

## The Muses Inhabit Mayaro: Michael Anthony's *Cricket in the Road*

"I can't write about England because to me I have not made emotional contact with it."<sup>1</sup> This is the view expressed by Michael Anthony in an attempt to explain the fact that England, his home in "exile" has not provided him with suitable inspiration for his creativity. Reinhard Sander considers this remark as an important clue not only to the man, but also to the writer whose three novels he sees only as representing a "return" to his nativeland, Trinidad; he subsequently interprets this as escapism to a Trinidad that is "romanticized . . . a figment of his imagination and a projection of his innermost wishes."<sup>2</sup>

Although we concur with Sander's statement that the novels represent a return, we cannot wholly accept the conclusion that Anthony's Trinidad is nothing short of a Shangri-la. We are much more inclined to think that when Anthony expressed his view he was enunciating one of the basic principles of his art; namely, that his "main desire was always to write about something I actually knew and experienced."<sup>3</sup> This also explains the autobiographical nature of his novels. What is true of his novels is especially so with regard to his collection of short stories, *Cricket in the Roads*. The setting of these stories is Trinidad specifically Mayaro, his birthplace: the major source of his inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

*Cricket in the Road* is important for understanding Anthony's work because it provides insights into his art and his views on the task of the writer and his relationship with his work. No critic disputes the fact of the predominance of the use of a child or an adolescent as the narrator. Edwards and Ramchand see this as producing a "peculiarly 'open' state of consciousness" which brings about the fusion of unusually disparate elements of experience.<sup>5</sup> This forces the reader to live the experiences of the narrator and creates intensity. "Uncle of the Waterfront" illustrates this technique very well. Here the child is made to attempt his own interpretation of the circumstances surrounding the family's hasty preparations for departure from his uncle's lovely home:

I wondered if the word Mother had said had anything to do with the man talking to Uncle and with our going back tonight. But it could not be, for it was such a pleasant, ringing word. I said it quietly to myself. It sounded so strange on the tongue. I itched to say it aloud. I crept away to a far corner and told myself we were going home tonight. And then, softly at first, I said the word Mother had spoken. And then, being careless, I wanted to shout it to the emptiness of the house. So taking a deep breath, I cried: "SMUGGLING!"<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect of Anthony's art made manifest in this book is his preoccupation with the idea of belonging and the need to appreciate one's surroundings. This feature is not readily discernible since it is couched in what

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Anthony, "Growing Up in Writing: A Particular Experience," *Savacou*, No. 3 (Sept. 1970), p. 66.

<sup>2</sup>Reinhard Sander, "The Homesickness of Michael Anthony," *The Literary Half-yearly*, 16, No. 1 (Jan. 1975), 104-05.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Anthony, Introduction to *Cricket in the Road* (London: André Deutsch, 1973), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Of the 20 stories, 9 are set in Mayaro.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Edwards and K. Ramchand, Introduction to *The Year in San Fernando* (London: Heinemann, 1970) p. ix.

<sup>6</sup>*Cricket in the Road* pp. 85-86. All subsequent quotations are from this text.

seems to be an extolling of the virtues of living in the country as opposed to the town. In "Sandra Street" the beauty and freedom of this section of the street, where fowls can run wild and the hills can be admired, are revealed to the boy, Steve, by the teacher (pp. 12-18). The boy in "The Valley of Cocoa," in whom the laborer Willis had fostered a longing for the city, comes to appreciate his valley even more after the machinery salesman compared city and country lifestyles: "Quietly, then, he talked of the city. He told me the city was lovely, too, but in a different way. . . . It had shops . . . everything. Everything that made life easy. But sometimes he grew tired, he said, of the hustle and bustle and nowhere to turn for peace. He said he liked it here, quiet and nice. As life was meant to be" (p. 31). The message becomes crystallized in "The Holiday by the Sea" which deals with the relationship established between the countryboy Joe and the doctor from Port-of-Spain. At first the doctor is "enchanted by the idyllic scene around him" (p. 99) and both he and Joe are in their element; but the former soon becomes fed up and longs for his office. The fact is that he is as out of place here as Joe is when, innocent to the fact that the doctor's affair with Mayaro was temporary, he visits the latter in his office: "Joe cut such a ridiculous figure that the young doctor could hardly believe his eyes. And yet this was the same child that had fitted in so well with Mayaro by the sea. At this moment, with the doctor's head filled with medical problems, Mayaro was only a dream, in spite of the boy sitting there" (p. 103).

It is in the stories "Sandra Street" and "Hibiscus" that the more obvious indications of Anthony's feelings about his art and himself as an artist are to be found. Mr. Blades remonstrates with the boy about his composition by telling him that "There is something like observation" (p. 14). Steve's composition would have been much better had he used this faculty. "Hibiscus" is the story of a boy from Mayaro living in England who will soon be returning to Mayaro to recuperate from pneumonia. In the hospital he is given a book of short stories by C. C. Matthews entitled *Hibiscus*. The first remark he makes about the book is that "we had hibiscus all over Trinidad. Especially in Mayaro. No one paid any mind to hibiscus" (p. 46). There are coincidences and parallels common to the boy, Matthews and Anthony: they are all from Mayaro; the boy and Matthews are "victims" of pneumonia; Matthews and Anthony are both writers; and all three share a love and admiration for Mayaro. These similarities lead us to conclude that the ideas expressed may just as well be those of the author. Excited by the reading of Matthew's book the boy is anxious to go home and to seek out Matthews. In his search he is amazed at the indifference and ignorance of the people with regard to himself and to Matthews: "They looked at me and asked if I had been in England. I swore to it and when I made them believe me they said that C. C. Matthews was probably in England because English people liked to write books. That made me despair. English people were not the only people who wrote books. And C. C. Matthews couldn't be an Englishman and write about hibiscus" (pp. 50-51). Finally when he meets Matthews, an old man saddened by a lost love and generally ignored, he empathizes with him when the latter concludes: "I'm not crying," he said. "It's only so sometimes." He seemed to have great difficulty speaking. And then he said again, 'I'm not crying. But a little writing isn't anything really. But if you have a little one and it's the only one—well it's a hell of a thing'" (p. 53).

*Cricket in the Road* then, as we suggest, serves as a compendium of all the recurring elements of its author's creative endeavor and it also offers some explanations of and insights into his writings.

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