

tion (via marriage to an older man) of her friend Lila Cisneros, etc., prepared Matilde's mind for her most important undertaking, her journey to Buenos Aires, and her final disillusion.

This is, indeed, an intriguing short novel where the anxieties of an entire class are summarized in the dreams and failures of a young lady from a provincial town. She is caught between the promises of a new social order and her out-dated education. Her liberation comes late (she is 26 before leaving home) and the social order she finds in Buenos Aires, far from bringing her happiness is just as it was in Tucumán, only a little more hypocritical and with stronger prejudices.

The story only covers four years (1944-1948); the bourgeoisie and the middle class do not change much. *Élite*, devoted before to the fashion and gossip from Paris, begins to give space in its columns to "folk music" and parties where Indian art or apparel are displayed, but with the same snobbishness as before. In one of those parties, Matilde's *exotic* (i. e. provincial) beauty attracts the attention of the privileged set. Ironically she yields to Jorge Páez, a retired playboy to whom she loses her virginity and her last dream.

The final message of *La ciudad de los sueños* is not one of condemnation of the Peron regime, but one of disillusion for everybody. The masses do not gain an inch in their status; the old provincial bourgeoisie remains untouched (but with its pride increased); the rich continue to be rich. All of their social habits are kept intact and aloof from the so called "social revolution." Girls like Matilde were just as unhappy as before and nurtured ambitions that one would think belonged only to the outcasts. In the last chapter of her "confessions" Matilde states: "I want love and abundance here and now, and I shall fight in order to get them with all the hatred that my heart is capable of harboring."

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## The Novels of Roger Mais

L. E. Braithwaite once wrote that Mais' novels "were built mainly for protest and his protest had become rather old fashioned by the time they came to be read."<sup>1</sup> The note of protest is not central to Mais' books. Instead the tone is neutral, but in a way which does not discount a warm informing interest. It is true to say that there is poverty and degradation in Mais' books, but a visit to West Kingston would dispel any notion that this has become old fashioned. In *The Commonwealth* Pen G. R. Coulthard refers again to the "dominant note of protest," seeing the books as "crudely realistic."<sup>2</sup> These attitudes arise partly out of memories of the man himself,<sup>3</sup> and partly out of the temptation to categorize the subject matter of his three novels,<sup>4</sup> though on this point, nothing is said about the last one, *Black Lightning*, which by implication is not "typical" Mais.

If one did not know that Roger Mais had left behind a considerable body of unpublished work, the three published novels are sufficient testimony to his ability as a writer because of the variety of tone and interest within a central preoccupation which unifies all three novels. The first one, *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, is neither realistic nor journalistic. It is eventually surrealistic and dwells powerfully in the imagination. It moves very quickly from seeming realism to a kind of broken poetry which gives in essence the horror at the heart of these peoples' experiences. One kind of writing reinforces and illuminates the other by contrast, as if the petty actions of the characters are played out against some vast indifferent scheme which occasionally manifests itself. The technique is far from documentary realism because Mais is giving us the spiritual annihilation underlying the economic degradation through the jagged insistence of the prose and its rhythmic repetitions. An example will make my meaning clear. Surjue imprisoned, learns of the insanity of his woman Rema. His reactions are first recorded in simple, concrete terms, as they appear superficially. They are written down in five short sentences with a strong monosyllabic and physical emphasis—the starch, the food-tin, the vomit, the bathroom. Two more sentences record the exchange between Chippie and Casano who is “wolfing his food hungrily” whilst pointing out that Surjue has received “bad news,” (pp. 208, 209). In this way we are plunged disconcertingly into the vision of horror. What we, in our blindness, call reality, Mais is saying, is but a thin veneer overlaying hideous forms of terror. Are we seeing buildings or dissolution and decay, men, or a heap of bones and an eyeless skull? The prison itself is no longer a place, but a universal confine, an inexorable process of abnegation where men walk upright not because they are alive, but because it is habitual and they earn the contempt of the vultures.

Familiar actions become in Mais grotesque and tenuous. The stomach ache of Bedosa is the result of a life of petty betrayal. Flitter's nausea and vomiting is the result of fear, and the money, which is his only because he deserted Surjue, he keeps in a money belt next to his skin which is “on fire with itch like a rash” (p. 196). Mais informs us that these people are outside life and controlled by a rationalized inhumanity symbolized by the diction of commerce and trade. The buildings, like the people who live in them, have stagnated and fallen into disrepair. The trees are gnarled and anemic, or “thrifty” because of the difficulty of survival. The life described is a physical one on a low level with the emphasis on “scuffling” and grunting. The prostitute Zephyr is voluptuous yet shoddy, and her emotions and perceptions are barely articulated as they flit across the physical surface. Ras rises late to begin “scuffling” when the whistles in the city blow for the lunch hour. And in this “Void” which each tries to fill with sex, religion, or drugs and crime, only the shops are “snug and comfortable” because they are “aloof from the sordid existence” (p. 57). Mais evokes a region unrelieved in its materialism and its impersonality. There is, one notices, not a word of class, race, color, identity, of that which sustains the usual West Indian novel, because Mais' world is our world wherever we be. At the close of the book the prison clerk arranges an execution, a “routine matter” and is more concerned with his “departmental leave” (p. 240). Surjue climbing the prison wall is shot by a prison warder suffering from a toothache, “without thinking” and dies “staring at the silent, unequivocal stars” (p. 228).

