Five: Seagulls at Paddington Station, Spades at Waterloo

When the newe world shall the old invade,

Nor count them their Lords, butt their fellowes in trade...

Then thinck strange things are come to Light

Whereof fewe eyes have had a foresight.

Sir Thomas Browne

Birds Astray

In 1979, the year that widespread social unrest and discontent in Britain brought Margaret Thatcher to power, a new novel by John Le Carré found George Smiley meditating on a flock of seagulls scavenging in the vicinity of London’s Paddington station: “If sea-gulls are taking to the cities, he thought, will pigeons take to the sea?” The appropriation by seagulls of both the territory and the livelihoods of London’s pigeons emblematized a feeling that pervaded not only Le Carré’s novel but most of the public likely to read it — a sense that everything in England had unaccountably gone wrong, that not only the time but Nature herself was out-of-joint, the world turned upside down. The same topos had occurred a couple of years earlier in Alan
Bennett’s play *The Old Country*, where Hilary toys with the idea of writing an indignant letter to *The Times*: “Sir, Am I right or merely sentimental in thinking that in the old days one saw seagulls exclusively by the sea? Here we are, miles from any shore and there is a seagull . . .

Seagulls on the land, starlings by the shore”\(^85\) And in Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age*, also published in 1977, “Rooks and seagulls rose, cawing, from a brown expanse” of field in Oxfordshire; “‘Why do seagulls get so far from the sea?’ asked Anthony.”\(^86\) By 1984 seagulls appeared to be turning up in the oddest places, and not just in fiction: we have already encountered Beryl Bainbridge in *English Journey* expressing amazement at finding Scottish seagulls in Lincolnshire. Bainbridge was mistaken about the provenance of her seagulls, but her mistake is instructive insofar as it may testify to the strength and perhaps the willfulness of the inclination (everywhere present in her book) to see contemporary England as the Land of Topsy-Turvy.

In both Le Carré’s novel and Bennett’s play, the seagulls have specific resonances; they resonate in each work with the theme of an England gone awry because the wrong kinds of people are in positions of power and responsibility. Neither work explicitly deals with racism in contemporary Britain, or “coloured” immigration from Britain’s former colonies as a perceived social problem. Yet insofar as the issue of colonial immigration has been a significant factor in the social and political ferment going on in England for at least the last quarter-century, it has also been a factor in that general sense of the uncanny that the seagull *topos* adumbrates. If this seems unduly fanciful, consider the extent to which “birds in the wrong places” were being linked to notions of “racial purity” in a 1995 debate about immigrant species. According to a story in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* headlined “Ducking the issue of racial purity,” British nature conservation groups were bitterly disagreeing over

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...plans to keep alien bird species from breeding by shooting them as they sit on their nests or graze in parks. Already on the Government’s death list are the ruddy duck and Canada goose, but purists want others added, including the snow goose, bar-headed goose, mandarin ducks and parakeets.

Some delegates at the British Ornithological Union’s meeting in March called for the shooting of all species imported into Britain. The proposals were defeated but the debate continues. One opponent, Dr Richard Ryder, said last week: “If you shot everything that arrived in Britain in the last 5,000 years, there’d be nothing left.”

Another opponent, “Paul Evans, chairman of the British Association of Nature Conservationists, said: “This slaughter is obscene in the name of racial purity.” The story went on to explain that Canada geese, “another alien, introduced to Britain by Charles II,” had been targeted for elimination because they were the cause of “some nuisance problems.” Although they had been “encouraged to breed in the 1950s so they could be shot by sportsmen,” the venture was a failure: the geese refused to take off when the beaters approached, the “sportsmen felt unable to shoot a sitting target, so the geese survived to breed in large numbers and moved into the nation’s parks” where “they eat and excrete more than any other bird....”

The debate, of course, was about birds, not people, but the structure of feeling that informed the move to slaughter “alien” species seems eerily congruent with the public mood that clamoured for increasingly stringent immigration laws, supported the (often violent) arrest and deportation of “aliens” (usually nationals of former British colonies) whose papers were not entirely “in order”, and fuelled concerns about British “national sovereignty” being eroded by continued membership of the European Union. If nature conservation efforts in 1990s England were
focussing on the “nuisance problems” caused by “aliens” and considering the ornithological equivalent of “ethnic cleansing” as a solution, then it may not be too farfetched to see the immigration issue as one point on the arc of meanings subtended by the chord of the seagull’s landward flight.

A closer examination of the contexts in which Bennett’s and Le Carré’s seagulls appear provides some support for this conjecture. Hilary, in *The Old Country*, certainly gestures towards the issue of human migration across political and economic borders in an apparently offhand and whimsical comment on his glimpse of the seagull “miles from any shore”: “Seagulls on the land, starlings by the shore. Perhaps Nature herself is becoming more liberal, embargoes are lifted, borders dissolved and birds as free to roam as we are” (11). Le Carré’s George Smiley provides no such gloss, but the setting in which he sees the gulls does. The area of London around Paddington Station — not far from Bayswater, Notting Hill Gate and the Portobello Road — was one where many West Indian immigrants lived, and it is introduced in terms of some rather stark and sinister black/white imagery: “There are Victorian terraces in the region of Paddington Station that are painted as white as luxury liners on the outside, and inside are as dark as tombs” (77). There are many signs of poverty, as well as hints of what the 1995 ornithological conservationists were calling ‘nuisance problems’ involving eating and excreting: “a heap of rotting mattresses” block the service road leading to the house, thirty doorbells indicate the number of flimsy partition-walls dividing the spacious Victorian rooms into cramped lodgings, Smiley hears “the flushing of a communal lavatory,” and one of the pervasive odours is an unambiguous culinary sign of the immigrant “other.” “There was a smell of curry and cheap fat
frying, and disinfectant. There was a smell of too many people with not much money jammed into too little air” (78).

* The concept of "curry" as unambiguous sign of the exotic "other" is beautifully burlesqued by Samuel Selvon in one of his London novels. Sylvester, like Selvon a Trinidadian of Indian origin living in London, believes that no English woman can resist the enticement of a curry:

Hear Syline, when he approach a bird as she window-shopping in Oxford Street:

'Would you like a cur-rey? Have you ever had a good Indian cur-rey?'

It have men who have some set ideas, and nothing could change them. Syl pick up this idea that white girls like to eat curry, and he always with this opening chord whenever he on the prowl: 'Cur-rey? What about a good Indian cur-rey?' as if he in some Oriental market offering the spices and perfumes of the East.

Part of the joke here is that Sylvester, although he is one of the "true-true Indians" from Trinidad ("Not Carib Indians or Red Indians, but Indians from India, wearing sari and thing"), is also one of those who have become "so westernise that they don't even know where the Ganges is" [The Housing Lark (London; MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), 29-30]. The continuing significance of “curry” as cultural marker — and potential flashpoint of cultural (“racial”) conflict — is pointed by a 1995 newswire story:

[June 6 1995] LONDON (Reuter) - School cook Manoher Morgan was fired because he refused to tone down his hot spicy curries, a British industrial tribunal was told Wednesday. Children at a school in Stourbridge, England refused to eat the fiery offerings. Morgan, who is of Indian origin, claimed racial discrimination and unfair
London’s coloured immigrants aren’t prominently featured in very many contemporary English novels by whites, but they haunt the margins of a number of them, their presence obliquely suggested by something as slight and apparently inconsequential as an allegedly aberrant seagull. I say “allegedly aberrant” because those same seagulls turned up in London in 1956 in The Lonely Londoners, a “dialect” novel written by a Trinidadian of East Indian origin who was one of those immigrants, and Samuel Selvon took care to let his readers know that the seagull that Galahad comes across in Kensington Gardens is not out of place at all, whatever Galahad may think: “Which part these seagulls come from? he wonder, for he always think that seagulls belong to the sea.” The seagulls come to London for some of the same reasons that prompt Selvon’s “spades” to leave the sea-girt isles of the West Indies, and they turn up in much the same places: “These seagulls that come up from the old Thames when things too hard for them by the sea, you could never tell where you will see them. Sometimes they join the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, and it have some of them does hang out by the Odeon in Marble Arch. Anyway, nobody surprise to see seagulls sitting up there on the roof . . .” (134).

Selvon’s spades are similarly ubiquitous: “this was a time when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade. In fact the boys all over London, it ain’t have a place where you wouldn’t find them, and big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation” dismissal for cooking curries which he said were good enough for his own family. But his boss, Betty Coleman, said: “The curries were too hot for the kids who gradually stopped eating them. We would find samosas (Indian turnovers) hidden behind radiators and under mats around the school because they couldn’t eat them.” The case continues.
As with the seagulls, a favorite gathering-place in the summer is Hyde Park Corner, by Marble Arch and Orator's Corner — "... all the boys coasting lime by the Arch ... From east and west, north and south, the boys congregate by the Arch" (98). White English people may consider the spades as egregious as the seagulls, but in both cases they are wrong: the spades have not only a legal right to be where they are but also, like the seagulls, a natural right. In the case of the spades, this natural right is of the kind that the inhabitants of a polity founded on John Locke's doctrine of property ought to acknowledge — England is properly the home of the immigrants because they have mixed their labour with it: "... we is British subjects ... we have more right than any people from the damn continent to live and work in this country, and enjoy what the country have, because is we who bleed to make this country prosperous" (40).

