writer and Society*[9] as this will help me, in parenthesis, to unravel certain similarities and differences in African and Haitian *vodun* and to look back afresh at the significance of the human *limbo* gateway.

> Haitian *vodun* or voodoo is a highly condensed feature of inspiration and hallucination within which 'space' itself becomes the sole expression and recollection of the dance – as if 'space' is the character of the dance – since the celebrants themselves are soon turned into 'objects' – into an architecture of movement like "deathless' flesh, wood or stone. And such deathless flesh, wood or stone (symbolic of the dance of creation) subsists – in the very protean reality of space – on its own losses (symbolic decapitation of wood, symbolic truncation of stone) so that the very void of sensation in which the dancer

begins to move, like an authentic spectre or structure of fiction, makes him or her insensible to all conventional props of habit and responsive only to a grain of frailty or light support. Remember at the outset the dancer regards himself or herself as one in full command of two legs, a pair of arms, until, possessed by the muse of contraction, he or she dances into a posture wherein one leg is drawn up into the womb of space. He stands like a rising pole upheld by earth and sky or like a tree which walks in its shadow or like a one-legged bird which joins itself to its sleeping reflection in a pool. All conventional memory is erased and yet in this trance of overlapping spheres or reflection a primordial or deeper function of memory begins to exercise itself within the bloodstream of space.

Haitian *vodun* is one of the surviving primitive dances of sacrifice, which, in courting a subconscious community, sees its own performance in literal terms – that is, with and through the eyes of 'space': with and through the sculpture of sleeping things which the dancer himself actually expresses and becomes. For in fact the dancer moves in a trance and the interior mode of the drama is exteriorized into a medium inseparable from his trance and invocation. He is a dramatic agent of subconsciousness. The life from within and the life from without now truly overlap. That is the intention of the dance, the riddle of the dancer.

The importance which resides in all this, I suggest, is remarkable. For if the trance were a purely subjective thing – without action or movement – some would label it fantasy. But since it exteriorizes itself, it becomes an intense drama of images in space, which may assume elastic limbs and proportions or shrink into a dense current of reflection on the floor. For what emerges are the relics of a primordial fiction where the images of space are seen as in an abstract painting. That such a drama has indeed a close bearing on the language of fiction, on the language of art, seems to me incontestable. The community the writer shares with the primordial dancer is, as it were, the complementary halves of a broken stage. For the territory upon which the poet visualizes a drama of consciousness is a slow revelation or unravelling of obscurity – revelation or illumination within oneself; whereas the territory of the dancer remains actually obscure to him within his trance whatever revelation or illumination his limbs may articulate in their involuntary

> theme. The 'vision' of the poet (when one comprehends it from the opposite pole of 'dance') possesses a 'spatial' logic or 'convertible' property of the imagination. Herein lies the essential humility of a certain kind of self-consciousness within which occurs the partial erasure, if nothing more, of the habitual boundaries of prejudice.

I have quoted rather extensively here from my previous essay because I think this may help us to see in *rapport* with Pierre Verger's definition of African *vodun* that while the trance similarity is clear, the functions have begun to differ. Haitian *vodun* – like West Indian and Guianese/Brazilian limbo – may well point to sleeping possibilities of drama and horizons of poetry, epic and novel, sculpture and painting – in short to a language of variables in art which would have a profoundly evolutionary cultural and philosophical significance for Caribbean man. Such new resources (if I may diverge for a brief moment and speak as someone whose chosen tongue is English) are not foreign to English poetry except in the sense that these may be closer to the 'metaphysical poets' – to a range and potency of association in which nothing is ultimately alien – of which Eliot speaks in his famous essay on "*dissociation of sensibility*".

Such a variable emphasis is outside the boundaries of intention in African *vodun* which is a conservative medium or cloak of ancestors. The gulf therefore between an inbuilt uniform censor and the imagination of a new art which exists in the British West Indies, in particular, is absent in Africa. African *vodun* is a school of ancestors: it is very conservative. Something of this conservative focus remains very strongly in Haitian *vodun* but there is an absorption of new elements which breaks the tribal monolith of the past and reassembles an inter-tribal or cross-cultural community of families.

The term *loa*, for example, which means 'spirit' or 'deity', is of Bantu origin – not Yoruba or Dahomean, the tribal homes (some say) of *vodun*. Furthermore (I now quote from Harold Courlander's *Vodun In Haitian Culture*): [10]

> The various cults encompassed by the term *Vodoun* in its larger sense are not easy to set down diagramatically because of different degrees of blending and absorption in different

> regions of Haiti. Had the old cults or 'nations' remained independent of one another, as they probably were in early days, they probably would have included the following: *Arada* (Dahomey or Fon), *Anago* (Yoruba), *Mahi, Ibo, Kanga, Congo* (including *Moundongue, Solongo, Bumba*, etc., or these elements also might have maintained independence), and *Petro* (a cult in the African pattern that appears to have originated in Haiti). In certain parts of Haiti one still finds *Ibo, Congo, and Nago* cults that have resisted absorption, but this pattern does not hold for most of the country. There has been intrusion of Catholic practices and doctrine into *Vodoun*. Many of the loa are identified with Catholic saints.

Elsewhere Courlander has this to say:

> *Vodoun* has perhaps the same meaning to some Haitian leaders as astrology to some leaders in India.

All in all – while it is true that the role of Haitian *vodun* or *vodoun* is part and parcel of a prophetic and esoteric perspective in the Haitian body politic – the strict collective traditional sanction which belongs to Africa has varied in a manner comparable in some degree to the cleavage we have noted between history and art in the British West Indies.

I could not help noting this passage in Courlander's essay:

> The question of *Vodoun*'s influence in politics in earlier days is blurred or distorted for a variety of reasons. European writers sometimes were unaware of *Vodoun* as a genuine religious pattern common to the entire nation, and, as we have noted, frequently delighted in depicting the superstitious character of the people. Haitian historians of the past were sensitive to the charge that the country was overrun with pagan rites, and they largely avoided mention of *Vodoun.* Little on the subject is likely to be found in government archives for much the same reason.

It is my assumption, in the light of all the foregoing, that a certain *rapport* exists between Haitian *vodun* and West Indian *limbo* which suggests an epic potential or syndrome of variables. That epic potential, I believe, may supply the nerve-end of authority which is lacking at the moment in the conventional stance of history.

But we need to examine this with the greatest care in order to assess and appreciate the risks involved.

In the first place the *limbo* imagination of the West Indies possesses no formal or collective sanction as in an old Tribal World. Therefore the gateway complex between cultures implies a new catholic unpredictable threshold which places a far greater emphasis on the integrity of the individual imagination. And it is here that we see, beyond a shadow of doubt, the necessity for the uncommitted artist of conscience whose evolution out of the folk as poet, novelist, painter is a symbol of risk, a symbol of inner integrity.

With African *vodun* – as we have seen – the integrity of the tribal person was one with a system which was conservative and traditional. There was no breath of subversion – no cleavage in the collective. History and art were one medium.

With Guyanese/West Indian *limbo* that cleavage is a fact and the rise of the imaginative arts has occurred in the face of long-held intellectual and legal suspicion. Therefore the rise of the poet or artist incurs a gamble of the soul which is symbolised in the West Indian trickster (the spider or *anancy* configuration). It is this element of tricksterdom that creates an individual and personal risk absolutely foreign to the conventional sanction of an Old Tribal World: a risk which identifies him (the artist) with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples but requires of him, in the same token, alchemic resources to conceal, as well as elaborate, a far-reaching order of the imagination which, being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. He stands therefore at the heart of the lie of community and the truth of community. And it is here, I believe, in this trickster gateway this gamble of the soul – that there emerges the hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale.

I would like to re-emphasise the roles of 'epic' and 'trickster'. The epic of *limbo* holds out a range of variables – variables of community in the cross-cultural tie of dispossessed tribes or families – variables of art in a consciousness of links between poetry and drama, image and novel, architecture and sculpture and painting – which need to be explored in the Caribbean complex situation of apparent 'historylessness'.

And furthermore in the Americas as a whole, it would seem to me that the apparent void of history which haunts the black man may never be compensated until an act of imagination opens gateways between civilisations, between technological and spiritual apprehensions, between racial possessions and dispossessions in the way the *Aeneid* may stand symbolically as one of the first epics of migration and resettlement beyond the pale of an ancient world. *Limbo* and *vodun* are variables of an underworld imagination – variables of phantom limb and void and a nucleus of stratagems in which 'limb' is a legitimate pun on *limbo*, 'void' on *vodun*.

The trickster of *limbo* holds out a *caveat* we must reckon with in our present unstable situation. It is the *caveat* of conscience and points to the necessity for a free imagination which is at risk on behalf of a truth that is no longer given in the collective medium of the tribe. The emergence of individual works of art is consistent with – and the inevitable corollary of – an evolution of folk *limbo* into symbols of inner cunning and authority which reflect a long duress of the imagination.

II THE AMERINDIAN LEGACY

The cleavage which we have observed between history and art in respect of the Negro in the Caribbean (as indeed in respect of all races – Indian from India, Chinese, Portuguese etc., all of whom have become original participants of *limbo* and Carnival) – takes on even greater proportions with the Amerindian.

One has only to glance at census figures, for example in Guiana in the middle of this century. Amerindians were excluded from the population and their numbers given as a historical aside.

Hand in hand with this statistical ghetto goes a documentary stasis of Amerindian cultures. I would like to draw your attention to a recent pamphlet entitled '**The Amerindians in St Lucia'** by the Rev. C. Jesse.[11] Father Jesse speaks of the Caribs as *"resorting particularly to the cannibalism for which they were notorious."*

He also refers to *"Shamans who acted as intermediaries of evil spirits. From serious accounts left by early missionaries, it would seem proved that the shamans dealt with the Devil and were at times possessed by him. In general the Caribs of the West Indies surrounded themselves with superstitious practices from the cradle to the grave."*

In regard to the Arawaks he writes: *"In the way of religion, the Arawaks seem to have specialised in* ***zemis*** *or small idols. These objects were supposed to be dwelling places for the spirits of nature and the spirits of their ancestors to reside. Each person, according to Dr Rouse, had one zemi at least, sometimes as many as ten: the idols had the form of grotesque human beings, turtles, lizards, birds, potatoes, and manioc; some even were of geometric design. Needless to say,"* Father Jesse continues, *"the cult of the* ***zemi*** *was associated with gross superstition."*

It is revealing – as another symptom of the cleavage between history and art at which we have been looking – that an organisation which describes itself as a 'historical society' should sponsor and publish in the year 1968 Father Jesse's biases. Clearly the historical assumptions and prison in which

Frazer wrote *The Golden Bough* have scarcely begun to thaw in the West Indies. And this in spite of the researches of men like Mircea Eliade and Lévi-Strauss; in spite of a genuine renascence of sensibility which has erupted into the work of the gifted Guianese-born painter Aubrey Williams through Amerindian symbols; in spite of the new wind of scholarship blowing through the work of men like the Rev. Father Placide Tempels and others.