In his first novel there is no center of interest because the lives of the people depicted are merely fragments in a pattern of unremitting horror or evil. The title of the second novel, *Brother Man*, indicates that the central

moral interest is provided by the chief character, a requirement not demanded by *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. The organization of Mais' novels, therefore, springs directly from the subtle interests of the writer and the two books are close together in form and substance though they serve to illuminate contrasting sides of Mais' vision. In his second and third novels Mais deals with the unfulfilled hopes of the first one. He also reproduces the same society as in *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. Mais is asking what are the possibilities of the virtues of humility, love, charity and certitude in this society? Apart from Brother Man, who is different, Mais depicts and examines the possessive, self-destructive nature of peoples' relationships begun in *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. There are Girlie and Papcita developing sex as a capacity for hurting each other—"Love me and hurt me" (p. 29) is Girlie's cry and it represents the opposite of Brother Man's salutation, "Peace and Love." The violence of their relationship is expressed in the violence of the prose which describes them: "And so they went on spearing at each other, because of this unevenness and insufficiency between them, and she goaded and taunted him until he could stand it no longer" (p. 35).

It is against this that Brother Man is measured. His goodness must operate within the all-consuming insufficiency of a society controlled by a law based on fear and punishment, bent on turning men into walking corpses as in *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. It is not surprising therefore that Brother Man is little understood by the people. His total disregard for the self is despised or taken for granted. He realizes that understanding is a superior attribute to judgment, and thus he accepts the impossibility of forever passing "moral judgment." This brings a unity of vision, a complex and simultaneous appreciation of all that is called life, as the rusting tin cans in the gully are beautified by sunlight gleaming on an untarnished spot. His goodness is only such in terms of the society. He is no presence, but, as Minnette informs us, a man like other men, and his possibilities are the possibilities of all others. The crowd beat him and soil him, and try to humiliate him, but succeed only in humiliating themselves, for his suffering eventually contains their fear, their frustrations and their guilt. The book closes on a note of affirmation. Nathaniel has warned him of the people, and now the people creep back and tentatively acknowledge the possibility which is Brother Man, which is their possibility, as the title implies.

The final novel, *Black Lightning*, extends and varies Mais' central preoccupation. It is a remarkable book because in a literature of such recent origin, even nearer the beginning when Mais was writing, it is a conscious and sophisticated inquiry into the nature of the relationship between life and art. Such an inquiry would, of course, be dear to Mais as a practicing artist. It is significant that wood-sculpture is the chosen art, one in which there are tremendous possibilities for intimacy with the material, sweat and blood mingling with the wood, and at the same time a frightening impersonality in the figure created. The relationship between the creator and the creation is explored, God's with Samson, or Jake's with the carving of Samson.

The meaning is extended into human terms with other characters in the novel and the same answer, a pessimistic one, is returned. Indeed this is the most pessimistic of Mais' books, for *The Hills Were Joyful Together* is offset by *Brother Man*. The setting is pastoral and unlocalized. The people are in no way oppressed by economic circumstances, but the pattern of relationships is essentially the same as in earlier novels. This pattern, repeated in different permutations, ripples out from the center established by Jake and

his woodcarving. The quality of the relationship is expressed by Stella when she comments to Glen upon the "symptoms of possessiveness" (p. 160) inherent in everyone. People create images of themselves in others and this creation contains elements of destruction. Hence Jake attempts to rationalize his misery in the carving of Samson, and when the torment takes on a quality of apartness from himself he smashes the carving for firewood. Delilah betrayed Samson in order to reinforce his dependence on her. The love of God is of a different order. Likewise there is the confidence which Jake gives to the stunted, crippled Amos. However, when Jake becomes blind he kills himself rather than accept dependence on the cripple. There appears to be one exception to this pattern, the relationship between Miriam and Glen, but then their relationship has hardly begun and their reconciliation in the silence of the woods is ominously disturbed by a "single gunshot" which causes Miriam to shudder.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>L. E. Braithwaite, *Bim* (St. Michael, Barbados), 8 No. 35.

<sup>2</sup>G. R. Coulthard, *The Commonwealth Pen* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 212.

<sup>3</sup>Roger Mais (1905-1955), was strenuously committed to his society and was sent to prison by the British Government during the Second World War for an article entitled "Now We Know" which was considered subversive.

<sup>4</sup>The three novels are: *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, (London: Cape, 1953); *Brother Man*, (London: Cape, 1954), and *Black Lightning*, (London: Cape, 1955).

## The Case of Henri Troyat

The figure of Henri Troyat provides an instructive example of the incompatibility, almost certainly irreconcilable, between his reception by critics and general readers respectively. The average critic, whether literary or academic, is usually content to neglect Troyat's work completely, or to pass it over casually as the over-facile product of an outdated naturalism, without interest. The reader in the street—or more likely in the commuter train—devours Troyat's novels insatiably. He has written no less than five *romans-fleuve* in the last quarter-century, and his sales have been enormous. This, of course, is a typical best seller situation, but in Troyat's case there are additional elements which we cannot neglect. His literary career has throughout been marked by recognition, from the Prix Populiste awarded to his first novel *Faux-jour* (1934) and the 1938 Prix Goncourt for *L'Araigne*, to election to the Académie Française while still in his forties in 1959. Whatever one may think of this latter institution, or of literary prizes, this can be no