Their labour-power is the reason that the immigrants were enticed to Britain in the first place:

After the war successive [British] governments began looking outside England for new workers to help the steadily improving economy of the 1950s which could no longer be serviced by the indigenous population. They began recruiting in the Commonwealth, notably in the islands of the West Indies ... The flow of West Indians was still restricted until 1953, but thereafter it increased dramatically, governed directly by Britain's labour needs, reaching its first peak in 1956, slowing slightly for the next three years, then taking off again from 1959. Some 10,000 people arrived in 1954, 24,000 a year later, and 26,000 in 1956. By 1959, 36,000 more had arrived. In 1961, a second peak, some 75,000 made the trip. Concentrated in London, they began carving out their own centres: north of the river around Notting Hill, Paddington and North Kensington, south in Brixton and Stockwell."89
No study of the contemporary English novel’s attempts to understand and represent contemporary England can afford to ignore the experiences and perspectives of these “seagulls,” for the immigrant writer, simultaneously insider and outsider, is likely to view the culture of the mother-country with both the familiarity and the critical distance enforced by the fact of colonization. Familiarity of a certain kind will come from having been, like Samuel Selvon, “indoctrinated, of course, colonized completely in English literature as a child in school. I knew English history, I knew more about England than any English person I met during my entire [1950-1978] experience in England knew about the Caribbean.” Distance and alienation, on the other hand, are the result not only of having grown up in the midst of a different landscape, a different climate, and a different “english,” but also of the irreducible social fact of colour, which overshadows and at least partially cancels out any sense of kinship founded on culture: “... in my experience, all the people of the Third World are considered black. This question of being black, white or brown never really made any impression on me until I went abroad to live, when I went to England . . . here, in England, you are a black man as opposed to a white man and a white society.” Colour cancels culture: an American and an Englishman “feel a kinship because of their colour, although their cultures may be vastly different!” (93)

**The Lonely Londoners And The Old Diplomacy**

Published in 1956, *The Lonely Londoners* is noteworthy as one of the first West Indian novels to use dialect (or a literary rendition of dialect) not only for dialogue but for the narrative. Dialect has traditionally been used for the purposes of broad comedy, and there is a great deal of that in the novel, which recalls the Broadway tales of Damon Runyon in its use of tricksters and other “characters” involved in comically outrageous low-life exploits. But the laughter here has a dark
underside: “As if, on the surface, things don’t look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening — what? . . . As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they fraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much about everything would be a big calamity — like how he here now, the thoughts so heavy like he unable to move his body” (142). The structure of the novel seems, deceptively, to be loose, episodic, with little in the way of a conventional plot; instead, continuity between a series of often-comic anecdotes or “ballads” is provided by the character Moses Aloetta, whose Bayswater room functions as an informal social centre for the small group of characters — mostly single males — whose picaresque adventures the book relates:

Nearly every Sunday morning, like if they going to church, the boys liming [i.e. “hanging out”] in Moses room, coming together for oldtalk, to find out the latest gen, what happening, when is the next fete [i.e. party], Bart asking if anybody see his girl anywhere, Cap recounting a episode he had with a woman by the tube station the night before, Big City want to know why the arse he can’t win a pool, Galahad recounting a clash with the colour problem in a restaurant in Piccadilly, Harris saying he hope the weather turns, Five saying he have to drive a truck to Glasgow tomorrow.

Always every Sunday morning they coming to Moses, like if is confession, sitting down on the bed, on the floor, on the chairs, everybody asking what happening but nobody like they know what happening, laughing kiff-kiff at a joke, waiting to see who would start to smoke first, asking Moses if he have anything to eat, the gas going low, why don’t you put another shilling in, anybody have change? (138)
The paratactic structure of these typical sentences is like the structure of the novel as a whole, and this is entirely fitting: these Londoners are lonely precisely because their situation denies them more fully-structured, more meaningful, lives: "'Ten years, papa, ten years the old man in Brit'n, and what to show for it? What happen during all that time? From winter to winter, summer to summer, work after work. Sleep, eat, hustle pussy, work’" (129).

Selvon’s novel is not without significant structure, however — it is just that it is not articulated through changes occurring to the characters. The traditional novel has a narrative structure in which the protagonist, as a result of the moral choices he or she makes, arrives at a state which is different from where he or she started, but Selvon’s point in The Lonely Londoners is precisely that this kind of narrative, closely linked to its origins in middle-class conceptions of individualism and self-help, is inappropriate for lives seemingly devoid of meaningful choice and significant change, for people who never in the course of the novel escape repetition and routine. The structure of this novel is of a very different kind, because it manifests itself in the development not of the narrative but of the terms in which the reader — and it would be easy to show that Selvon is writing primarily for the white English reader — understands its subject-matter. At the beginning Selvon seems eager to cater to our probable assumptions and prejudices about the relative degrees of "civilization" obtaining in England and The West Indies, but these comfortable beliefs are first undermined and then progressively challenged, until finally all grounds for complacency have disappeared. The progression in the novel’s structure is that of the reader’s experiences, not the characters’.

For example, when Henry Oliver, nicknamed Sir Galahad, arrives in London from Trinidad, Selvon seems to be inviting us to patronize his naïve astonishment at common English manners.
and courtesies. "He see a test come and take a newspaper and put down the money on a box —
nobody there to watch the fellar and yet he put the money down. What sort of thing is that?
Galahad wonder, they not afraid somebody thief the money?" (42). A few minutes later, he tries
to push his way to the front of an orderly bus queue, "and the conductor say, "’Ere, you can’t
break the queue like that, mate.’ And Galahad had to stand up and watch all the people who was
there before him get on the bus, and a old lady look at him with a loud tone in her eye, and a girl
told a fellar she was with: ‘They’ll have to do better, you know’" (44). Although one critic has
asserted that these incidents are the stimulus to the growth of “social conscience” in a “rootless
rogue” whose life in Trinidad has no such normative values92, their function is quite different: it
is to set a trap for the complacent English reader who is only too ready to believe that a black
man’s ignorance or apparent disregard of a particular English social convention like the queue
indicates that he lacks any developed social consciousness at all — that he is a relative “savage”
or “primitive.” The reader should already have been put on guard against smugness about the
superiority of English manners by many hints, such as this conversation between Galahad and
Moses only two pages earlier:

‘Things as bad over here as in America?’ Galahad ask.

‘That is a point the boys always debating,’ Moses say. ‘Some say yes and some say no. The
thing is, in America they don’t like you, and they tell you so straight, so that you know how
you stand. Over here is the old English diplomacy: “thank you sir,” and “how do you do”
and that sort of thing” (39-40).

The reader who has not taken the hint and who smiles condescendingly at Galahad’s early
blunders will soon be disabused; English civility, at least in London, rarely goes further than “the
old diplomacy.” *Civility* has come to mean superficial good manners rather than the rich mutuality involved in the rights and duties of citizenship, just as *polity*, the complex networks of interdependence constituting civil organization, has degenerated into a matter of surface politeness. One of Selvon’s purposes is to show that “the old diplomacy” (shades of “perfidious Albion”) conceals an absence of more fully humane values, making all inhabitants of London—not just the immigrants—the “lonely Londoners” of the book’s title.

This analysis of English civil society emerges from the unfolding depiction of the immigrant’s experience. Living apart from his own extended family in the West Indies, the spade is typically forced to pay a high rent for “a cramp-up room where you have to do everything — sleep, eat, dress, wash, cook, live” (137). The “cramp-up room” will perhaps have to be shared, and the rent will be extortionate because most landlords refuse to rent to coloureds, although they will rarely come right out and say so: “I went to look at that room that Ram tell me about in the Gate, and as soon as the landlady see you [Galahad’s black skin] she say the room let already. She ain’t even give me a chance to say good morning” (88-9). Landlords who accept spades do so because they can charge what the market will consequently bear (27-8). Work provides no relief from “the old basement room” and its “whiff of stale food and old clothes and dampness and dirt” (92). Whatever the immigrant’s qualifications, he will be hired only for low-paid, uninteresting, menial jobs, as Cap discovers when the employment exchange sends him to apply for a storekeeping job at the railway for seven pounds a week and he is offered instead manual labour at six pounds ten: “They send you for a storekeeper work and they want to put you in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think this is all we good for, and this time they keeping all the soft clerical jobs for them white fellars” (52). This kind of incident has become so common that now officials at the employment exchange “will find out if the firm want coloured fellows before they

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send you . . . In the beginning it cause a lot of trouble when fellars went saying that they come from the labour office and the people send them away saying it ain’t have no vacancy. They don’t tell you outright that they don’t want coloured fellows, they just say sorry the vacancy get filled” (46). Moses lost one job because “all the people in the place say they go strike unless the boss fire Moses . . . . A few days after that the boss call Moses and tell him that he sorry, but as they cutting down the staff and he was new, he would have to go” (29). Once you get a job you must painfully learn that fellow-workers, however pleasantly they may behave, will never become real friends: “the night before he was in the lavatory and two white fellars come and say how these black bastards have the lavatory dirty, and they didn’t know that he was there, and when he come out they say hello mate have a cigarette” (88). The ugliness of racism is almost everywhere papered over by the dishonesty, the hypocrisy, of civility.