I would like to say something briefly about Aubrey Williams's paintings before I move on. There is no other painter in the Caribbean to my knowledge, who has attempted (as Aubrey Williams has) to interpret the sensibility of the Amerindian with colour. (By the way what I say here is my personal interpretation of Williams. He may, or he may not, agree with my view of his work).

It is my view that this use of colour is a poetic and liberating device. One recalls a famous poet who saw colours within the vowel structure of a poem. More pertinent – in this context – is the kind of light which seems to glow or expand in Turner and in a different way, in Van Gogh: in another way still in an Australian painter like Nolan or in the work of the American Jackson Pollock. In fact paintings which intuitively or intentionally make colour a character of metamorphosis are involved in the elements as a peculiar, often fantastic scale. There is a musical intimation (which I find in Williams's use of colour – a brooding, sometimes savage undercurrent of music). But there is another aspect to Aubrey Williams's paintings. Amerindian peoples – for one reason or another – have been decimated. Therefore a translation of the blood of the past into the scale of the elements is consistent with the character of 'space' – the theme of 'space' – the re-assembly, reconstitution of the muse – which we explored yesterday in terms of subconscious and unconscious variables in Negro Guianese West Indian *limbo* and Haitian *vodun*.

In this sense, I see Aubrey Williams as a painter of renascence who has been affected in an original way by a Amerindian 'resurrection' as Edward Brathwaite, for example, has been affected in an original way by an African 'resurrection'.

Let us look, first of all, at the cannibal horizon of the extinct Caribs which Father Jesse labels 'notorious'. Michael Swan takes a different view. His isn't a searching analysis but he indicates certain signposts which are useful. In the cannibal horizon he hints at "*transubstantiation in reverse*" and points out that the accusations levelled by the Spaniards were largely a smoke-screen for their own excesses. Excesses, I believe, partly compounded and projected out of their own Catholic Spanish psyche of heaven and hell. Therefore, whatever inner fiends the savage Caribs truly possessed as pre-Columbian conquerors of the ancient West Indies and Guianas – these were irrelevant to the Spaniards who were incapable of assessing the Carib genius and psyche or the brooding melancholy of Carib temperament and wished to find merely ready-made black devils in the New World consistent with the ornamental surfaces of Latin symbolism.

Such a gateway complex between pre-Columbian primitive and ornamental Latin symbolism carries within it, nevertheless, a new latent capacity, a *caveat* or warning we need to ponder upon deeply and to unravel in our age. If we succumb to a blackhearted stasis – to enclosures of fear – we may destroy ourselves; on the other hand, if we begin to immerse ourselves in a new capacity or treaty of sensibility between alien cultures – we will bring into play a new variable imagination or renascence of sensibility steeped in *caveats* of the necessary diversity and necessary unity of man. In short we won't oversimplify or crudify similarities or differences, but will seek as it were, however difficult, even obscure, the path to bring all perspectives available to us into an art of the imagination.

We know from investigations into the psychology of the victim (conducted for example in post-Hiroshima Japan) that it is he, the victim, very often, whose consciousness is infused with omens of the future (apocalyptic omens are often of this kind in a victor/victim syndrome). It is as though the guilt of the victor stands on the threshold of a creative breakthrough in the darkening consciousness of the victim as prelude to the birthpangs of a new cosmos. It is not inconsistent, therefore, that we may discern, in the rubble of the Carib past, signs akin to a new ominous but renascent consciousness at the time of the Spanish conquest.

That new darkness or dawning renascence lay not simply in the ritual morsel of the enemy they devoured or the flute they fashioned from his bone, but from a sudden upsurge of bush baby spectres which rose out of their cooking pots like wraiths of smoke or sparks of fire. Certain vestiges of legend – in this context – have come down to us and the bush baby syndrome corresponds to what C. G. Jung calls the *puer aeternus* – the immortal or archetypal child of dreams.

If this is the case, we can look back at the Carib 'immortal child' of dreams with the aid of alchemical symbolism for which, as you may know, there are three stages, namely first of all the *nigredo* or blackness —sometimes called the *massa confusa* or unknown territory (not to be equated superficially with the colour *black*, but with an undiscovered realm), secondly the *albedo* or whiteness (again not to be equated superficially with the colour *white* since it means an inner perspective or illumination, the dawn of a new consciousness), thirdly *cauda pavonis* or the colours of the peacock, which may be equated with all the variable possibilities or colours of fulfilment we can never totally realise.

The immortal wraith which the Caribs glimpsed as they crouched over their campfires and consumed a morsel of the enemy, carried therefore overtones of eclipse at the hands of Spain (akin to *nigredo*) overtones also of a new dawn (akin to *albedo*), and of a host native (akin to *cauda pavonis* or rainbow peacock). There was also the bone or flute they fashioned whose music has long faded but retains for us the seed of an unwritten modern symphony. The only attempt as far as I am aware, to write a modern composition was made by Philip Pilgrim in the 1940s. He based his music on A. J. Seymour's **'The Legend of Kaieteur**'. That music was largely in his head. It was his intention to put the full score on paper but he died within weeks of his first experimental performance he conducted in Georgetown before a generous and greatly enthusiastic audience. I wrote this before I knew that '**The Legend of Kaieteur'** would achieve a 'resurrection' and that the skeleton bars of music Philip Pilgrim left behind would invoke a new response in a reconstructed score by Bill Pilgrim. Thus both A. J. Seymour's **'The Legend of Kaieteur'** and Philip Pilgrim's music have been reassembled into a joint classic within the gate of the Republic of Guyana.

To return to the main thread of my argument. The overtones and undertone's of host native – of a native consciousness – could have occupied little more than a latent threshold in the Carib/Latin world of the sixteenth century. For that was an age whose overriding character – as in the centuries to follow – remained rooted in notions of conquest. What I would suggest, however, is that this overriding character of conquest (the Caribs themselves were conquerors of the ancient West Indies before Spain, England, France, Holland came on the scene) was in a state of subconscious erosion. And I also feel that this latent threshold – this inner erosion of a certain dominant mould or character of conquest – this inner secret of the native (inner divergence of the native from a consolidated given pattern which is the tyranny of history) is fundamental to the originality of the Guianas and the Caribbean and to a renascence of sensibility.

All this is implicit, I believe, in our cannibal horizon out of which the wraith of time ascends like subsistence of memory. I have often wondered whether the ritual of Guyanese and Caribbean hospitality (with its religious concern for the stranger) is not related obscurely to the theme we have been unravelling – the native or host consciousness.

This scale of the native as host consciousness is subtle and complex and involves both inner and outer horizons we may only have begun to perceive afresh in our age. The alchemical analogies I have chosen are not easily comprehensible. They may need, in fact, to come into *rapport* with a new anthropology capable of investigating the subconscious and unconscious mind of an age. For, we must remember, the whole syndrome was latent, unrealised in the West Indies from the Carib/Latin age to our day in spite of the Carnival host. Indeed this latency, this lack of realisation – except on Carnival occasions when the whole populace seems to have been devoured by a school of masks – may have been inevitable. For the raw material of life lived in the West Indies and the Central or South Americas has involved not only peoples from Asia, Africa, Europe who were alien to each other (and therefore caught, as it were, in culture shock) but situations of change (conquest, slavery, indenture, emancipation, etc.) which precipitated crises again and again in economic terms. Thus,

in effect, the Carib or Carnival 'immortal child' was an inner omen which diverged from the immediate realism of the day. Such a divergence exposed latencies or sleeping resources. Those resources of inner divergence need to be converted in our age, I feel, into an original threshold in a West Indian architecture of consciousness so that we may begin to cope within ourselves with the overburden or sheer raw material of life lived which has been our blanket realism for centuries in these parts.

In other words, it is not that the Caribbean and Guianas are at the rim of the world like a kind of gutted monster (as V. S. Naipaul and others see it) but rather I would suggest, that the waves of action stemming from many movements and continents since the European Renaissance have come so thick and fast that 'realism' becomes, in itself, a dead-end and the need begins to dawn for a drama of consciousness which reads back through the shock of place and time for omens of capacity, for thresholds of capacity that were latent, unrealised, within the clash of cultures and movements of peoples into the South Americas and the West Indies. Such an art of subsistence of memory involves, I feel, a kind of shroud at times or organ of obscurity we need to participate as intrinsic to the arousal of illumination in perspectives of sleeping/ awakening resources of the imagination.

To return to the Caribs. It is possible to read into the Carib lot something of the sleepwalker of history which became their destiny in the wake of the Spanish conquest. They continued to remain bogged down in the overriding character of the age – they began to duplicate on an inferior level the role of conqueror they had played in pre-Columbian times: they became mercenaries or jungle-police of the Dutch and English. It was, in a way, a crowning indignity for a once proud sovereign people.

Thus the inroads inflicted on them by the Spanish Conquest never healed (perhaps we need to look even farther back into the pre-Columbian mind of the Caribs for the first causes of their downfall). There may have been a brooding death wish even before Spain arrived. With the dawn of the nineteenth century they were virtually extinct. Their 'immortal child' omens, compounded of morsel and flute, analogous to a

prophecy of the birth of a native imagination that could absorb both conqueror and conquered in an everlasting spiritual tenant (or genius of place) remained a latent threshold they never crossed – and assumed, as a consequence, inner proportions we would describe today as a nervous breakdown.

The process of shamanism resembles a nervous breakdown. The shaman, as we know, is likely to appear in the tribe in times of crisis and his role – far from being 'gross superstition' as Father Jesse believes – is an indispensable creative attempt to see through or break through a hangover of the past (in the Carib syndrome that hangover was the diabolic overburden of the character of conquest) and to make of every inner divergence, every subtle omen of change – subsistence of memory to feed imagination in the future, There is a trickster element in the shaman which reflects his ambivalence and can lead sometimes to self-enchantment or *hubris*. This is understandable since the diabolic inflation of the warrior king hangover is not easily seen through. That this conversion of diseased character – diseased warrior king into half-trickster, half-shaman – occurred with the Caribs may be gleaned from the events of the early nineteenth century.

