

**SAYING GOODBYE TO SAM SELVON by Ken McGoogan**  
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Of all nonfiction subgenres, the academic essay is the least amenable to personal presence. How does one bring voice to the scholarly? One approach is to focus on your struggle or relationship with the material. In 1995, after I published a novel called *Calypso Warrior*, I got invited to participate in an academic conference in Sri Lanka. There was a catch: I would have to contribute an essay.

The conference was mounted by the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. Because it included a tribute to the late Samuel Selvon, a writer-friend who had influenced my recent novel, I already had my subject. I wrote the essay and, in Sri Lanka, received a warm welcome. The following April, the piece appeared in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, under the title *Saying Goodbye To Sam Selvon*. It ran over 4,000 words, and here I present half of it.

IN APRIL OF 1994, an obituary appeared in a newspaper in Calgary, Canada. It began as follows: "Calgary lost one of its best-loved and most outstanding authors on Saturday when Samuel Selvon, who lived in this city for the past sixteen years, died of a heart attack while visiting his native Trinidad. Selvon, 70, was travelling to the airport to return to Canada following a two-month illness when he suffered the heart attack—his second— and, subsequently, died in hospital."

The article mentioned that Victor J. Ramraj, an English professor at the University of Calgary, and one of Selvon's closest friends, had spoken with the author by telephone after his first heart attack; Selvon was then in high spirits and looking forward to returning home to Calgary. Then it noted that Selvon had moved to Calgary in 1978, after living twenty-eight years in England, mostly in London, where he had long since established himself as a writer. It identified Selvon as the author of seventeen books and as one of those celebrated West Indian expatriate writers—among them George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Edgar Mittelholzer, and Wilson Harris—who surfaced after the Second World War ("Samuel Dickson Selvon" A10).

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

I should explain that for me, part of Selvon's attractiveness was his man-of-the-people quality — his lack of pretension.

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

I celebrated Selvon's man-of-the-people quality in a profile I wrote on him after our first meeting, in 1985: "Three years ago, Samuel Selvon found himself running short of cash. He scanned the want ads, saw that the University of Calgary was looking for a janitor and applied for the job. He got it, and for the next four months, Selvon worked from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. cleaning blackboards, washing floors, and generally doing the things janitors do. Nothing odd in this, except that Selvon is an internationally known author." ("Samuel Selvon" 7)

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

Now, obviously I am not the only one who finds sentiments like these — notable for their absence of writerly pretension—both healthy and disarming. Certainly I was captivated. And though I hesitate to make grand claims, given that Selvon is an important literary figure, the truth is that, over the next few years, he and I became friends. We met frequently for lunch — sometimes with the excuse of me gathering information for a column (as literary editor of the *Calgary Herald*), other times just for the pleasure of it. Now and then, I would invite Selvon to review books for the newspaper, but he did so only reluctantly, two or three times, and finally I stopped badgering him and just enjoyed his company.

I never analyzed our friendship or wondered about its psychological underpinnings until I undertook to write this

testimonial. At that point, I picked up a book called *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, edited by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, which included an interview with Selvon. In the introduction to that book, the editors quote a passage from Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd's *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*: "Cultures designated as minorities have certain shared experiences by virtue of their similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture, which seeks to marginalize them all" (qtd. in Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 18).

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

At this point, I break out "to document a few specific ways in which Selvon, expatriate West Indian author, contributed to *Calypso Warrior*. I write about the "spirit" that informs the novel, and of how, for me, Selvon embodied the spirit of calypso—a spirit of spontaneity, irreverence, and topicality, of eclecticism and open-hearted inclusiveness. And I show that one of my fictional characters, a best-friend-figure named Tolbert, was modelled largely on Selvon.

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

I am not going to try to cite every contribution Selvon made to *Calypso Warrior*. I think I have established the pattern of influence. And I want now to return to this question of marginality—to explore certain more general affinities I feel with Selvon, affinities that encouraged me to identify with him, and which manifest themselves, I believe, between the lines in *Calypso Warrior*. My purpose is not to suggest that my novel bears

comparison with Selvon's pioneering works, but rather to underline something too often overlooked: that an English-speaking individual of European heritage can also be marginalized by a dominant culture, and so develop a philosophy or attitude similar to that of a writer who clearly belongs to the "postcolonial world."

In his book *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming hailed Selvon as a pioneer for his willingness to deal in his work with multi-racial situations. Asked about this in the 1980s, Selvon responded: "Well, it's true; what else have I got to deal with? That is the problem that we have. So, you know, I can't turn blind eyes to it. In fact, the thing with me is that I am so much Westernized, so much Creolized, that it's the only element that I think that I am really strongest in" (Interview 112). Later in that interview, Selvon identified the source of his attitude: "A lot of my friends in my neighborhood and in my school in the town that I grew up in were mixed blacks and Indians." (113)

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

Here I note that Sam Selvon became an expatriate writer. He spent most of his life (forty-four of his seventy years) in England and Canada, and despite his love for the latter, always identified himself as a Caribbean expatriate and felt most comfortable writing about West Indians. He is usually considered an apolitical writer, and I enter the evidence for this interpretation before continuing:

All his life, Selvon championed the development of a multicultural, pan-Caribbean consciousness—one that included the various peoples of all the islands. His was an expansive, inclusive, and welcoming frame of mind. Discussing the development of a Caribbean consciousness, for example, he said of the Spanish-speaking islands: "They're incorporating the English-speaking Caribbean with their arts festivals and things like that in Cuba and drawing them in. So I think we also should be doing some of that sort of thing" (Interview 114). And, again, while discussing Third World immigration in relation to Great Britain, Selvon observed: "They've got all those problems, and they are looking ahead and seeing how best they can use the situation to

their advantage, and one of the things would be to accept that there are other cultures that would be coming into ours, and other artistic forms, writing, dancing, calypso music, whatever you like, reggae, or whatever, that would infiltrate into our society, that we have to take into account.' (Roberts and Thakur 16)

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

Selvon said frequently that he considered himself a citizen of the world. And in 1979, addressing a conference at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, which celebrated the contributions of those of East Indian heritage, Selvon went further: 'Another thing I heard—and I stand to be corrected—is that this conference is keeping a "low profile." These new words and phrases don't baffle an old Trinidadian like myself. You could construe your own meaning, but what that means to me is that we best hads don't talk too loud before we antagonize the Black people and cause further botheration. If we feel that we are being oppressed and suppressed, all the more reason, I say, to blow our trumpet loud and fly our kite high.' (*Foreday Morning* 224) Now this, I note, is precisely the position that I have [the protagonist] Nelligan take in *Calypso Warrior*. It is a position with which Tolbert identifies completely.

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

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

Later I would take comfort, foolish as it sounds, in knowing that I had spun on my heel and elbowed my way through that laughing crowd to greet Selvon. That I had spoken, one last time, with my friend, and eaten a prawn he had given me. In a funny way, and almost despite myself, I had managed to say goodbye to Sam Selvon.