Even on the street, white English xenophobia and colour prejudice form a barrier to the most innocent social encounter:

‘Mummy, look at that black man!’ A little child, holding on to the mother hand, look up at Sir Galahad.

‘You mustn’t say that, dear!’ The mother chide the child.

But Galahad skin like rubber at this stage, he bend down and pat the child cheek, and the child cower and shrink and begin to cry.

‘What a sweet child!’ Galahad say, putting on the old English accent. ‘What’s your name?’

But the child mother uneasy as they stand up there on the pavement with so many white people around: if they was alone, she might have talked a little, and ask Galahad what part
of the world he come from, but instead she pull the child along and she look at Galahad and give a sickly sort of smile, and the old Galahad, knowing how it is, smile back and walk on.

(87-8)

Social transactions of a more pleasant sort can indeed be had, but at a price, for they usually have a mercenary basis: the local grocer rushes to “stock up with a lot of things like blackeye peas and red beans and pepper sauce, and tinned breadfruit and ochro and smoke herring, and as long as the spades spending money he don’t care, in fact is big encouragement, ‘Good morning, sir,’ and ‘What can I do for you today, sir,’ and ‘Do come again.’” An East End tailor, “a cockney Jew fellar,” gives out free cigars, plasters his walls with “photo of all the black boxers in the world,” and “by the time you ready to leave the shop the fellar have you feeling like a lord even if you ain’t give an order for a suit and you have him down one cigar” (77-8).

Racism is endemic in Selvon’s London in the 1950s, but his critique goes deeper than this: the society the spades find themselves in is one in which traditional forms of neighbour-hood, of social relationship, have broken down, to be replaced by more businesslike social transactions. The mercenary principle permeates a social life in which dating, for instance, becomes a kind of prostitution in which sex is granted by the woman in exchange for a night out at cinema or restaurant, and many of the spades prefer outright prostitution in which “you could ... negotiate ten shillings or a pound with the sports in the park” (101). They are not the only ones — prostitution attracts all sorts and conditions of men: “you does meet all sorts of fellars from all walks of life don’t ever be surprised at who you meet up cruising and reclining in the park it might be your boss or it might be some big professional fellar because it ain’t have no discrimination when it come to that in the park in the summer” (104). Literal prostitution,

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involving men from all classes and occupations, becomes a synecdoche for the essentially commercial ethos to which social relationships in England have been reduced. Prostitutes are businesspeople just like the grocer and the tailor referred to above, and although their business principles preclude overt racial discrimination, they entail no humanity, no relationship of reciprocity beyond a cash/commodity transaction, as the customer quickly discovers if his tender is too low: “see them girls in little groups here and there talking and how they could curse you never hear curse until one of them sports curse you if you approach one and she don’t like your terms she tell you to — off right away and if you linger she tell you to double — off but business is brisk in the park in the summer” (104).

In Selvon’s London there is no real charity; people may throw coins to beggars, but “What impulse does prompt people to give no one knows. Is never generosity — you could see some of them regret it as soon as they give. But is a kind of feeling of shame. One fellar give, and the others feel shame if they don’t put a penny in the old man hat” (76). A rich woman lying in bed in her luxury flat may toss a sixpence from her window to a beggar in the street, but she does not really care about the recipient, in whom she takes no personal interest: “But if she have a thought at all, it never go further than to cause the window to open and the tanner to fall down. In fact when the woman throw the tanner from the window she didn’t even look down: if a man was a mile away and he was controlling a loudspeaker in the street moving up and down, the tanner would have come the same way” (75-6).

The sixpenny-piece tossed from a window to an invisible beggar, a bodiless voice, is a nice emblem of the “cash nexus” to which social life in post-war England has dwindled. Selvon’s narrator remarks that “It have a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class and the
spades, because when you poor things does level out” (75), but we see little of this in the novel; what we do see are elderly working-class Englishwomen who remember a more traditional community life than is to be found in the years of burgeoning post-war prosperity: “... it have bags of these old geezers [widows whose husbands were killed in the war] who does be pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can’t realise what happen to the old Brit’n ... On Friday or Saturday night, they go in the pub and buy a big glass of mild and bitter, and sit down by a table near the fire and stay here coasting lime till the pub close” (75). Dying in this society is as lonely as living: “And another thing, look how people does dead and nobody don’t know nothing until the milk bottles start to pile up in front of the door ... That is a hell of a thing to think about, you know. One time a test dead in this house — right there down the hall, in the second room. You know what? I miss the test — was one of them old geezers, every morning she see me she say. ‘Cold today, isn’t it? I bet you wish you were back home now’ ... Well I miss the test: when I ask the landlord for her, he say she dead about a month ago” (131). The fact that Moses can sorely miss an old woman with whom his social interaction was both minimal and superficial says a great deal about the quality and the texture of the rest of his social life.

Outside the gatherings in Moses’ room, there is no sustaining community for the spades in London:

‘Sometimes I look back on all the years I spend in Brit’n,’ Moses say, ‘and I surprise that so many years gone by. Looking at things in general life really hard for the boys in London. This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn’t get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell. Here is not like home where you have

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friends all about. In the beginning you would think that is a good thing, that nobody minding your business, but after a while you want to get in company, you want to go to somebody house and eat a meal, you want to go on excursion to the sea, you want to go and play football and cricket. Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes, but you can’t go in their house and eat or sit down and talk. It ain’t have no sort of family life for us here. Look at Joseph. He married to a English girl and they have four children, and they living in two rooms in Paddington. He apply to the LCC for a flat, but it look like he would never get one. Now the children big enough to go to school, and what you think? Is big fight every day because the other children calling them darkie . . . Boy, when I see thing like that happening to other people I decide I would never married.’ (130-1).

But the spades’ experience is simply a special case of a general malaise, because there doesn’t seem to be a community in the traditional sense at all: “It have people living in London who don’t know what happening in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living. London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don’t know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers” (74). In Trinidad things were different, as is evident from this exchange between Moses and Galahad in Moses’ Bayswater room when they first meet: “’Where you used to live?’ ‘Down south, San Fernando, in Mucurapo Street.’ ‘Eh-heh! You know Mahal?’ . . . ‘But how you mean? Everybody know Mahal!” (37) Or from this, between the same men in the same room three or four years later: “’Aye Galahad,’ he say, ‘you used to know a fellow name Brackley in Charlotte Street?’ ‘Brackley? Charlotte Street? But how you mean? You think I
would be living in Port of Spain and don’t know Brackley?’” (127) By the end of the novel the reader understands in a new light what he has been told at the beginning:

It have some fellars who in Brit’n long, and yet they can’t get away from the habit of going to Waterloo whenever a boat-train coming in with passengers from the West Indies. They like to see the familiar faces, they like to watch their countrymen coming off the train, and sometimes they might spot somebody they know: ‘Aye Watson! What the hell you doing in Brit’n boy? Why didn’t you write me you was coming?’ And they would start big oldtalk with the travellers, finding out what happening in Trinidad, in Grenada, in Barbados, in Jamaica and Antigua, what is the latest calypso number, if anybody dead, and so on . . . . (26)

Most of the spades, lonely as they are, have a greater sense of fellowship than the English, and at its best it is a fellowship constituted not only by gossip and “oldtalk” but by obligation and duty: Moses “had was to get up from a nice warm bed and dress and come out in this nasty weather to go and meet a fellar he didn’t even know. That was the hurtful part of it — is not as if this fellar is his brother or his cousin or even friend; he don’t know the man from Adam. But he got a letter from a friend in Trinidad who say that this fellar is coming by the ss Hildebrand, and if he could please meet him at the station in London, and help him until he get settled” (23). Moses resents having to go, but the point is that he goes, and he does help Galahad get settled, as he has helped so many more: “So what Moses could do when these fellars land up hopeless on the doorstep with one set of luggage, no place to sleep, no place to go?” (24). This passage, which occurs on the second page of the novel, appears to be a rhetorical question, but by the end of the novel the reader should realize that it isn’t: Moses could — in theory, at least — do what the native English do — the “old diplomacy.”