As we know the Caribs were on the verge of extinction at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was at this time that Mahanarva – the last Carib warrior chieftain to come to Stabroek – arrived to claim his gifts from the English Governor. These gifts constituted the pay the Caribs had been receiving for services rendered as mercenaries or jungle-police to various occupying powers since the Spanish. It was a custom or treaty which was fast becoming archaic and little need existed any longer to guard the escape routes of African slaves. In fact slavery had been or was on the point of being abolished.

Mahanarva claimed that a considerable fighting force lay under his command in the bush which would constitute a threat to Stabroek. Little penetration of the interior by the English had been made at that time since their fortunes lay on the coast. So the treaty with the Caribs was one which signified a kind of overall cover to imperial adventure since in theory the English occupation extended far beyond the

coast, and the treaty with the Caribs gave that hypothetical occupation a symbolic seal – gave 'teeth' as it were to the unknown world of the bush stretching into a continent.

Such an arrangement seemed, on the face of it, empirical and astute but the decimation at the heart of a people – the primeval fallout of a broken tribe – was something that may have been truly obscure to the European occupying powers.

It was Mahanarva who unwittingly parted the shroud for the eyes of the English Governor. His tale of a considerable fighting force was accepted and much impressed, a scout was despatched – unknown to Mahanarva – to reconnoitre the position. (That scout – if I may diverge for a moment – was the beginning of certain new penetrations by Europeans – the nineteenth-century arm of the conquistador – amongst whom figure names like Barrington Brown, Horsham, Schomburgk and others). However, to return to Mahanarva, the English scout discovered that the Carib chieftain had lied. There was no body of warriors lying in the bush. Mahanarva's ancient command had shrunken to rags. A handful of warriors was all he possessed.

There are two issues which arise from this bald historical account which we find occupying little more than a footnote in the history books.

First of all, Mahanarva's 'lie' gives us an insight (if we begin to free ourselves from dogmatic morality) into the trickster womb of the shaman. When Mahanarva claimed that his fighting forces were intact we know now from insights we have gleaned into our own psyche and into the so-called savage mind that he was compensating in himself losses his people had endured over centuries. He became the womb of the tribe in certain respects that are analogous to traces of mythology – ancient Greek, Persian, Mithraic as well as Christian – in which stones and rocks become charged with architectural latencies, inner rooms, etc., and therefore give birth to numinous tenants. In the same token, Pallas Athene, half-feminine, half-warrior archetype of wisdom, leapt from the head of Zeus; the Christian aeon was born of Peter the Rock. The shaman therefore stands in a perspective wherein 'death' becomes 'life' and the diseased warrior-king is translated into half-priest, half-feminine guide to the

underworld. And that underworld of the lost Caribs constitutes for us a very significant dimension of elements (animate and inanimate realms of psyche, realms of subsistence of memory).

Secondly, Mahanarva's 'lie' to the Governor brings into play a fateful – however subconscious – erosion in the character of conquest. The shroud which was parted gave the Governor a view of his hypothetical kingdom. There were no Carib fighting forces lying in the bush either to threaten Stabroek or alternatively secure the interior for the English Crown, but instead a chasm of losses – the primeval fallout of a broken people who were partly victims of themselves, partly victims of him (the Governor) and of others who had invaded the Guianas – victims in effect, of a global appetite for adventure.

As such the statecraft of the European nineteenth-century representative of the Crown came into intimate *rapport*, with the trickster-shaman of aboriginal allies. It was a marriage of alien yet conspiring functions (trickster to statesman) that broke a uniform pattern to complacent character on both sides, and a creative necessity was born for the spatial re-assembly or salvage of the muse of authority.

I would like now to look back to the Arawak *zemis* which we touched on earlier in this paper. Father Jesse dubbed these 'gross superstition'. *Zemi*, in fact, which I like to call the Arawak icon, iconic turtle or lizard or bird, etc., is related to *seme* which means 'sweet' or 'delicate'. The correspondences making for spatial links – Arawak/Latin/English in the Caribbean – are enormous:

Space (our weakest resource in that we appear to move freely through it or bend it freely to our wills) is analogous to the Arawak *seme* (which means 'delicate') and to *zemi* or icon—zemi of the turtle (space of the turtle), zemi of the lizard (space of the lizard), as well as to the Latin threshold signifying hidden perspectives (*latere*, 'to hide'). We are involved therefore – if we can imaginatively grasp it in iconic or plastic thresholds – in an architecture of consciousness or reconstitution of spaces in the West Indian psyche running through Negro *limbo* and *vodun* into sculptures or spaces equivalent to rooms of an Arawak cosmos (rooms of turtle, bird, lizard).

In fact, an awareness of such a subconscious perspectival landscape infuses, in my view, a new quality or apprehension to a remarkable poem like Derek Walcott's '**A Tropical Bestiary'** which can be approached as a *zemi*-studded poem. The heraldic images namely Ibis, Octopus, Lizard, Man-o-War, Bird, Sea Crab, the Whale, Tarpon are partly fortuitous and ornamental like –

Flesh that has lost pleasure in the act,
Domesticity drained of desire

But Walcott's work witnesses to a continuous wrestling with his images and a technical development beyond that of any other Caribbean poet. As such a visionary overlap reaches his poem akin to an intuitive fusion and psychic concert of the god of land and sea.

The sea crab's cunning, halting, awkward grace
    is the syntactical envy of my hand.

This brings us to the question of landscape. A friend of mine recently told me that in conversation with a certain high-ranking Guyanese official and politician, he discovered that that politician saw landscape as nothing more than the boundaries of his constituency. The ideal artist or scientist for him, therefore was someone who conformed to an immediate governing stasis of place and time. As I reflected on this kind of realism, as some would call it, I recalled my boyhood (before World War II broke out) when I often swam at the Fort on the Georgetown foreshore. I reflected also on an observation I made when I was last in Georgetown in 1966: the sea no longer stands where it used to be and the land has grown in its place by six or seven feet. Therefore, if I were to endow the *de facto* mound or grave which now exists on the foreshore with a figurative meaning beyond the present stasis of reality I might see the ghost of the past (the ghost of my childhood) swimming in dry land.

That kind of imagination – which is clearly suspect to the politician – is true of areas of the primitive world and, in my conception, it corresponds to an architecture of consciousness

within which the opaque mound or wall of earth is a relative not absolute, feature and the swimmer in dry land witnesses to a fluid room or dimension that was also relative when it occurred.

This is but a small illustration, of a landscape of the imagination which can be unravelled to lay bare many complex rooms and dimensions that have a profound bearing on Caribbean man as a civilisation-making animal, as an architect or a poet.

In Latin-American literature this reality is something which, I believe, occupies certain artists and novelists. This kind of vision, however, is quite rare in British West Indian literature. At the present moment I am glad to note that there is a new critical grasp of the issues. And some of the credit may lie with the Spanish Literature Department of the University of the West Indies and the work which Gabriel Coulthard and James Irish, for example are doing there. I am indebted to James Irish for the quotation I aim about to read to you. That quotation is a statement by Gabriel Garcia Marquez which James Irish records in a paper of his entitled **'Magical Realism: a Search for Caribbean and Latin-American Roots**'. Gabriel García Márquez declared:

> I am a realist writer because I believe that in Latin-America everything is possible, everything is real. There is a technical problem in that the writer finds difficulty in transcribing real events in Latin-America because no one would believe them in a book. We live surrounded by these fantastic and extraordinary things and still some writers insist on recounting to us immediate realities of no real importance. I believe that we have to work, investigating language and the technical forms of narration so that the entire fantastic reality of Latin-America might form part of our books, and so that Latin-American Literature might in fact correspond to Latin-American life where the most extraordinary things happen every day. We Latin-American writers, when we sit down to write, instead of accepting them as realities, enter into polemics and rationalise by saying 'this is impossible; what happens is this man was a lunatic'. We all start giving a series of explanations which falsify the Latin-American reality. I believe that what we should do is to promote it as a form of reality which can give something new to universal literature.

As you will see this 'form of reality' of which Márquez speaks is akin to my swimmer in dry land or to Merleau-Ponty's endowment of the *de facto* situation with a figurative meaning beyond a historical stasis.

In the third and last section of this address, I intend to look, amongst other things, at one area of the work of Edward Brathwaite who possesses, I believe, the greatest potential among Caribbean poets for the revival of poetic folk drama.

III CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

So far we have been looking at a cleavage between the historical convention and arts of the imagination in the Caribbean. I have suggested that the historical convention remains a stasis which possesses no criteria for assessing profoundly original dislocations in the continuous pattern of exploiter/exploited charted by the historian. As such, the West Indies – history-wise – appear to me to be little more than an adjunct of imperialism. It has become essential, I feel, to assess dislocations which point away from the straight jacket of convention. These dislocations, I have suggested, may be perceived in areas of folk obscurity such as Negro *limbo* or phantom limb of the dismembered god and slave, in aboriginal features at which we have also been looking, and in the rise of the individual artist and imagination in the West Indies today. We have also touched on archetypal resonances, for example, the many-armed deities of India, European alchemy, etc. In fact, the word native is not to be confused with local prejudice. Karl Marx, for example, was a profoundly native phenomenon. This meant that his resources went so deep they appeared obscure and embraced many contradictions to acquire universal application in the Western World. Many economic theses, however, which are easy to read have a pseudo-universal or local/insular application.

To turn to creative writers and artists – Herman Melville and William Faulkner, Wole Soyinka and Amos Tutuola, Denis Williams and Carpentier (if I may give a few examples) are native/universal spirits not local ornaments of middle-class, working-class, or any-other-class prejudice. I would like to make it very clear that it is not my intention to denigrate West Indian historians. I have a high regard for Professor Elsa Gouveia and for Mr C. L. R. James, but it is my personal view that there does not exist a philosophy of history in the Caribbean correlative to the arts of the imagination.

I have not been able, in these talks, to look at the new, largely unpublished poets in the Caribbean. But judging from

manuscript poems I have read in Jamaica, it would appear that Wayne Brown and Dennis Scott are certainly rising poets to watch.

There is a certain point I would like to clear up at this stage. When I used the word 'evolutionary' (as I have been doing all along in these addresses) I intended not to imply a kind of static progression in which later cultures are seen as superior to earlier cultures, or in which some sort of biased projection is made back into primitive ages (either in the pseudo-romantic sense which exalts the noble savage, so-called, or in the equally pseudo-romantic sense which exalts the pride or arrogance of the consumer age).

