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Abstract

This is but a short note in appreciation of Samuel Selvon's achievement as an imaginative writer. Few writers in the West Indies are as loved and regarded as he is by the common people for his humane and creative spirit.

WILSON HARRIS

On The Cross-Roads

This is but a short note in appreciation of Samuel Selvon's achievement as an imaginative writer. Few writers in the West Indies are as loved and regarded as he is by the common people for his humane and creative spirit.

I first read Selvon's *Calypsonian* in 1960 in Andrew Salkey's anthology *West Indian Stories* (Faber and Faber, 1960). The depiction of Razor Blade, the Calypsonian, is haunting and memorable. He arrives on the cross-roads of Trinidad society at a time of acute crisis. 'It look like if work scarce like gold, and is six months now he ain't working'.

One of the archetypal figures associated with the cross-roads of the Caribbean imagination is Legba of Haiti. Legba is a lame god yet regarded as immensely strong. As with lame gods, or wounded figures of legend, whom we may perceive at times in ancient and modern theatres of the the imagination Legba is a seer. Hephaestus - another lame god - was regarded as a matchless seer on Mount Olympus of ancient Greece. The contradistinction between strength and lameness endows Legba with a peculiar nuclearity. He is consumed inwardly and the tension of elements within him immerses him in a fabric shot through with a numinous dividing line between self-destruction and self-creation.

Razor Blade's correspondence with Legba may seem far-fetched at first sight. Selvon himself perhaps did not contemplate this. But the intuitive links in reality seem profoundly true to me. Intuition tends often to be a misunderstood term. In depth 'intuition' serves as a hard-won key to open new dimensions of understanding and to break a frame or prisonhouse of convention. 'Intuition' therefore is part and parcel of an enduring quest and curiosity and labour and activity of the heart and mind and senses.

Razor Blade is imbued with depth. He comes to a shoe-maker's shop. He contemplates the table at which the shoe-maker works. The shoe-maker slices into the wood of the table at times as if he is blind to the leather upon which he works. The involuntary blend of wood and leather provides an indirect *sculptural* clue to a pattern of imageries that now ensues. Razor Blade steals a shoe when the shoe-maker retires into his shop for a moment. Rain is falling on the pavement outside of the shop. He keeps an eye on straggling passers-by on the pavement. His watchful eye identifies with them and would appear to achieve a

synaesthetic leap into their passing - apparently sculpted - bodies for he sees them as 'sheltering rain', he identifies with their rain-soaked appearance as if they were shelters of rain, *carven or sculpted* bodies internalizing the element of rain that is falling *within* them.

The imageries that Selvon employs are indirect in their linkage and proportion but they impress me as a synaesthetic when one weighs the nuclear image 'sheltering rain'. On one hand a reader, it seems to me, may become sensitive to Razor Blade's slicing *malaise*. On the other hand the rudiments of self-creation are active in depth. There is a further complication in that Razor Blade's companion is known as ONE FOOT. These and other inner/outer features bring a numinous coherence to Razor Blade's fragmented existence upon the cross-roads of Trinidad society.

I hope I have succeeded in addressing the unusual talent at work in Selvon's craft, his comedy, his versatility.

A personal word. My wife and I met Sam at several conferences and we liked him enormously. He possessed a true gentleness of disposition combined with a sharp sense of humour.