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But of course he can’t, because he’s not in this respect “English” and because a different social practice has constructed his sense of what citizenship involves in the way of duty to fellow-citizens. Despite Galahad’s astonishment at the degree of trust inscribed in the system of newspaper vending — “nobody there to watch the fellar and yet he put the money down” — it turns out that West Indians can teach the English something on this score. In the novel the most effective teacher is the most solid representative of West Indian values in Selvon’s London — Tolroy’s Tanty [Aunt] Bessy, who accompanies the rest of Tolroy’s relatives from Kingston, Jamaica, to England “to look after the family” and because “is a shame to leave she alone to dead in Kingston with nobody to look after she” (30-31). Tanty shops regularly at the grocery that has gone to such lengths to attract the immigrants’ business:

It had a big picture hang up on the wall of the shop, with two fellars in it. One is Mr. Credit, and he surrounded with unpaid bills and he thin and worried, with his hand propping up his head. The other is Mr. Cash, and he have on waistcoat with gold chain and he have a big belly and he laughing and looking prosperous. Tanty used to look at the picture and suck she teeth. One day she ask the shopkeeper if he don’t know about trust.

‘Trust?’ the shopkeeper say.

‘Yes,’ Tanty say. ‘Where I come from you take what you want and you pay every Friday.’

‘Oh, credit,’ the shopkeeper say, as if he please that he understand Tanty. ‘We don’t do business like that in this shop.’ And he point to the picture on the wall.

‘But you should,’ Tanty say. ‘We is poor people and we don’t always have money to buy.’

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Tanty keep behind the shopkeeper to trust, but he only smile when she tell him. Then one day Tanty buy a set of message and put it in she bag and tell him: ‘You see that exercise books you have in the glasscase? Take one out and put my name in it and keep it under the counter with how much I owe you. Mark the things I take and I will pay you on Friday please God.’

And Tanty walk out the white people shop brazen as ever. When the Friday come, she pay what she owe.

‘I will only give you credit,’ the shopkeeper say, to humour Tanty, but before long she spread the ballad all about that anybody could trust if they want, and the fellar get a list of creditors on his hands. However, every Friday evening religiously they all paying up, and as business going on all right he decide to give in. He take down the picture and put up one of the coronation of the Queen. (78-9)

This “ballad” of Tanty and the shopkeeper epitomizes what Selvon sees as the difference between London on the one hand and a traditional West Indian sociality on the other: Tanty wants “Trust,” and the shopkeeper equates this with “Credit,” as if they are simply two names for the same thing. But of course they are not; as the structuralists long ago told us, language is a system of differences without positive terms, and a term’s meaning is constituted by its network of relationships to other terms in a language-system. “Credit” as the shopkeeper uses it is a term belonging to the mercantile-language-system of modern capitalism, and what it means to him is constituted by its binary opposite in this system — not “discredit” but “cash,” as the grocer’s picture of Mr. Cash and Mr. Credit so graphically declares. Tanty, however, inhabits a different language-system in which the opposite of the “trust” that she insists upon is not “cash” but

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“mistrust,” “distrust,” or “doubt.” This language-system (which is also a social system) still conceives of shopping as a relationship of mutuality between people who never cease to regard each other as moral agents rather than as “consumers” whose “creditworthiness” is determined by an accountant’s calculus; Tanty refuses the economic abstractions of the modern world that London here represents. Her refusal has political ramifications, for there is good reason to suppose that “trust” between its members is an essential precondition of a polity in which the role of government goes beyond securing the minimal “negative liberty” of individuals:

“...if trust and understanding have developed between the members of a state, this makes it more possible to carry out policies that have universalistic criteria and have the result of helping certain regions or groups more than others, because there is some expectation that other policies another time will have the effect of benefitting other groups. Trust might be defined as the willingness to wait: hence the impossibility, according to Hobbes, of covenants in a state of nature. In all kinds of different cultures, paying back gifts or services too quickly is regarded as a refusal of social relations, and in traditional Irish peasant society, where loans among neighbours were common, the first thing one did upon falling out with somebody was to pay off any outstanding loan. 93

Not everyone is like Tanty and the other customers who “religiously” pay their debts; the immigrant community has plenty of rogues and tricksters who, isolated from a sustaining community, embrace purely mercenary principles and become cheats and deadbeats: “a lot of parasites muddy the water for the boys, and these days when one spade do something wrong, they crying down the lot” (41). One of these is Cap, a Nigerian who comes to London to study law but drops out when his father stops his allowance because “he start to spend money wild on
woman and cigarette” (48). Cap survives by conning money out of his fellow-exiles and preying on women, usually immigrants and au-pairs from continental Europe, and Selvon reverts to the topos of the seagull to emblematize the “intra-species” nature of this predation. Once when Cap is reduced to desperation by hunger, he sets elaborate traps for the seagulls who frequent the ledge outside his upper-storey room in Dawson Place: “In the two weeks that Cap stay in that top room, he lessen the seagull population in London evening after evening . . . . The menu had him looking well, he eat seagull in all manner and fashion.” But Selvon makes it very clear that predation is no satisfactory substitute for a sustaining community based on mutual obligation; though it may seem to work in the short term it is self-defeating, for the seagulls will get wise in the end: “The next place that he went to live, he get a top room again when he ask for it, but seagulls never come on that ledge, though Cap used to put bread out every day” (137). And the moral of this story, as should by now be clear, applies not only to the immigrant population but to all the lonely Londoners.

Although Cap is perhaps the most outrageous hustler and trickster in the novel’s immigrant population, he is by no means the only one, and Selvon is certainly not suggesting that the behaviour of each and every West Indian immigrant ipso facto embodies a concept of community superior to that which is to be found in 1950s London. Indeed, Trinidadian author Earl Lovelace, in his 1982 novel *The Wine of Astonishment*, suggests that in post-war Trinidad the traditional attitudes and behaviors that Selvon’s Jamaican Tanty represents survive chiefly as residual elements of a pre-industrial culture being transformed by “the sickness for money that
was the disease taking over everybody.”94* Furthermore, Selvon is not uncritical of some aspects of the traditional culture of his spades, especially their behavior towards women, who are viewed almost exclusively as sex objects and/or as sources of ready cash. This is one area in which English culture is represented as being superior: when Lewis beats his wife Agnes because he suspects her (causelessly) of adultery, Moses warns him that “women in this country not like Jamaica, you know. They have rights over here . . .” (69). And Agnes finally asserts her rights, suing Lewis for assault after a particularly savage beating and then leaving him for

* Lovelace’s novel pinpoints as the beginning of this transformation the establishment of American military bases on the island in World War II, which instantly creates a new breed of hustler more sinister than — but clearly related to — Selvon’s worst rogues: "Since the Americans come money start to flow, fellows spring up from nowhere with clean fingernails and pointy-tip shoes; lean fellows in zoot suits with long silver chains looping from the fob of their trousers to their side pocket, who, to see their eyes, you have to lift up their hat brims" (22). A typical example "is money-lender and Contact Man, dealing in blackmarket goods and selling GI boots and other things that he thief from the American Base. Now he about Bonasse, with a gold ring on every finger, his belt slacken at the waist, his eyes looking at everything like it have a price he could afford to pay. . . . Get so fresh and outa place, he want to pinch every woman he meet, and when she open her mouth to disagree, he wave a five dollar bill in her face" (19). None of Selvon’s characters is as ugly as this, but the immigrants of The Lonely Londoners are not complete innocents: "to tell truth most of the fellars who coming now are real hustlers, desperate" (24).
good. Nor is this an isolated incident: the theme of the West Indians’ exploitation of women echoes throughout all three of Selvon’s London novels, and should prevent us from interpreting his critique of English society as a simple-minded, nostalgic endorsement of “traditional” West Indian mores.

It is also important to remember that the West Indies hardly constitutes a pre-mercantile Eden: Selvon’s blacks, the descendants either of slaves or of East Indians imported to the West Indies as cheap labour, are no strangers to some of the harsher operations of commerce, for they are themselves indelibly inscribed as commodities in global circuits of commodity-exchange. Yet what I am here calling “traditional culture” is the structures of relationship that develop among an oppressed population as part of a general survival strategy, and it remains true that the spades’ indigenous culture, which once functioned as a site of resistance to the de-humanizing pressures of English colonialism, can play a similar role in resisting the not-unrelated pressures of modernity that the immigrants encounter in London. As the figure of Tanty serves to remind us, Selvon’s Caribbean characters were all born and at least partly raised in a society in which money was not the only, or even the strongest, social bond. The fact that their earlier socialization in their West Indian communities can prevent them from assimilating some of the least attractive patterns of English behaviour doesn’t mean that it always does, for in London the

* The position of women in the immigrant community, where traditional gender roles and behaviours become increasingly dysfunctional in a changed setting, is an important issue, and one explored in painful depth in Buchi Emecheta’s London novels of a slightly later period, In The Ditch and Second-Class Citizen.