My use of the word 'evolution' has nothing in common with either of these views. I am saying this because I was approached by someone who unfortunately had gained the impression. When I emphasise 'evolution' I am concerned with the gateway-complex between cultures. Such a gateway-complex means, in fact, that one stresses a discontinuous line – the missing links, as it were between cultures rather than a hard continuous dividing wall. Such a discontinuous or dotted line means, in effect that one has no dogmatic evolutionary walled creed of superiority and inferiority. One is, in fact, intent on an original overlap or viable frontier between ages and cultures.

Such a quest invites us to look afresh in each age at the life of the imagination as this addresses us from the past with a new intuitive logic and design that diverges from the prison of the past, or which speaks through us towards the past and the future in a manner that also subtly diverges from the prison of the present and, may I add, from popular prejudice. You may recall that yesterday we were speaking of the Caribs. The pre-Columbian Carib was the Conqueror of the ancient West Indies and the ancient Guianas and we found that the post-Columbian Carib, in a way, carried on this role of conqueror at an inferior level. The post-Columbian Carib became the mercenary of the Dutch and French and the English. Therefore, one has apparently a continuous historical line, a continuous historical character coming out of the pre-Columbian world into the post-Columbian world and, in fact, we know that there are projections by people today who think

of the Amerindians as a people who were intercepting or catching slaves.

Much of this projection upon all Amerindians, irrespective of tribe, is related to the continuous historical line associated with the Caribs. In fact, when we look very closely at the Carib vestiges of legend I believe one sees that there has been a divergence at a certain moment of time in terms of the bush baby omens that pointed away from that continuous character line towards a subtle annunciation of native host consciousness. If one invests in the continuous historical line of conquest one misses that kind of subtle divergence and this, of course, is part and parcel of the cleavage which exists between the historical convention and the arts of the imagination.

In fact I believe that it is here (in this sometimes almost subconscious divergence – it takes a peculiar kind of mind, I would think, to perceive both sides of the coin in his lifetime, namely, the wall of prejudice and the intimate phenomenal resources for divergence or discontinuity) it is here, I repeat, that the essential objectivity or life of art resides. It does not reside in the given historical prejudices of the artist or poet or novelist or sculptor, but in what is virtually intuitive and subconscious terrain that may acquire its conscious application later in the extensive body or development of the artist's work, or at a later post-mortem reappraisal stage by critical intelligences who may be better placed to appreciate the intuitive breakthrough in a work of art executed within a certain age or prison history. This view of art as an extraordinary drama of consciousness whose figurative meaning lies beyond its *de facto* historical climate is anathema to the materialist or conventional realist, though I know that Lukács, a Marxist critic, toyed with the idea and that the great Irish poet Yeats attempted to articulate it when he wrote "*Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.*"

This is a helpful point at which to turn to a poem like Edward Brathwaite's *Masks,* the second book in his trilogy. It seems to me that there is an abrupt terrain or discontinuous line in *Masks* which constitutes for me anyway (the poet himself may not agree) what I would call the dramatic breath of the poem. Take for example –

So the god,
masks of dreamers,
hears lightnings
stammer […]

I repeat:

hears lightnings
stammer […]

Note the echo of the drums, of thunder implied there in association with the lightning that stammers across the sky. That stammer – in association with the thunder of heaven's drum – constitutes the oracle of the poem.

So the god,
mask of dreamers,
hears lightnings
stammer,
hearts rustle
their secrets
blood shiver like leaves
on his branches. Will
the tree, god
of path-
ways, still
guide us ? Will
your wood lips speak
so we see?

Sound becomes sight because of the discontinuous line of the drum, of the mask that allows for the breath and life of the icon.

Brathwaite is, I believe, a Caribbean poet of renascence. And as you know in this series I have been concentrating on perspectives of renascence within which for example, we looked at Aubrey Williams, the painter, and the bearing his work may have on his Amerindian renascence.

Brathwaite has been affected by African images but in an evolutionary way as I understand it. Evolutionary in that it seems to me, a discontinuous line makes for areas of overlap or gateway drama between Africa and the West Indies – between sound and sight. Therefore there is an oral and visual coincidence in his poems which invokes a speaking oracular voice as well as an imagistic intelligence. Because of this gateway between voice and image his icon breathes and the oracle addresses us through the elements in a manner consistent with West Indian folk consciousness.

One must remember that breath is all the black man may have possessed at a certain stage in the Americas. He had lost his tribal tongue, he had lost everything except an abrupt area of space and lung: he possessed nothing but the calamitous air of broken ties in the New World. Historical convention has no criteria for this inner subtle storm of reality (almost Yoga reality in the Indian sense of the yoke between the breath of man and God) – the yoke of imagination in the trickster theatre of the Caribbean as a breath-body or field of metamorphosis beyond the *de facto* embalmed posture of the slave in every catalogue of injustice.

The continuous exploitation of man by man, inhumanity of man to man, is reinforced, ironically, I believe, by ceaseless catalogues of injustice. We need somehow to find an original dislocation within which to unlock a body of claustrophobic assumptions which strengthens itself by promoting a self-encircling round of protest – a continuous obsession with irreconcilable differences – irreconcilable frontiers – irreconcilable ghettos – like a static clock that crushes all into the time of conquest. Much of the character of civilisation as we have known it has been geared to this static clock which obviously seeks to shape its material, all its human material, into timetables of defensive capital, defensive labour and other territorial imperatives. That is why the catalogues of deeds compiled by historians conform to dead time that measures man as a derivative industry-making animal, tool-making animal, weapon-making animal.

And the quest therefore for an inner clock is so necessary in our situation of social and industrial character geared relentlessly to static time (to statistical bundles of labouring,

fighting time, etc.) that it constitutes a universal, complex and liberating theme. Something far different, needless to say, to the tautology of fact – the continuity of embalmed fact.

It is in this context that we look back again at the discontinuous line or breath of the icon in Edward Brathwaite's *Masks*.

This brings me to the last section of my talk. I have felt from various writers' conferences I have attended (whether a Commonwealth Conference in Australia, UNESCO Conference in Cuba seminars in British Universities, etc.) that no philosophy of history exists in regard to the Third World. One has the sense that a continuous plea is mounted on behalf of the black man and the deprivations that he has suffered. A plea which invests in deterministic horizons within the past, present and future. Once, again, therefore it seems to me the native consciousness is being overlooked within deterministic projections, and criteria are invalidated which might probe into unpredictable perspectives, latent spaces we need to unravel in our age. One has the sense also that vested interests are at work to embalm the fact of exploitation. Thus a new kind of callous is enshrined which blocks perspectives. How many people are aware for example that when the horrors of slavery were being mounted in the Caribbean, press-gangs roved England in search of able-bodied men for the Navy. The appalling deprivations such men suffered in the age of Nelson, the great Admiral, would make for a catalogue of almost unbelievable horrors. Surely this is a related aspect of a civilisation which saw men as bundles of labouring, fighting time, time-fodder to fertilise the fields of industry or to fence the high seas. For the Navy is not an arbitrary choice since without it the West Indies would not have become a British possession.

So I return to the thread of my argument. In a society which has been shot through by diverse inter-racial features and intercontinental thresholds, we need a philosophy of history which is original to us and yet capable of universal application. Caribbean man is involved in a civilisation-making process (whether he likes it or not) and until this creative authority becomes intimate to his perspectives, he will continue to find himself embalmed in his deprivations – embalmed as a

derivative tool-making, fence-making animal. As such his dialectic will remain a frozen round of protest.

It would seem to me that the closest West Indian historians have come to a philosophy of history is in terms, firstly, of the Marxist dialectic. C. L. R. James is notable in this respect and deserves the closest attention. In terms, secondly of Marxism allied to various humanitarian and egalitarian principles, Elsa Goveia is notable in this respect and deserves too to be read with the closest attention. In her *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century*[12] there emerges what seems to me a key passage:

> Sooner or later we shall have to face the fact that we are courting defeat when we attempt to build a new heritage of freedom upon a structure of society which binds us all too closely to the old heritage of slavery.

For that "*old heritage of slavery*" as Professor Goveia sees it (and as many liberal West Indian intellectuals see it) serves to buttress a state of inequality and deprivation of opportunity that threatens democracy. In short, that "*old heritage*" may come to constitute – if it does not already constitute in Professor Goveia's thinking – an adamant and inflexible psychological fortress.

But – as a humane scholar – she reasons, "*Perhaps however, there is still good reason to believe that the forces of radicalism will prevail. For now that a democratic suffrage has been established in many parts of the West Indies, the time may be ripening for the emergence and success of renewed movements of protest.*"

Right here we see how Elsa Goveia has invested in a continuity of humane, intellectual protest which has no criteria for subtle dislocations or original metamorphoses within the prison of time she characterises as "*the old heritage of slavery.*"

I would suggest that intuitively, unintentionally, therefore Elsa Goveia puts her finger on the sterility of West Indian politics and intellectualism. Protest in intellectual political terms (Marxist and humanitarian) continues to divide the Caribbean. Some people have said that Dr Jagan's Marxist party in Guyana – radical and far-thinking as it once was –

eventually became dominated by the self-interest of an Indian peasantry who built a wall in the face of that very "*old heritage*" of Negro slavery and this, in fact, is no denigration of the Indian peasantry, because they are as much trapped as any other group in the Caribbean and one feels, in the same token, that the West Indian Federation split into island fortresses who were intent on building a hard and fast wall against that very *"old heritage of slavery"* within themselves and without. It seems to me, therefore that the continuity of intellectual moral protest (which has been the liberal political climate of the West Indies spearheaded by thinkers like Elsa Goveia) will remain an embalmed posture until immense new disciplines (a new anthropology I would think) can assess discontinuities and original divergences from the continuous character line charted by historians as a humane imposition, on one hand, or an oppressive deterrent on the other.

Kenneth Ramchand and Paul Edwards put their finger rather well on that continuous wall of deprivation which hems in the West Indian intellectual. I quote from their article on Michael Anthony:[13]

> Anthony is committed in *The Year in San Fernando* to involving us in the feel of a peculiarly open state of consciousness; that this is achieved by a scrupulous adherence to the boy's point of view in a deceptively easy style that carries the necessary sensuous burden as well as sustaining the illusion of adolescent reportage. The kind of participation invited in this way seems to us to be of a more experimental kind than that which V. S. Naipaul suggests may be achieved in another way. A literature can grow only out of a strong framework of social convention. And the only convention the West Indian knows is his involvement with the white world. This deprives his world of universal appeal. The situation is too special. The reader is excluded; he is invited to witness and not to participate. It is easier to enter any strong framework of social convention however alien. It is easier to enter the tribal world of an African writer like Camara Laye.
>
> The reader's sensuous involvement in Anthony's fiction will be further illustrated, but there is another element (not restricted to the question of involvement) to be traced in Naipaul's remark. The West Indian hankering after something like a tribal past or coherent social present as an organising

principle for fiction, only latent in Naipaul's comment, appears more distinctly in *Bim* where praise for *A House for Mr Biswas* is followed by this conclusion:

> The Negro West Indian cannot really expect novels like *Biswas* until he has a strong enough framework of social convention from which to operate […]
>
> Novels do indeed reflect the society out of which they have been created, but coherence in the world of the novel is one thing and an external framework of social convention is another. It is naive to confuse life with fiction at this level.

The line of reasoning pursued by Naipaul and *Bim* makes it all too clear – ironically perhaps – how strong is the *de facto* historical situation in the West Indies in black/white rigidity and how it encircles the imagination. Edwards and Ramchand – in their study of Michael Anthony – seek to break out of that prison by exploring *The Year in San Fernando* as an open state of consciousness which endows the *de facto* situation with a figurative meaning beyond the conventional stasis. Herein lies, I believe, the immense possibility which the Caribbean novelist or poet may pursue. It is something which the Latin American writer – unlike Naipaul and *Bim* – understands at this moment of time.

It is my view that the subtle key to a philosophy of history is embedded in the misunderstood arts of the Caribbean which we have traced through Negro *limbo*, Haitian *vodun*, Carib bush baby, Arawak *zemi* as well as through Latin and English inheritances and the intuitive logic of a few Caribbean poets, painters, novelists, etc. One area I have neglected is to deepen our perception of the fauna and flora of a landscape of time which indicate the kind of room or space or material vision of time in which whole societies conscripted themselves. The point here is that by tracing this one is able to endorse what one has been saying before. The sort of facile reliance on what is called 'a strong framework' is, in my view, a parody of the historical convention – an unconscious parody perhaps, whereby the imagination fails to deepen its resources, and to explore perspectives away from the embalmed posture of history. The trap is a very pervasive one because it seeps into literature itself and begins to take over the critical role until the whole realm of criticism is subsumed or taken over by historical convention and the critic loses his independence.

We saw with the Caribs that they possessed an apparently continuous character line which embodied pre-Columbian conqueror in post-Columbian mercenary. That continuity, however, of historical line – of the character of conquest – had been secretly breathed in their bush baby omens of a new native consciousness. This was not apparent in a collective sense to the Caribs who continued to enact the sleepwalking role of conqueror at an inferior mercenary level.

Let us note also that parrots were the heralds of Manoa or Eldorado. Heralds of a bank of time. The Aztecs of Mexico, as you know, also visualised a bank of time which possessed a cyclic character. For this reason at the end of each cycle of 52 years, according to our reckoning – they were convinced time might die unless replenished with the heart's blood. This terrifying emphasis on replenishing the bank of time fatefully determined the character of man as slave to an industry of priests who worshipped the sun. The living hearts of men were torn out of their breasts to feed the gold of time – if I may be permitted to invoke an overlap between Eldorado and ancient Mexico – and one is reminded of that "mire of human veins" which Yeats associated with Byzantium at a certain level of artifice and desperation.

The parrot was the herald or omen of Manoa, the rabbit figures in the cyclical calendar of ancient Mexico, and if we appoint these as fauna of the landscape of time, we are involved in the character of man as this was fatefully established through philosophies of time in those civilisations.

The curious spin-off available to us today from cyclic orders, half-moon orders, waves or troughs of time, rooms of time, some approximately vertical, some horizontal, which we can trace through many civilisations is this: relative time becomes the spectre of humanity. Cyclic time in ancient Mexico meant a cyclic relative ghost of man to feed the blood or gold of the cosmos, linear time – in our twentieth-century programmed age – means a linear, relative ghost of man to serve a five year or ten year or twenty year plan. Architectural time (in which the relative scale overlooked by each monolithic age would emerge as the thread running through a philosophy of history) would bring us into *rapport* with a liberated spectre of man inhabiting shapes of time – all being rooms in an

architecture of consciousness. So far this relative vision has not been the case and the character of man has been encased in a monolithic or continuous wall and one needs immense concentration upon the texture of an age (through the texture of an age into discontinuous cornerstones which are liberating architecture-wise). In a sense, it is the revitalised fauna and flora of legend, in an age of renascence when perspectives into the past reopen afresh, which invoke the strangest ironical overlap between apparently irreconcilable ages or cultures.

Let me restate the position. History in pursuing a continuous wall as its domain, in consolidating national or local political and economic self-interest, becomes the servant of a material vision of time. As such it has not realised criteria to assess the subtle discontinuities which point to the originality of man as a civilisation-making animal who can alter the architectural complex of an age. Such an alteration or dialectic of alteration would seem to me the cornerstone for a philosophy of history in the Third World of the Caribbean. It would bring into play the inspiration for new criteria within the dead-end of economic and political institutions. It would alert us to the duality that is characteristic of calendars of fate associated with dead time as the spectral irony and archaeology of the muse.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Fable and myth are employed as variables of the imagination in this essay.
[2] *Caribbean Quarterly,* March-June 1968.
[3] West Indies number, July 1969 (published by Heinemann and the University of Leeds).
[4] Published by Longmans, 1969.
[5] [Editor's note: as printed, this sentence seems incomplete.]
[6] Appearing in *New Beacon Reviews*, Collection 1, 1968.
[7] *The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures*, second series, January 1969, published by the National History and Arts Council of Guyana.
[8] Published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.
[9] Wilson Harris. New Beacon Publications, 1967.
[10] Published by the Institute for Cross-Cultura1 Research, Washington.
[11] Published by the St. Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society, 1968.
[12] [Editor's note: published by Yale University Press in 1965.]
[13] In *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (July 1969, No. 7).

Fourth Series, 1971

Man and Making - Victim and Vehicle

Martin Carter

FOREWORD

A. N. Whitehead was continually striking off simple but preternaturally wise remarks and one of these quoted by Martin Carter in his third talk in this series of Edgar Mittelholzer Lectures, seems to form a basis for introducing these talks: "*The elucidation of immediate experience is the sole justification for any thought, and the starting point for thought is the analytic observation of the components of this experience.*"
Under a series of interest-compelling titles, '**The Question of Identity,' 'The Victim Identified', and 'Victim as Vehicle**,' Martin Carter goes behind creative writing and examines the spiritual apparatus of the writers themselves. He examines the main concept of identity and a core of other related concepts such as freedom, morality, human power and consciousness, in an apparently naive but subtle and fascinating web of comment. The lectures were short and almost defiantly provocative, but the insights cut deep. For example, he states, "[…] *there is a pattern of psychological anarchy which even now determines the shape of the contemporary Commonwealth Caribbean […] the only choice available to the slave in Commonwealth Caribbean history was the choice of a way to die [...] In the Caribbean, the political leader and the obeahman have much in common. Both seek short cuts: the former through history; the latter through reality […] The political leader as a victim, is the prisoner of the forces at work in the sociopolitical-psychological continuum.*"

In Caribbean history, a number of politicians have possessed and do possess artistic insights as an advantage – Munoz Marin, Eric Williams, Albert Gomes and George Price. Martin Carter belongs to this small group and with his double insight as artist and politician he develops in these three lectures arguments cast in political terms and examined in historical dimension, but possessing religious overtones introduced with the concepts of victim and vehicle. He makes us look hard at a strange but attractive trinity of role-players in our contemporary Caribbean history – the artist, the

obeahman and the political leader. He takes issue with two previous lecturers, Denis Williams and Wilson Harris, in their search for a ground of being: with the first-named because he treats identity as a matter of invention and with the latter because for him identity is a matter of discovery. For Martin Carter, identity is a matter of creation, and the Caribbean declares itself in its literature as an expression of culture in which the artist, handicapped by his divided selfhood, is rejected by society and becomes a victim, since it is his own consciousness, a function of his power as a human being, which he exploits in order to produce.

He ends with the statement: "*The selection and combination of themes and the sponsorship of certain values in his work reveal the character of the artist's self-victimisation, and furnish for our inspection and enquiry, intimations of the extent of his plumbing of his own identity and intimations of the nature of the freedom he seeks.*"

These lectures maintain the ideals of the series and continue at a high level the discussion of the nature of the development of the arts in Caribbean Society.

A. J. Seymour
Deputy Chairman
National History & Arts Council

I THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

In the very first in the series of Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial lectures Arthur Seymour told us that the series of lectures would be concerned with a theme of contemporary Guyanese or Commonwealth Caribbean writing or the relationship between thought or history and the emergence of creative writing in the Commonwealth Caribbean, The emphasis here, as can be easily seen, is on creative writing. I, however, would like to go behind the writing, as it were, and examine the spiritual apparatus of the writers themselves. In other words what I would like to do is to locate the creative actions of the writers in the spiritual field in which they have their being. And anyone who has paid any attention to the chief preoccupation of the creative minds in the Commonwealth Caribbean should recognise, that in starting off these talks with the first one dealing with identity as the title confirms that I am only taking hold of a preoccupation which over the years has been the focus of much attention from our essayists, novelists and poets. Denis Williams, for example, began his series of talks with one concerning the concept of the ancestor, while Wilson Harris in the second of his series dealt with the Amerindian legacy. To my mind and as I see it in the context of this twentieth century, the former is more of an invention than anything else; while the latter is a discovery. And both this invention and this discovery had to come. They had to come I say because the unsatisfactory present and imagined future drove both Williams and Harris to a search for a ground of being, a ground of being which would be valid as a stance when confronting the present and future. This has been the way in which almost all creative people in the Caribbean have approached the question of identity.

For my part my approach to the question is somewhat different. Different I say inasmuch as I believe that a person's or a people's identity is created by a person or people rather than invented or discovered by either of them, For identity is an open-ended thing, and a process and a becoming; a process

and becoming in which even without a conscious intention on the part of the human agent, the objective world is humanised and the human world objectivised. This dialectical process applies both to the individual and the society, and is in fact the process in which both identity and alienation are established as primary elements in the mode of being of human beings.

In the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx has described for us the labour process in action and I would like to quote it now in order to give an example of what I mean when I speak about the dialectical process. I quote:

> Labour is in the first place a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms, legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature's production in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.