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spades find themselves being pulled in two different directions: some (like Moses) continue to yield to the claims of community and fellowship, while others embrace the role of *homo oeconomicus*, ruthlessly maximizing their narrowly-conceived self-interest:

> It had a Jamaican fellow who living in Brixton, that come to the station to see what tenants he could pick up for the houses that he have in Brixton. This test when he did first come open up a club, and by and by he save up money and buy a house. The next thing you know, he buy out a whole street of houses in Brixton, and let out rooms to the boys, hitting them anything like three or four guineas for a double. When it come to making money, it ain’t have anything like ‘ease me up’ or ‘both of we is countrymen together’ in the old London. Sometimes he put bed and chair in two or three big room and tell the fellars they could live in there together, but each would have to pay a pound. So you could imagine — five-six fellars in one room and the test coining money for so. And whenever a boat-train come in, he hustling down to Waterloo to pick up them fellars who new to London and ain’t have place to stay. . . . (28)

The conflict between the traditional West Indian social imperative of cooperation and the anti-social imperative of predation is the fulcrum of Selvon’s next two London novels.

**A Skylark, A Fete And A Bacchanal: The Housing Lark**

In *The Housing Lark* (1965), these two attitudes are embodied in a Jamaican, Harry Banjo, and a Trinidadian, Battersby (“Bat”), who share a dilapidated basement room in Brixton. Bat is a predator, but not in the western mode of calculated exploitation in the service of ruthless, driving
ambition: Selvon’s target here is rather the kind of impromptu rascality of “scalliwags and scoundrels” to whom “everything is a skylark and a fete and a bacchanal,” who have “no ambition, no push. Just full your belly with rum and food, and you all belge and fart around and look for lime to pass the time, walk about, catch women, stand up by the market place talking a set of shit day in and day out”\textsuperscript{95}. So Bat is a predator by default; a chronically impoverished and improvident dreamer who fantasizes about Aladdin’s genie bringing him money, “a nice woman, a house to live in, food, cigarettes, rum,” he exploits his roommate and friends in order to obtain the small luxuries he’s too lazy to secure by more orthodox means (7-9).

Harry is also a dreamer, but one with a more practical and constructive bent, and it is he who suggests that a group of spades — all of them dreamers and no-hopers apart from himself — club together and start a savings fund in order to raise a down payment on a house of their own and be rid of avaricious landlords and wretched lodgings. The scheme, which entails communal action and purpose, energizes other members of the group, jolting them out of the anomie that has previously characterized their isolated existences; Gallows, for instance, walks away from the inaugural meeting “as if he drifting on a cloud. As if the plan to buy a house make a new man of him. In all his life, Gallows never had a plan, never had ideas about the future” (47). But although Bat agrees enthusiastically, admonishing the others to give up smoking, drinking, 

* Selvon’s narrator is careful to warn the English reader of the dangers of stereotyping West Indians in these terms: "Still, you don’t have to get any bloody airs about OUR PEOPLE, because in this world today they have plenty company. Procrastinators and high dreamers like stupidity all over the place" (128-9).

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and “spending money on women,” and exhorting them “to trust one another ... We have to treat this thing serious, else it won’t work at all ... “ (33-4), part of the reason for his enthusiasm is that he manoeuvres himself into the position of club treasurer and behaves as if Aladdin’s genie has really materialized:

Bat get big kick from the idea of the house, and he already collect twenty-nine quid.

Twenty-nine quid! Who would of dream that just by talking about a idea men would give you money? Bat begin to get delirious from the time the money start to come in. He can’t even remember who give how much, all he know is that he is the man in possession of the money, and he begin to spend wild. Thinking about it now, he wonder how much remain? He lift himself up and feel under the mattress. . . . His fingers scramble about on the springs, and he feel a note and pull it out. It was ten shillings.

Bat jump off the bed and pull the mattress right off. No more money, the ten shillings was all that remain.

Which part all that money gone? Bat wondered. Somebody thief it? I hide it somewhere else?

And then as he cool down, he realise he must of spent it. No use bothering about it, he would have to make another collection. Was about time the boys come up with some more if they really intend to get a house. What would happen on the day of reckoning when the fellars find out that he spend all their money was something that Bat wasn’t worried about. He would have to think of some scheme. If things come to the worst he could always say that somebody thief the money. Bat imagine himself telling them: “Oh God! You know
what happen? Somebody break open the room and thief my money!” On top of that he would have to say they thief clothes and wristwatch too, to make it sound real. (64-5)

Since this novel, like its predecessor, is a comedy, notwithstanding its sombre undertones, things turn out all right in the end despite a whole string of misadventures. The wives and girlfriends of some of the men in the group, tired of all the “farting around that’s been going around,” decide to assert themselves by calling a meeting and taking command of the enterprise (132). Teena, with the support of Bat’s sister and his girlfriend, takes charge of what money Bat has managed to come up with to replace the missing banknotes, and, by contributing the ten pounds she and her husband Fitz have scrimped and saved to buy winter clothes for the children, shames the men into coming up with the rest (143-4). Bat, however, remains irresponsible, unrepentant and unreformed: when Teena finally relinquishes the bottle of rum that she confiscated from Bat as she took charge of the meeting, “Bat snatch it up like a seagull swooping on a fish” (139). At the end of the novel, undaunted, he’s still hustling.

The single honourable exception to the male norm of carefree, lazy irresponsibility in the novel is Harry Banjo, who not only inaugurates the housing club but also, by the novel’s end, seems to have realized his ambition to become a successful “calypsonian” in show business. But Harry is in prison for much of the novel — one of his drug-dealing “friends”, fleeing the police, leaves him innocently holding a package that turns out to contain “weed” — so it is left to the women to assert and enforce the ties and duties of community. They have the will and the strength to do so because they, as mothers or prospective mothers, have responsibilities to others that they cannot easily ignore; so as the unnamed narrator points out, while “the house might be a lark” to the single men in the group, it means a lot to Teena, Jean, and Matilda: “It all well and good for

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the boys who free single to make do with what they have, but what about when people start
having family? Them English people don’t want to rent from the time they see you, and as for
when you have a family!” (137).

Yet the “rootless rogues”, despite their devil-may-care attitude to most of life’s problems, are
still implicated in a mode of community that Selvon portrays as more fulfilling than the English
norm. This emerges when Bat, in a desperate attempt to replace the money he has spent, latches
on to a chance suggestion of Matilda’s and organizes a community charabanc excursion to
Hampton Court at a pound a head. Although his intentions are ignoble, the outing is a real
community event: “It look as if the whole of Brixton was going on this excursion to Hamdon
[sic] Court. Friend invite friend, cousin invite aunt, uncle invite nephew, niece invite godfather”
(104). Even the ruthless rent collector, Charlie Victor — “so Anglicised that he even eating a
currant bun and drinking a cup of tea for lunch!” (110) — deigns to “patronise” the excursion,
and although he endeavours to hold himself aloof (partly to impress his English girlfriend), he
eventually breaks down and grabs a plate of peas and rice, “throwing decorum to the winds”
(121). Significantly, the only one excluded — ostracized, in fact — is the man who not only
refused to join the housing club but also transgressed against a deeply-felt social norm by
thrusting a packet of marijuana on the innocent Harry Banjo and leaving him to go to jail for
dealing, since Harry refuses to inform on him.

At Hampton Court the men relax after a Rabelaisian picnic and settle down to a conversation
that is a truly social event, as Selvon’s narrator emphasizes by eschewing individualities and
refusing to distinguish between speakers:
If you ever want to hear old-talk no other time better than one like this when men belly full, four crates of beer and eight bottle of rum finish, and a summer sun blazing in the sky. Out of the blue, old-talk does start up. You couldn’t, or shouldn’t, differentiate between the voices, because men only talking, throwing in a few words here, butting in there, making a comment, arguing a point, stating a view. Nobody care who listen or who talk. Is as if a fire going, and everybody throwing in a piece of fuel now and then to keep it going. It don’t matter what you throw in, as long as the fire keep going — wood, coal, peat, horse-shit, kerosene, gasoline, the lot. (123)

Judged by the criterion of historical accuracy, the ensuing conversation about Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey and the “nights of the round table” contains quite a lot of horse-shit, but it doesn’t matter. The point of it all is not the conversation per se but the community it is instrumental in creating, and the image of the fire is so felicitous because this is a living culture, in stark contrast to English culture: “It don’t matter what the topic is, as long as words floating about, verbs, adjectives, nouns, interjections, paraphrase and paradise, the boys don’t care. It like a game, all of them throwing words in the air like a ball, now and then some scandalous laugh making sedate Englishers wonder what the arse them black people talking about . . .” (126). The sedate Englishers are inscribed in a different kind of culture — museum culture —

* "The lime is the chief West Indian social form.... For the West Indian lime is really the genius of the place giving voice, as a wind gives voice to a mountainside; and in its exercise lies not only 'resistance" — resistance by the poor, the unemployed, or simply the contented, to the attenuated, workaholic world of our time — but many a moment when the stillness created resembles the stillness of art: of a finished, self-sufficient thing.... West Indian voices in the

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as they “catch up on some more historical data” at Hampton Court: “... them Englishers, from the time they get in a palace or a tower or a art gallery or any kind of exhibition, they behave as if they on holy ground, and you can’t even raise a cough” (120).