If we substitute in the quotation I have just made the term 'identification' for labour process we can more easily understand what I mean when I say that identity is a process, and a process at different levels of organisation, extending from the physical and reaching into the realm of the religious. Thus identity itself is a many-sided process, presupposing self and other selves. Moreover, as a formulation of the relevant issue, this formulation of the concept of identity also presupposes a notion in a mind or minds of what it is to be human. In this regard my contention is that what human being is can only be explained in terms of culture. Thus I want to suggest that we have arrived at the point where we can say that the concept of identity is a cultural concept.

Now I am aware that the question as to whether there is a West Indian culture has been tackled by many writers in as many publications. "Is there a West Indian culture?" has been the subject of many lectures and many arguments.[1] And from these lectures and arguments have come as many question-begging asseverations. Rather than making any attempt at a

critique of these – which in any case would be out of place here – I prefer to assume that all of us would allow the anthropological definition of culture as a way of life and a mode of being to stand. If this is so, then the question of identity as a cultural concept takes upon itself a historical dimension. Thus for us to proceed we have to make clear to ourselves the nature of the philosophy of history we intend to apply. In this connection, I offer consistency in time as the chief element in the philosophy of history. Thus the question of identity resolves itself into a question of self-identity, since the consistency we are dealing with is a cultural entity in which the subjects are by definition human beings possessing selves. Self-identity then becomes identification of self and other selves; and other selves are as a mirror for this self, while this self is as a mirror for other selves.

Having set up, as it were, this framework in the abstract, it is now time for us to apply the abstractions we have set out to the process of history, as we have already noted that the concept of identity in being located in the field of culture becomes historic and thereby a matter of consciousness. And if we are to keep within the boundaries of discussion laid down by Arthur Seymour then we shall have to confine our examination to the history of consciousness in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In doing this I shall proceed on the assumption that all of us here have a working acquaintance with the history of facts which has come to us as Commonwealth Caribbean history.

In his foreword to a publication of the University of the West Indies entitled *The Artist in West Indian Society* John Hearne, the Jamaican novelist, had said and I quote:

> For nearly three centuries there was no place for art, or the artist in West Indian society. It is doubtful whether any other culture of which we have any record has ever focused its energies with such single-mindedness of purpose into the one channel of commercial exploitation. For nearly three centuries the West Indian thought nothing, created nothing, explored nothing. If at any time between Columbus and the Second World War the British Caribbean islands had sunk beneath the sea, the world would have lost little that enriches the imagination of mankind. This was a condition imposed

> upon us by history, by social conflicts too enormous for us to discuss here but which generated a society unique in its inarticulate sterility.[2]

We can hardly quarrel with Hearne's hyperbole. But if we are committed to pursuing our course as set out in the earlier part of this talk, it seems that we shall have to go about inventing a history of consciousness in approximately the same way that Denis Williams had set about inventing the ancestor. Having taken all we have spoken of it now seems to me that the only way we can progress in our quest for identity is by starting with an examination of the given of the now. By the expression 'given of the now' I mean all that there is extant and available, in deed and in thought, of the present.

What is the 'given of the now' in the Commonwealth Caribbean? In terms of political economy this is not a very difficult question. It is when we come to examine the 'given of the now' in terms of consciousness that we have to tread warily.

Consciousness is a function of human power, and this essentially is the reason why our artists, particularly our writers, often speak as John Hearne has spoken in the quotation I used just now. So then if now we want to accept for the sake of argument Hearne's observations about the non-consciousness of the past we shall have to examine the human content of the 'given of the now' and then from the concepts derived from this examination, establish a ground of being from which vantage point we can direct glances behind and before us.

The first question in this examination is: In what way does the human content of the 'given of the now' express itself as human power? If we can find the correct answer to this question we should be able to use the insight provided by it to ask new questions in our attempts to enquire into the question of identity in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

Let me repeat the question: In what way does the human content of the 'given of the now' express itself as human power?

But let us examine each term by itself. What do we mean by human content? What do we mean by human power?

The answer to the first of these two subsidiary questions is experience inasmuch as experience connotes duration. The answer to the second subsidiary question is morality inasmuch as morality connotes freedom. Thus we can reformulate our main question in the following manner: How does experience or duration affect morality or freedom, and how does this affection find expression in the 'given of the now'?

Since the 'given of the now' has its foundations in the consistent past then it becomes our task to examine this consistent past with an eye out for clues. And what is the nature of the consistent past which has bequeathed to us the psychological 'given of the now'? For the pattern of living laid down by the master-slave relation is analogous to the pattern of psychological anarchy which even now determines the shape of the contemporary Commonwealth Caribbean.

Moreover, since freedom is an ethical principle then we must ask what ethical principles were at work during the regime of the master-slave relationship. My reading of Commonwealth Caribbean history suggests that the only choice available to the slave was the choice of a way to die. Thus the slave gained identity in the manner of his death. Freedom to choose the way in which to die is the legacy we inherit from the consistent past.

Now I know that the fact that we have people of African descent and people of Indian descent making up the bulk of our population might well be proposed as an argument against this, inasmuch as the people of Indian descent were never slaves in the sense that people of African descent were. My answer to such an argument is that even before the arrival of people of Indian descent into the Caribbean the essential structure of society had already been set up. Thus the entrance of people of Indian descent into the Caribbean was only the entry of newcomers into an already established social and psychological order. Thus the nature of the legacy of the consistent past weighs down on us all.

By and large we live in the midst of an aggregation of subsistence seekers and with this fact before us we may well want to know how some of the concepts I have voiced here can have any relevance to their lives. But surely this is not the point. The point is rather that we can become more self-

conscious and more other-conscious by seeking to locate ourselves in time and life, by seeking to understand who we are and why we are what we are. Thus when I said that we live in the midst of an aggregation of subsistence seekers I am also saying that we participate in the lives of these, and are shaped by these even as the shape of water is the internal shape of the vessel that contains it.

So far I have been pushing my thesis that man makes himself and in that making creates his identity. But it is only being fair to you and me that I discuss a different opinion.

Mircea Eliade in his book *Cosmos and History – the Myth of the Eternal Return* devotes a whole chapter to what he calls the 'Terror of History'. In this chapter Eliade begins by confronting historical man with the man of the traditional civilisation who, as he argues, had a negative attitude towards history. But it is when he comes to consider the question of freedom and history that he becomes relevant to what I have been saying. "*The modern man*," Eliade says, *"can be creative only insofar as he is historical. In other words all creation is forbidden except that which has its source in his own freedom; and, consequently, everything is denied him except the freedom to make history by making himself."* Countering this, which Eliade himself had proposed as the standpoint of modern man, Eliade goes on to say that it is becoming more and more doubtful if modern man can make history. History, says Eliade, "*tends to be made by a smaller number of men who not only prohibit the mass of their contemporaries from directly or indirectly intervening in the history they are making (or which the small group is making) but in addition have at their disposal means sufficient to force each individual to endure, for his own part, the consequences of this history, that is to live immediately and continuously in dread of history."*

"*Modern man's boasted freedom to make history*," Eliade declares, *"is illusory for nearly the whole of the human race*."

In this Eliade is stating in another way something to which I only alluded when a few moments ago I said that we live in the midst of an aggregation of subsistence seekers. But surely the answer to Eliade's contention is that the historic process presupposes people and that whether the people participate through force or voluntarily they still must be counted as an

element in the process, an element without which there would be no process at all. Furthermore, Eliade's proposition that history tends to be made by a smaller number of men is a proposition that we must question. For there are many levels of organisation within the historic process and the smaller number of men that Eliade speaks of is the leadership level. And since leadership presupposes the led then it does seem necessary to pay some attention to the dialectical relations which exist between the leaders and those whom they lead. For it is the character and capabilities of the led which determine to a great extent the range of choice available to the leadership. It was Leon Trotsky who once said that the peasants are the pack horses of history. But this is not to cause us to underestimate the importance of the peasants. On the contrary, dating from ancient historical battles down to the more modern systems of guerilla warfare, the peasants have played a most important role, a role which sometimes assisted the war lords and revolutionists to survive and succeed or sometimes caused them to perish and fail.

Now to sum up what I have been saying:

Firstly, I have advanced the argument that a person's or a people's identity is neither invented nor discovered. A person's or a people's identity is created, and is therefore a process coming in being or going out of being. Next I have tried to describe the term 'dialectical process' and tried also to show that the creation of a person's or a people's identity is a dialectical process. Again, I have tried to make the point that being human or human being can only be satisfactorily explained in terms of culture.

Next, I have suggested that the concept of identity is a cultural concept and can only be explained in cultural terms. Further, I have said that the question of identity as a cultural concept inevitably takes on an historical dimension.

Again, I have taken the position that it is only by examining the present – what I have been calling the 'given of the now' – that we can proceed to an investigation of consciousness.

Later, I introduced the concept of human content meaning by it human experience; and the concept of human power, of which consciousness is a function, as morality, thereby bringing into focus the concept of freedom since freedom itself is an ethical principle.

Again, having elaborated on the thesis that man makes himself and in that making creates his identity, I went out of my way to discuss very briefly a position which is almost the opposite of the one I had been advancing. I mean here my reference to Mircea Eliade's argument as contained in his book *Cosmos and History – the Myth of the Eternal Return*.

In all, what I have been trying to do so far is to provoke you.

II THE VICTIM IDENTIFIED

Among the concepts I have tried to introduce to you in the first of these talks the one to which I have paid most attention is the concept of identity. I did so because not only does this concept preoccupy almost all the people of the Commonwealth Caribbean, but because also the concept itself is central to any discussion of the way the creative people of the Commonwealth Caribbean express themselves. I tried to make the point that the concept of identity is a cultural concept, and a concept closely related to the question of human power, by which I meant the capacity of a given person or a given people to make use in a beneficial way of such choices and opportunities as are made available to them by history. I went on further to say that only through an examination of the present – of the 'given of the now' – can we put ourselves in a position to investigate consciousness, which itself is a function of human power.

Let us therefore take a look at the prose written by Commonwealth Caribbean writers and isolate in that body of material the themes which are present in it. And I can hardly do better than to quote a passage from an article written by Arthur Seymour in which he said, and I quote:

> What are the themes of these novels? Personal identity, autobiography, the urge to set one's story on record, and also national discovery, the history of the environment and of the nation – how did we come here and who are we? There is a full range of social classes involved in the great themes of up from slavery, poverty, emancipation and its associate of colour prejudice, sometimes working in family relationships as well as in community relationships. The lower middle and upper classes take their stand. Do we want sex, migration, religion? Mittelholzer and Lamming will rise to the call and show us how people live and move and worship. Do we want to poke fun at those most serious and tragic figures, the politicians? Naipaul will do so for us […] Do we want to see how the large Asiatic group, the East Indians, are living as islands in the midst of the African based communities? Selvon

> and Naipaul and Kempadoo will show us in the sociology of fiction and we will see the Indian philosophy – way of life. Have the novelists caught the racy rhythms of country peasants? Reid has done so, Selvon has done so and Carew and Mais have shown the differences in Jamaican urban and rural, Trinidad and Guyanese country dialects.