**The Bird’s-Eye View: Moses Ascending**

Ten years later, in *Moses Ascending* (1975), Selvon is still concerned with the issues of community and mutuality, but in this novel the species of predation he is concerned to critique is that of England’s burgeoning “enterprise culture.” Moses Aloetta, the mainstay of the fragile society of spades in *The Lonely Londoners*, has wearied of that role and decides to become a capitalist. With his meagre savings he buys a dilapidated but large house, due for demolition in three years, and sets out to become a gentleman of leisure living off the rents of the less provident. Moses in fact becomes a parody of the leisured landowner, occupying his time writing his memoirs in a comic mixture of the mandarin and the demotic, employing various bits and pieces of an eighteenth-century English prose style peppered with colloquialisms: “I cannot tell you what joy and satisfaction I had the day I move into these new quarters. Whereas I did have a worm’s eye view of life, I now had a bird’s eye view. I was Master of the house. I insert my key into the front door lock, I enter, I ascend the stairs, and when the tenants hear my heavy

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night, unascribed, [constitutes a literary mode] that is a truer reflection of the felt social reality of these islands, of the West Indian sensibility and mode of intercourse, than the 'he inquired' and 'she replied' and 'he said' construct of the traditional novel....” Wayne Brown, "Caribbean Booktalk: Far Tortuga: A Fable Of The Contemprorary Caribbean," *Caribbean Affairs* Vol 1, No. 2 (April-June 1988),199.
tread they cower and shrink in their rooms, in case I snap my fingers and say OUT to any of them “(4). Moses’ ascension — a literal one, in that he exchanges his rented basement room for the “penthouse” suite of his new property — involves repudiating all his former social ties: “The only thing I didn’t want was to have any of the old brigade living in my house, and the rumour went around town that I was a different man, that I had forsaken my friends, and that there was to be no more pigfoot and peas and rice, nor even a cuppa, to be obtained, even if they came with gifts of myrrh and frankincense” (4). Significantly, Moses does not say that he would refuse the gift of gold, and he doesn’t, accepting any prospective tenant “first come, first served. . . as long as every Friday-please-God they shell over their respective rents, and didn’t grumble too much about leaks and cracks and other symptoms of dilapidation which infested the house” (4).

Although he himself doesn’t intend to do anything like work, Moses imitates that icon of eighteenth-century enterprise, Robinson Crusoe, in taking on as “my Man Friday a white immigrant name Bob from somewhere in the Midlands . . . . He was a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black man. In no time at all he learn how to cook peas and rice. . . . By and by, as he was so useful to me, I allowed him the freedom of the house, and left everything in his hands so I could enjoy my retirement” (4-5). But even though he has become the Master waited upon by a Servant, Moses never gets to enjoy the life of leisure he has contemplated. Yielding to the temptation to make some easy money, he allows his house to be used as a temporary holding place for illegal immigrants being smuggled into Britain from Asia, and the farcical complications of this madcap scheme leave him little time for writing. When a “consignment” of illegals overflows the allotted space, he is forced to vacate his “penthouse” for

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a while and, ironically, has to seek refuge with the member of the "old brigade" who still lives in the basement room Moses thought he had once and for all escaped from.

This temporary reversal prefigures the end of the novel, which finds Moses living in the basement of his house while "Man Friday" Bob takes over Moses' spacious apartment: "I was reduced to living as a tenant in my own house, with Robert holding the reins and cracking the whip" (134). Moses warns the reader against inferring from his story the moral that "it is the white man who ends up Upstairs and the black man who ends up Downstairs" (139-40), and although at least one commentator has asserted that Moses is blind to the significance of his own tale and that this is indeed the moral of Selvon's book, I think we should heed Moses' caution.

Moses' eventual fate is the consequence of two things; on the one hand, his greed and predatory behaviour, and on the other his conscience, which prompts him to regret and atone for his misdeeds. He loses his penthouse because, when Bob catches him "in flegrante delicto or whatever it is lords and ladies call it" (133) with Jeannie, Bob's wife, Moses offers to exchange apartments in a desperate attempt to prevent Bob moving out entirely; for the fact is that Moses, having repudiated all his friends from "the old brigade" at the beginning of the novel, has discovered that he does need friendship, and servant Bob has become a friend. As usual in Selvon, sexual predation is both the concomitant of and the figure for economic predation; Moses' cuckolding of Bob is an extension of the behaviour which he has espoused at the outset, while his subsequent guilt and atonement are signs that his espousal of exploitation is never ruthless enough to be completely successful.

Throughout the novel Moses is torn between individualistic self-advancement and the conflicting claims of friendship and solidarity, and his demotion to the basement, however unwelcome,
represents the triumph of the latter over the former. Several incidents in the novel lead up to this triumph: the climactic one comes when Moses, although disapproving of the Black Power movement in which several of his acquaintances are involved, feels such moral outrage at the behaviour of the police at a Black Power meeting that he voluntarily and unexpectedly sacrifices all his ill-gotten gains to a defence fund for police victims:

‘These are My People,’ I say grimly, ‘No Englishman with black blood in his veins can stand aside and see innocent victims hang. We were party to that meeting, Bob. We seen what happen with our own eyes.’

‘Aye,’ he say, and give a little shudder. ‘I saw an Alsatian leap upon a helpless woman and maul her. And Brenda was roughly handled in spite of her womanhood. Two pigs literally hoisted her out of the hall.’

‘What are we waiting for?’ I cried. ‘We should have enough cash in the house. Get it all together and let’s make haste.’

It was thus that I became involved in spite of my misgivings and philosophy of neutrality. One would not be worth one’s salt to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the injustice of that night. I know all the failings and shortcomings of My People, their foibles and chicanery, their apathy and disunity, but I were less than a Pharisee to leave them by the wayside. Such was my righteous indignation that I did not even consider the recoverability of the three hundred pounds, plus twenty-five new pee [pence] for stamp duty, that I had to fork out for the brothers and sister. I told Galahad, after their release, that the money could be used for their defence when they bust a case in the police arse for wrongful arrests. (96-7).

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This scene, in which Moses expresses his solidarity not merely with fellow-blacks \textit{qua} blacks but with fellow-Englishmen (albeit with "black blood in their veins") who are victims of injustice, marks an important turning point in the novel. Previously Moses, a mere (and sceptical) spectator at a Black Power rally in Trafalgar Square, has himself suffered wrongful arrest, and has registered some of the racial/historical resonances of the experience: "I do not know about you, but it is a shuddering thought for a black man to be lock up by the police. Once you are in, it is a foregone conclusion that they will throw away the key. There was no protests from any of the passengers [in the police wagon] saying that they was innocent and shouldn't be here, nobody struggling to get out like me, nobody saying anything at all. Like we was in the hold of a slave ship" (36). But he has refused to draw the conclusion that his individualism is misguided, that he and his fellow-spades, whether they like it or not, share a common identity in the eyes of English policemen and a common fate at their hands. Although he "cannot remember all the welter of emotions that I feel at the time of my stretch," he subsequently chooses to ignore this potentially regenerative confusion and to interpret his experience narrowly as confirmation of the rightness of his resolve to remain apart and aloof: "To tell you the truth, I wasn't so much vex with the police as I was vex with myself for going to that fucking rally. I remember lying on my bunk in the cell the night and thinking that if I did keep my arse quiet and stay at home, having a cold beer and looking at the church service on TV, I would not of got myself in this shit. It just goes to show how right I was all the time to have nothing to do with the black brotherhood" (38-9).

Nevertheless, Moses' imprisonment, despite his attempts to blind himself to its meaning, is the beginning of what we might call his sentimental re-education. The seed of doubt has been sown;
later, when he watches the illegal immigrants (whom he has been paid twenty pounds a head to shelter) departing to another safe house, he is able to acknowledge a genuine if comic and uneasy ambivalence: “I stood by the window of the penthouse, observing the exodus, a lump in my throat. Those of you who take up your cudgels against these poor unfortunates, who lobby the House of Commons and write letters to Members of Parliament, who march in protest waving banners and shouting imprecations on their heads, cannot understand my mixed emotions. I stood there counting them as they entered the van. Twenty pounds, forty, sixty — and when I turned away, there was a tear in my eye” (89). The comedy and the pathos of this ambivalence matches Shylock’s when he discovers that his daughter Jessica has eloped, taking his money with her: “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!” It is tempting to see Moses’ concern for money — “Twenty pounds, forty, sixty” — as totally undermining and discrediting his ostensible concern for people, but it would be a mistake (as it is in Shylock’s case) to think that bathos entirely abolishes pathos. Moses’ ambivalence is genuine, and the contradictory impulses that fuel it are the very stuff of the conflict that gives the novel its purpose and meaning. The wrongful arrests that Moses later witnesses tip the scales and resolve the ambivalence, pushing him despite himself firmly in the direction of fellow-feeling, of compassion. Moses is not just a comic butt whose absurdities exemplify the perils of assimilation, but a significant moral agent whose failure to assimilate to a culture of selfishness, despite his best efforts, represents the triumph of the claims of community and sociality — of truly civilized mores — over atomistic individualism. Moses Ascending is not an entirely ironic title by any means: although the novel’s plot sees him descend from penthouse to basement, by the novel’s end he has climbed back up to a moral plane far higher than the one he vowed to dwell upon at the beginning.

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Prime Minister Thatcher declared, notoriously, that there was no such thing as society, merely individuals. More than twenty years before she came to power, Sam Selvon identified this attitude as endemic in London, and all three of his London novels are deceptively comic assaults upon this proposition, employing as the means of critique a motley assortment of characters whose recent-immigrant status means that they are "imperfectly-socialized," not only in comically and trivially pejorative senses, but in the honorific sense of not being fully inscribed within a non-society of selfish individualism.

**Getting A Few Tips: Escape To An Autumn Pavement**

Selvon’s reading of English society is not an idiosyncratic one among West Indian immigrant writers. It is shared by Andrew Salkey, whose *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960) presents a Jamaican protagonist who is even more torn and more angry and bitter than any of Selvon’s spades but whose analysis of his new London “home” is quite similar to the one that emerges from between the lines of Selvon’s novels.

Almost on the eve of the country’s independence, Johnnie Sobert has fled from Jamaica and from his parents’ middle-class aspirations for him because they do not offer a sustaining identity: he despises the rising Jamaican “middle-class” as a crude mockery of its European model, and he cannot bring himself to believe that Federation and Independence can forge a civil society on any terms other than a grotesque imitation of Europe:

* Jamaica, a British possession since the Treaty of Madrid (1670), was granted increasing measures of self-government between 1944 and 1962, when full independence was achieved.
you mustn’t get Jamaica’s middle class wrong. There are a few families who’re aspiring to a sort of middle-class position. In some weird way, they are ready for it. They have the necessary trappings, the deceitfulness, the narrowness, the smugness, the holier-than-thou attitudes — all this plus a deep-rooted working-class mentality. As far as I can see, working-class and slave-class skeletons-in-the-cupboard add up to the most ridiculous situation in the Caribbean area. (47)

But if a Jamaican identity is not satisfactory, what alternative is there? As another character — white, English — puts it, the “West Indian problem” is “not being anything totally identifiable? I mean, you’re not Continental African and you’re not anywhere near the other thing [English]”, and Johnnie agrees: “... Africa doesn’t belong to me! There’s no feeling there. No bond.

We’ve been fed on the Mother Country myth. Its language. Its history. Its literature. Its Civics. We feel chunks of it rubbing off on us. We believe in it. We trust it. Openly, we admit we’re a part of it. But are we? Where’s the real link?” (48).

The England that Johnnie flees to is not a mother but an orgy of commercial exploitation, and he has no greater love for the “real” English bourgeoisie than he has for the “false” Jamaican one. But one of the dubious pleasures of his exile is that he can more freely indulge his contempt: the things he hates in London are English and therefore less painful to him than things Jamaican in which he feels personally implicated.

The West Indies Federation was established in 1958, but foundered in 1962 when Jamaica and Trinidad withdrew from it.

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Once in London Johnnie takes what appears to be a perverse and savage delight in immersing himself in the seamier side of life in a commercial society, working as a waiter in a disreputable club that caters to lonely black GIs in search of booze and sex and to English voyeurs in search of black studs for private "parties." Although the novel includes ominous signs of the racism that was to issue in the Notting Hill riots, Johnnie's choice of a job is not the result of limited opportunities for spades; it is a paradoxical attempt to remain free and uncommitted, for he thinks he can both make money and indulge his contempt for money-making while satisfying himself that he is defying his parents and his "people" by refusing to fulfill their middle-class hopes and plans for him: "... I had believed implicitly that London's that big cinema of a city where trees are banks and money plus freedom is as easy to come by as leaves on an autumn pavement" (206)

Money turns out to be easier to come by than freedom: his "freedom" is not really freedom at all, but a willed aloofness that entails a huge psychological cost. He is as full of anger and self-contempt as John Osborne's Jimmy Porter and Bill Maitland or any of the other "angry young men" who were attracting such attention at the time:

Getting a few tips; giving a few laughs. . . Things are great. I'm a very happy man! What more could I really want? Total independence for my little archipelago of a territory? More loans for the regional governments? More enthusiasm for the publication and sale of regional books within the region? More adult education? More exchange among islands of island-problems and debates? Of course not. I'm basically selfish. Couldn't-care-less hunter of rent money and bus fares I am, really. Not interested in the land, in agricultural improvement and development. Not conscious of nationalism and growth and pride and
independence and wealth and the rest. Used to be interested in the Yankee dollar earned on farms in the South; interested now only in the punctured pound acquired by magic in industrial England. (32).

Johnnie is deceiving himself here, of course, for his well-educated and politically-sophisticated mind is constantly being invaded by all the things he claims not to be interested in or conscious of. He is also constantly and bitterly aware of the all-embracing power of money and greed in London, even in the small hours of the morning when the Oxford Street shops are closed: “Can feel the presence of cash registers along the street. . . . Hundreds of presences on both sides of the street. Yet it’s always a joy to know that they’re out of action and are unable at the moment to make it off you; to suck you in and spit you out minus your bus fare. Doesn’t really matter, does it? They’ll catch you early Monday morning, just the same. . . . And who doesn’t really want to be caught at some time or the other?” (34).

A life of hustling can appear to be freedom only because it involves Johnnie in no relationships that transcend the “cash nexus” he so despises, but his choice involves self-hatred, and it cuts him off from the potential fulfillment of the fuller human relationships he really craves. Larry, the Jamaican barber he goes to for advice, tells him straight:

You’re a self-seeking man. A real old-time selfish, ever-grasping individual. Take me and Ringo and the other West Indians in this country; you don’t even think of us as being important to your life. You only use us, you know, for your convenience. You come down here to my barber shop to get a break from your new life, your new sophistication, your new sophisticated worthless sort of existence. We don’t matter to you in no way at all. . . . You’re looking for a sort of mirror which will make you out to be somebody worth while.

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You want an identity like. You want to feel that you have a nation behind you, a nation that you can call your own, a national feeling is what you looking for. You would like to walk proud like how the German or the Frenchman or the Englishman can walk proud knowing that they have tradition and a long history behind them to give them a real identity. You feel lacking in all that because you’re a colonial boy with only slavery behind you. So you bound to be confused. You bound to want to escape. (199)

Larry later tells Johnnie to disregard these accusations because he was talking not about Johnnie but about himself (202), but the cap fits both of them.

Johnnie’s confusion and the perversity of his chosen way of life become apparent when his dilemma is recapitulated on the level of personal relationships. For most of the novel Johnnie is torn between continuing an affair with the predatory Fiona and opting instead for a sustaining and monogamous relationship with Dick, a fellow-lodger in his Hampstead rooming-house; and although the prefatory “blurb” to the novel claims that “It is stimulating to find a West Indian fiction hero wrestling with a problem like his own sexuality instead of being buried exclusively in the problems of his colour and his exile,” I find it impossible to read Johnnie’s confusion over his sexual identity as anything but an allegory of his wider cultural and political confusion.*

* In a sexual interlude with Fiona, Johnnie imagines how his acquaintance Ringo, an expatriate Barbadian intellectual, would deal with her: "He'd read colour, class, background, blood, master-servant relationship, Imperialism, little Englandism, the Empire, pink politics, blue politics, red politics, emerging black politics, anything and the kitchen sink into it" (127). The novel makes it clear that Ringo would be right.
Refreshingly, it’s not the possibility of a homosexual relationship with Dick that is perverse here, but the decision not to extricate himself from the clutches of Fiona, for whom he has no feelings but loathing and contempt, and whose feeling for him amounts to nothing more than pure sexual greed: “Splotchy spasm of a kiss. Nervous. Then a grasping splash of two more. All resounding kisses of a greedy claimant who knows her strength, and her victim’s... She grunts easily and begins to show her sizzling inside. Her inferno of greed and remorseless passion” (125-6). Salkey points up the correspondence between Fiona’s sexual predation and London’s economic predation in two consecutive paragraphs on p.160:

Tips. Tips. Tips. I could see nothing else. And that was as it should be: Christmas or no Christmas, tips should flow, I persuaded myself. A lovely greedy sensation ran wild over everything I touched; everything I did; everything I hoped for; everything I collided with. Tips for the rental of the flat; tips for spending money; tips for the hell of it. Yet I never thought of tips for the passage back home. Why? Had I decided to face things? Had I made the grade at last? Why? And the answer came: I’m happy enough if the tips are! Then I knew that the future was a myth. I was certain that greed was the message of the age; I knew this and I gloated over the fact in my own inimitable pompous way, smiling and feeling as secure as ever in my filth, in my self-embrace, in my autumn pavement.