I have quoted Arthur Seymour at length in order to pinpoint, as it were, the themes that preoccupy Commonwealth Caribbean novelists. And we can see from what Seymour has said that these themes are mainly of the kind that sociologists deal with. Here, however, the difference is that the novelists bring a different apparatus to bear on the material at hand so that what we get is not the sociology of one school or the other, but rather the recasting of the ore, the raw material, into other moulds. The question to ask here is: What is there in these novels that mark them off from sociological reporting? The immediate and obvious answer is of course related to the question of form which by its very nature brings about a shaping, and a heightening and distortion on the one hand, and a selection and combination on the other hand, of the elements of the raw material chosen by the creative writer. It is the power of right selection obeying an intention which, in the end, determines how successful the writer has been in his work. And it is right here that we have to pause for a moment and consider an element which has much bearing on the work process of Commonwealth Caribbean writers. I am referring to the question of audience.

By and large the people of the Commonwealth Caribbean are not great readers. This is one of the reasons why the various attempts to set up publishing houses in the region have come to naught. As a consequence the creative Commonwealth Caribbean writer is one who consciously or unconsciously writes for an audience which is not a Caribbean audience. As a result much of the writer's energy is used up in making sure that what he writes is intelligible to his North American or English audience. Rarely will publishers even consider a novel which shows little promise of being bought. And it is not necessarily because the novel is poor artistically that it suffers the fate of being rejected over and again by different

publishers. The danger in this situation is that the creative person who aspires to write and to be published has always to keep in mind the fact that he is addressing an audience which is strange to him. Preoccupied with a necessity to explain to this kind of audience things which his native audience would take for granted, the writer is forced, as it were, to make concessions which invariably weaken the structure of his work and dilute the content of it. And yet this very seeming disadvantage may well serve to rescue the writer from the opposite situation which we can call, in a word, parochialism. Thus while on the one hand the necessity to write for a spectator audience does have disadvantages, it still can serve the good purpose of forcing the writer to eschew to some extent what, for want of a better word, I would call 'folksiness'.

So far I have been dealing with external mechanics, that is to say, with the themes which Commonwealth Caribbean novelists dwell on, and with the sheer physical necessities which affect their intentions and their finished creations. And, as Seymour has pointed out, many of the themes are the same as the reader will find in a representative collection of novels from countries as far apart in time and space as Greece and Chile. But a closer examination of the themes will reveal that there are certain themes which are specifically Caribbean. I mean slavery and the quest for personal identity. And this is why in my first lecture I went out of my way to examine the whole question of identity, and in which I offered the proposition that a person's or a people's identity is created by persons or people and not invented or discovered by either of them.

Let us now therefore consider the case of an imaginary novelist and trace his development from birth to writer. As is to be expected, our imaginary novelist would have been born into a middle class, semi-professional family, and would have had at least a formal education up to school certificate standard in one or other of the better colleges in the Caribbean. With the advent of the University of the West Indies our novelist would most likely have been a student and later a graduate of this institution. Throughout his boyhood and early manhood he would have been a person

enjoying a fairly easy way of life and also a person whose value system was based on the life patterns within which he had his being. His formal education would have been similar to that of a contemporary in an English secondary school, while his informal education would be similar to that of his native contemporaries inasmuch as it would have been informed by the preoccupations of the aggregation of subsistence seekers among whom he would already have spent at least a half of his life. The burden of Ian McDonald's novel *The Humming Bird Tree* is an excellent example of what I mean. Please remember that I am speaking of an imaginary writer and that the events I speak of are chosen only to illustrate the quality of life he would have enjoyed.

But to continue. What we will discover upon considering the experience of our imaginary writer is that, like other members of the social stratum from which he comes, he suffers from a divided selfhood. On the one hand, here he is, living in a country, comparatively desperate in economic terms with no drawn lines separating social stratum from social stratum, and enduring daily assaults on his sensibility. On the other hand, here he is, speaking English as his mother tongue, assimilating the values instinct in the English language, and developing a world outlook which is, to the greatest extent, a little bit more than a mirror image of the recent past or contemporary movements in philosophy or aesthetics of advanced societies. In due course this imaginary person of whom I speak comes to the conclusion that if he remained and spent his life in the place of his birth there would be little chance of his ever attaining the goal to which his aspirations direct him. The atmosphere of the subsistence-oriented society chokes him; the Philistinism of his peers numbs him; and so after enduring for a while our imaginary writer leaves the place of his birth and early manhood and sets out as he thinks for "*fresh fields and pastures new*". But not long after his arrival in his new social environment he soon discovers that the gain in terms of social and intellectual freedom is paid for in many different ways, chief among which are the blunting of his sensibility and the continuous awareness of the presence of an audience which is not, to use George Lamming's phrase, "*native of his person*".

What I am trying to say here is that the Caribbean artist is a victim in a very special way. If he elects to remain in the country of his birth he must be prepared to face considerable dangers through the sheer failure of being able to establish lines of communication with his immediate social and psychological surroundings. If he migrates he again has to face considerable dangers inasmuch as he has to adjust himself in so many ways to his new social and psychological environment. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* in which he painted a most distressing picture of life in India was greeted by non-Caribbean critics as a fine piece of writing, but was sharply criticised by Caribbean and Indian writers as being not merely inaccurate but also as simply not good in terms of literature. And the sharpest came from Caribbean writers who had been lavish in praise of his earlier work.

All that I have been doing so far is attempting to show the nature of the relationship which does exist between the writer as artist and the world at large, whether or not this world is a village or a continent. My contention is that it is almost impossible to take a piece of writing and understand it properly without having a fair idea of the circumstances which brought it into being or the circumstances which made its coming into being a reality. For the theme of all art has remained the same through the centuries, the theme of the human condition as this manifests itself in all its many-sided complexity.

It is my further contention too, that precisely because the human condition remains essentially the same that we can identify all men (and in this context women of course are implied) as victims. Thus, when I speak of the victim identified I include all, artist or criminal, hangman or hanged man. It is only by accident of nature that the artist is separated out and in the separating out becomes the agent of the dumb. It was Goethe, the great German poet who said, describing himself: *"And when man in his agony is dumb, I have God's gift to utter what I suffer."*

Now in saying, as I have done, that all humans are victims, I am of course just repeating a commonplace. Because there are many ways in which men can be victims, and these are legion in variety. However, since I am dealing specifically with

the Commonwealth Caribbean, it becomes my task to examine the mode of being of the Caribbean man as victim.

In the first of the talks in this series, I said that identity is a process at different levels of organisation. And in the passage from Arthur Seymour's article which I have quoted there is a statement to the effect that chief among the main themes of the Caribbean novel is the theme of personal identity. Holding this in mind and remembering that I have said that a person's or a people's identity is created, I have now to marry the concept of personal identity as a theme in the Caribbean novel to the concept of identity as a thing which comes into being through a process of creation. But how can personal identity be a theme if personal identity itself is an on-going process? It may be better for us to say that personal identity, far from being a theme of the Caribbean novel, is instead the *raison d'être* of the Caribbean novel. In other words, the making of the novel is only one of many ways of establishing a personal identity. And the novels or the poems or the drama brought into being by Caribbean people constitute a declaration of identity, a declaration which exhibits in tangible form the stage achieved in the creative process of self-identification, and the extent to which the writer or artist consciously or unconsciously portrays himself as victim.

And it would be misleading if we were to suggest that only the writers or the artists make declarations consciously or unconsciously, about their status as victims. Political leaders in the Caribbean also do the same; they also in various ways, make declarations about their status as victims. Trapped as they are, in a society which splits human existence into two, into what is desired and what is possible, they become the symbols of this split, and their condition is expressed in the similarity of role they enjoy with obeahmen. For in the Caribbean, the political leader and the obeahman have much in common. Both seek short cuts: the former through history, the latter through reality.

If then we consider the artist, the political leader and the obeahman as victims, we can do so precisely because they represent, in the clearest outline, some consequences of the process of victimisation at work in the Caribbean society; and in so doing, take on the mantle of martyrs, at least in appearance.

The novelist or artist peeps at us in disguise from behind his work; the political leader whispers in our ears with a voice unlike his own; and the obeahman, by claiming to use other laws, purports to be breaking the laws of nature.

As I have said the artist, the political leader and the obeahman are victims, and their identity as such takes place at different levels of organisation. Further, as I have also contended, all men, even when none of them is artist, political leader or obeahman, possess an identity as victim at different levels of organisation. The difference between the victim's identity as victim and the victim's identity as artist or political leader, or obeahman, is however a qualitative difference: qualitative in as much as the latter is an active identity, an identity which seeks to impose itself upon the world of other men – other men whose identity as victim is a passive one.

To follow up this last proposition, let us for a moment consider the political leader as a man who is a victim, but whose identity as a victim is an active principle. The political leader for example, as a consequence of being a victim with an active principle of identity, is a man always in process of becoming either a victim or a maker of victims. As a victim, he is the prisoner of the forces at work in the sociopolitical-psychological continuum. The fate of the political leader is to become a victim and a maker of victims; to use as an instrument those very forces which had made him a victim. This dialectical inversion holds good for the artist, be he novelist, painter, sculptor or what you will, and also for the obeahman. And the reason why it is possible, in this argument, to select the political leader, or the artist, or the obeahman is related to the fact that this type of victim is articulate and makes himself recognisable in forms which are intelligible or at least perceptible to a significant section of fellow victims.

III VICTIM AS VEHICLE

Making the point that all men are victims at different levels of organisation, I have said that in certain forms identity as victim can be an active principle while in other forms it can be a passive principle. As an active principle it seeks to impose itself upon the world of other men. But its identity as victim in an active role does not mean that the element of its character as victim is thereby abolished. What it does mean is that during its performance as an active principle it takes on the status of vehicle.

And what is it that I mean by vehicle? Roger Garaudy, the French philosopher, has expressed in the following words something very much like what I am trying to say, and I quote:

> In the sciences when contemporary physics shows us that the answers given by experiment are the functions of the questions asked, these questions are not those asked by any unspecified individual, but those of a culture [...] The physicist who asks the question is not only an individual: in virtue of this culture the whole of past mankind dwells in him.

How do we abstract the concepts inherent in the sentences I have just quoted and apply them to Caribbean man? Once again I am beginning my argument with the assumption that all of us here have a working acquaintance with the facts which have come down as Commonwealth Caribbean history. In addition it will be recalled that in my first lecture I said that the question of identity within the context I was using it is a cultural concept. Consequently, the proposition of identity as victim, whether in the sense of an active principle or in the sense of a passive principle is itself a cultural concept. What then, in cultural terms, is the difference between identity as victim as an active principle and identity as victim as a passive principle?

In attempting to answer this question the first thing I have to do is bring forward again my selection of the political leader,

the artist and the obeahman (as charlatan) as entities embodying in their performances those qualities which are embraced by the concept of identity as an active principle in contrast with identity as a passive principle. In this connection I want to make it clear that the existence of identity as a passive principle precedes the coming into being of the existence of identity as an active principle. And the transformation of a passive principle into an active principle does not do away with the possibility of the active principle regressing to the status of passive principle. For present purposes, however, it is not necessary for us to consider this aspect of available possibilities. Rather the question to be asked is what are the properties of being which distinguish the victim as vehicle from the victim as victim. And if we begin our enquiry by agreeing in general with Garaudy's formulation which I quoted a few minutes ago, then we shall have to locate the Commonwealth Caribbean in the total cultural space-time continuum. And what will strike us immediately is the sheer unevenness of development in the context of the economic, political, social and spiritual spheres of being and becoming. Further, we simply have to begin our examination with the contemporaneous – the 'given of the now' – since it is the contemporary mode of being which determines the way in which we look at the past and pre-assess the future. As A. N. Whitehead has written, and I quote:

> Our datum is the given world, including ourselves; and this actual world spreads itself for observation in the guise of the topic of our immediate experience. The elucidation of immediate experience is the sole justification for any thought; and the starting point for thought is the analytic observation of the components of this experience.

Returning, however, to what I have called the 'given of the now' in the Commonwealth Caribbean, we can repeat that the sheer unevenness of development in the material and spiritual spheres both within the Caribbean and beyond it attracts our attention immediately. Furthermore, we can see all around us, via direct inspection and information received

through the mass media and other means of communication what Professor Northrop Frye meant when he said, and I quote:

> Culturally, the primary fact about the modern world, or at least about our 'Western' and 'democratic' part of it, is that it is probably the first civilisation in history that has attempted to study itself objectively, to become aware of the presuppositions underlying its behaviour, to understand its relation to previous history and to see whether its future could in some measure be controlled by its own will.

Thus, if we complete the chain of meaning implicit in what both Whitehead and Frye have said, and if we agree with it, then we can conclude that the field of enquiry which merits our closest attention is consciousness which, as I have said before, is a function of human power and an integral component in the process of self-identification. And if we apply these considerations to Commonwealth Caribbean history we are bound to see that we are caught between our slave past with its denial of choice and therefore freedom, and the future which will bring to bear upon us assaults of a nature which we can hardly comprehend living as we do in a present which, while consistent with the past, is spiritually incapable precisely because of that very consistency. Our history has not prepared us for the encounter with the modern world and this is one reason why discontinuity is the only continuity we know. Every new attempt in the Commonwealth Caribbean at every level of organisation is a departure from the historically determined; and the cultural lag which follows every such departure is always bringing to a halt the progression of the departure. We can look at political activity in the Commonwealth Caribbean as an example. Beginning from the most elementary processes the direction of political activity in the Commonwealth Caribbean soon takes on a pattern of almost arbitrary personal behaviour of the political leader. The quality of political activity reflects directly the personal qualities of the leader. At the earlier stages these personal qualities were contained by the various necessities of social reality. But, as I have said before at

another level in these lectures, with the domination of the various necessities of social reality through administrative manipulation, the field is left wide open for the emergence of personal arbitrariness in its crassest manifestations. And it would be a mistake to believe that this process only occurs in politics. Take for example the performance of the obeahman (as charlatan) in Caribbean society. By setting out deliberately to dupe his clients the obeahman as charlatan pretends to impose an arbitrary rule and domination upon the objective laws of nature. The fact that his clients accept his pretensions is important here, inasmuch as such acceptance indicates the existence of a body of feeling and belief which demands but does not get attention from the society at large. Whether the clients approach the obeahman (as charlatan) in the first instance or as a last resort in a search for help, the fact remains that the approach itself constitutes a rejection of the social whole as an institution. As regards the artist, be he novelist, painter, musician or sculptor – and I mention artist because artist was mentioned before in a similar context – the position is inverted. For here, instead of the society being rejected, it is the society which does the rejecting. This rejection is only reviewed if the artist and his work receive the approbation of members of another social whole: one which is considered culturally superior.

Now I have made the point that identity as victim as an active principle presupposes the prior existence of identity as victim as a passive principle. And we have seen how the political leader who was once himself a victim can become a maker of victims; how the obeahman (as charlatan) who was once himself a victim, can too, become a maker of victims. And how the artist who was once himself victim can be further victimised by the society of which he himself is a part. In the case of the political leader and the obeahman (as charlatan), we can see how the social and psychological history of the society in which they have their being can be self-sufficient and capable. On the other hand, in the case of the artist we can see how this self-sufficient and capable social and psychological history can bring about the alienation of the artist in such a way that the possibility of his disalienation comes to depend upon the sanctions of individuals or institutions

who or which do not participate in his original society either as victim or victimisers.

But why is it that of political leaders, obeahmen (charlatans) and artists, only those in the last-named category find themselves in this position, that is to say, in a position which requires external sanctions as a necessary recommendation? One of the reasons I would like to suggest, is related to the fact that the artist, whose identity as victim is an active principle, differs from the political leader and the obeahman (charlatan) in that, while the political leader or the obeahman (charlatan) victimises others, the artist victimises himself. As a consequence, he is vehicle in a sense somewhat different from the sense in which the political leader or the obeahman is vehicle.

Now earlier on, at the start of this talk, I quoted a passage by Roger Garaudy in which Garaudy had said, among other things, that in certain areas of enquiry, the questions which are asked are not those asked by an unspecified individual, but those asked by a culture. Even before that I had made use of a quotation by John Hearne who had said that for nearly three centuries the West Indian thought nothing, created nothing, explored nothing. And Hearne had also said that this was a condition imposed upon history. Accepting Hearne's contentions for the sake of this argument, it is significant that I have, in selecting victims, included the artist and the obeahman and the political leader. For these are, so to speak, newcomers on the scene, unlike the obeahman whose presence throughout Commonwealth Caribbean history is well established.

This being so an enquiry into the nature of the obeahman as vehicle should cast some light on the nature both of the political leader and the artist, as vehicle.

We know, first of all, that in the Commonwealth Caribbean the obeahman is one of a class of individuals whose activity or performance transcends race and class. An obeahman can be a person of any racial strain, and, as a matter of fact, would-be clients of an obeahman are disposed to credit an obeahman of a different racial strain with powers greater than those possessed by an obeahman of the client's own race. And the mere fact of acceptance that an obeahman possesses

certain powers is sufficient to identity him as vehicle. And during those three hundred years that Hearne spoke of as a period when the West Indian thought nothing, created nothing and explored nothing, we can rest assured that during those years, the obeahman was a very busy person indeed. He alone appeared to possess powers which were beyond the reach of the slave owner or the planter. He alone appeared to be able to alleviate distress. In a world in which the only choice available was a choice of the manner of dying, the obeahman was not the charlatan he would become when the structure of life relationships provided a range of choices in addition to and different from the one limited to a manner of dying. Instead, the obeahman was the living repository of the beliefs, the hopes and the fears of his community, be it the nigger-yard or the plantation as a whole. But even in his role as obeahman, as living repository, and without being a charlatan, he was already capable of being a victimiser. For he could refuse to use, on behalf of others, the power he was believed to possess and so put himself in a position to reduce a client to the status of victim. Thus even before the transformation of obeahman as obeahman into obeahman as charlatan, the capacity for him to be maker of victims was already established. And one reason that his contemporary performance has more in common with the latter position than with the former position is related to the social and political and therefore psychological changes that have occurred since the abolition of slavery. What during slavery was on his part a positive contribution to sheer survival has in our time been taken over by the political leader. And hand in hand with this has been too the taking over by the political leader of certain negative aspects of the obeahman's performance as charlatan.

It is possible therefore, to propose that the political leader and the obeahman (both as obeahman and as charlatan) are, as it were, to a great extent cut from the same fabric of beliefs, fears and hopes, with one difference. This difference resides in the fact that while the obeahman's performance as charlatan transcends racial barriers, the political leader's performance as obeahman does not. This is so because the object of the obeahman's performance is different from the object of the political leader's performance. In the case of the obeahman

(as obeahman or as charlatan) the objective is to achieve a change in a given network of relationships by positing a competitive network of relationships. In the case of the political leader the objective is to achieve a change in the given network of relationships by a manipulation of the given network itself. Thus, there is no conflict between political leader and obeahman (as obeahman or as charlatan) in so far as objectives are concerned, or, to put it another way, there are historic spaces in Commonwealth Caribbean society which only political leaders and obeahmen can and do fill.

It is in the context of this situation that we have to examine the concept of the artist as victim as vehicle in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

At the beginning of this talk I quoted Garaudy as saying that in certain circumstances, and he was referring to scientific procedures, the answers given by experiment are the functions of the questions asked and that these questions are not asked by any unspecified individual but those of a culture. If what holds good for the scientist holds good also for the artist, then the creations of the artist are the creations of a culture. The artist thereby is a means through which the culture expresses itself. And it is within the expressions of itself as these are made available to us as productions that we have to seek out specific qualities of the culture we speak of. We need to remember here that, like the political leader, but unlike the obeahman (as obeahman or charlatan) the artist is a newcomer on the Commonwealth Caribbean scene. And earlier in this talk also, I did say that the artist is different from the political leader and the obeahman in that whereas these two are capable of making victims of others, the artist makes a victim of himself. He makes a victim of himself in that it is his own consciousness, a function of his power as a human being which he exploits in order to produce. The selection and combination of themes and the sponsorship of certain values in his work reveal the character of his self-victimisation, and furnish for our inspection and enquiry, intimations of the extent of his plumbing of his own identity and intimations of the nature of the freedom he seeks.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Nine years after this lecture was delivered, Martin Carter contributed an article **'Is there a West Indian Way of Life?'** to a symposium in *Kyk-Over-Al* (Vol. 6, No. 20, 1980), pp. 193-194.

[2] *The Artist in West Indian Society: A Symposium*, ed. Errol Hill (Jamaica: Mona, 1963).