Then I thought of Fiona’s greed. Another kingdom-come kind of tips greed. Similar greed. Must-get-it-at-all-cost kind of greed. Hurt everybody. Cheat everybody. Use everybody. Nobody’s a friend. Nobody’s in love. Love doesn’t matter. Just greed! Greed’s the total ambition. We escape from love to fling ourselves into the waiting arms of greed. There’s nothing else to escape to. If one’s truly greedy, one’s on the way to the top. If one wants to

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be mediocre, one must learn to avoid greed, avoid ambition, avoid selfishness, avoid
gluttony, avoid tips, avoid Fiona’s sexuality, avoid Sandra’s commercial earnestness, avoid
hustling, avoid hustlers, avoid . . . (ellipsis in original)

Johnnie is repelled by Fiona’s sexuality even as he continues to service it, just as he’s repelled by
the traffic in booze and human flesh in the bar where he continues faithfully to hustle. Like
Dick, Fiona believes that Johnnie is a “latent” homosexual, but she doesn’t care as long as he
goes on allowing himself to be used. Dick, on the other hand, offers Johnnie a love to which he
feels himself powerfully attracted, and it’s a love which, unlike Fiona’s, is unselfish. The one
demand Dick makes of Johnnie, however, is commitment, and that is what Johnnie is afraid of;
he perversely prefers a sexual liaison with Fiona just because his loathing for it and for her
allows him that distance and disengagement that he falsely thinks of as freedom. In the same
way he perversely prefers hustling in London to committing himself to the idea and the reality of
Jamaica, but Larry warns him that this is a dead end: “Your duty is to feel sorry for your own
people, not to try to compromise. . . . You look like you sell out to the other side. You look like
you settle down to a real old-time Sunday dinner of compromise and blind-eye philosophy. It
won’t work, I can tell you right now” (176).

England — insofar as London represents it — emerges from Escape to an Autumn Pavement as a
major battleground of the internecine war of all-against-all, and although Selvon’s tone is
deceptively lighter and more humorous than Salkey’s, the two novelists appear to concur in this
vision. It is important to note that the first of these novels was published in 1956, during the
period that the English themselves will later come to identify as the years of Consensus, the
years before the English social fabric is perceived as beginning to decay. In 1955 Geoffrey
Gorer’s *Exploring English Character* had asserted that the English were “among the most peaceful, gentle, courteous and orderly populations that the civilized world has ever seen,” but Selvon was at the same time claiming that these apparent qualities (“the old diplomacy”) were little more than window-dressing and that the rich sociality they were supposed to represent had already decayed. His work similarly undermines the thesis that informs many contemporary English novels, of which John Mortimer’s *Paradise Postponed* is typical — the thesis that an organic society persisted into the 1970s and was broken up only when a new ethos of selfishness, ambition, and ruthlessness becomes hegemonic across class lines with the rise of a new generation (lower-middle-class Leslie Titmuss but also middle-class Christopher Kempenflatt and upper-class Magnus Strove).

When had this organic society begun to decay? *The Lonely Londoners* provides no answer to this question; it represents English society in London as Selvon presumably found it, and the nearest it comes to suggesting when and how a richer sociality might have disappeared is in its evocation of the lonely old widows “pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can’t realise what happen to the old Brit’n” (75). But if we look back to J. B. Priestley’s *English Journey*, we can see many indications that England in the 1930s was by no means the harmonious whole that it is often supposed to have been.

“*Weary Negroid Ditties:* Priestley’s *English Journey Revisited*

Priestley’s journey, in fact, was undertaken precisely because England had become two nations; his quest for the “truth” about life on the dole was an attempt to give the lie to affluent southerners, to “a few million people in London... still enjoying fanciful mental pictures of

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miners’ wives dropping empty champagne bottles into the works of their beautiful pianos” (261).

That is why he thought it necessary repeatedly to insist that there were not two Englands — north and south, rich and poor — but one: “Since when did Lancashire cease to be a part of England? . . . we have marched so far, not unassisted in the past by Lancashire’s money and muck, and we have a long long way to go yet, perhaps carrying Lancashire on our backs for a spell; and the hour for complacency, if it ever arrives at all, will strike long after most of us are dead” (217).

To persist in believing that England really was more of a community, a gemeinschaft, in the 1930s than it was in the 1950s or the 1980s, is to ignore all the evidence in Priestley’s rhetoric that pointed the other way: with heavy irony, he pretended incredulity at the idea that the benighted denizens of Shotten, “smothered with ashes and fumes, are as good as anybody else, and have votes. Votes! You would think that they were not supposed to have even noses and lungs. You would imagine that they were held to be members of a special race, born tip-dwellers” (260). In the same vein he imagined that “a stranger from a distant civilization, observing the condition of the place and its people, would have arrived at once at the conclusion that Jarrow had deeply offended some celestial emperor of the island and was now being punished. He would never believe us if we told him that in theory this town was as good as any other and that its inhabitants were not criminals but citizens with votes” (238). A real community would never have permitted any of its members to live as Priestley saw them living: “Was Jarrow still in England or not? Had we exiled Lancashire and the North-east coast? Were we no longer on speaking terms with cotton weavers and miners and platers and riveters? Why had nothing been done about these decaying towns and their workless people?” (307). That
Priestley should have had to make these strenuous rhetorical appeals is an indication of one of the key problems he is grappling with — the disintegration of his unitary England-of-the-mind into _de facto_ apartheid whereby the poor are hidden from the view (and therefore the consciousness) of the affluent. Far from suggesting that the economic problems of the country are minor and of limited impact, the absence of widespread public outrage and concern pointed to the fundamental wrong, which was the decay of the true sense of the social, the failure of the general acknowledgment of kinship and mutual responsibility essential to Priestley’s conception of nation.

Yet paradoxically, any impression we may have that England was, at bottom, an organic whole in the 1930s is partly due to the efforts of Priestley himself and others like him: he _created_ England as a community again and again in the texture of his prose. His book is peppered by little phrases like “the rest of us” or “those of us who . . . ,” which quietly but continually insist on a nation at bottom united enough to warrant the use of the first person plural, which is omnipresent in the book. This is reinforced by a use of the second person plural that is particularly skillful, as it modulates insidiously from an apparently neutral equivalent of “one” (e.g. “You do not see abandoned shops . . .” [212]) to a direct challenge to the reader (e.g. “Such men as these . . . stand on their own feet, do their jobs with a will, stoutly resist stupid opposition but give way to affection, and, like him, are grand lumps of character. What — in the name of everything but supermen — could you want?” [151]). Priestley’s confident assumption of the first person plural and his equally confident presumption that he could address his reader as confidant and familiar were founded on a faith that “we” were fundamentally alike in the values “we” subscribed to, and that we would all unite in working to remedy the evils Priestley was bringing to “our” attention. This faith, this fundamental belief in England as a community.

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unified by a common culture embodying common decency, allowed Priestley, an atheist, to mount the pulpit and assume the authority of Scripture, as in his invocation of Joel 2:25 ("And who shall restore to them the years that the locust hath eaten?") to express his indignation at the peacetime treatment of the soldiers returned from the Great War. He did not feel it necessary to identify the text to which he alluded: the language, the tone and the sentiment, he assumed, would be familiar and acceptable to his readers.

One way in which Priestley created England in *English Journey* was to create himself as a character embodying appropriately John-Bull-like traits — an honest, reasonable, no-nonsense, bluff, middlebrow, good companion who shunned the extremes of philistine narrowness and pre-Raphaelite fastidiousness: "I like life and art to be neither Birmingham nor Burne-Jones, but to travel on the honest roads that march between the deacons in counting-houses, on the one side, and the drooping maidens in hot-houses on the other" (67). Then he used all the grappling-hooks of his art to persuade his readers to identify themselves with honest Jack Priestley, to

* "... the essence of [the Christian account of this life], the self-sacrifice of a god for men, seems to me too good to be true, and the rest of it, the theological jugglery lit by hell-fire, not worth having ... " (140-1).

** He may also have assumed that some, at least, of his readers, would recall the context:

And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.

And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied. . . . (Joel 2:24-26, KJV).
remake themselves morally and sentimentally in his image and to respond as he had responded to the sights and sounds he described. This appeal is everywhere implicit in his prose; he constantly elbowed his readers in the ribs, as it were, with rhetorical questions, and on one occasion broadly hinted that “people of independent and private means” should respond to the Depression as promptly and eagerly as to a Declaration of War, becoming volunteers in the forces “of decency and knowledge and justice and civilization” fighting against “poverty, idleness, ignorance, hopelessness and misery” (246).

England as a harmonious, organic whole was not what Priestley saw in his Journey; it was something that he tried to create by first personifying it in the character of bluff, commonsense Jack Priestley — “a new William Cobbett [expressing] the attitude of the sturdy, average Englishman” — and then, through his art and his rhetoric, persuading his readers to identify with that personification. In World War II, when national unity was imperative, Priestley’s personification and the ideological work it did were found useful enough by the government for him to broadcast regularly over BBC Radio.

Priestley’s attempt to include his readers in a single England comes with a certain cost, however — one worth considering for the light it throws on the predicament of Selvon and his spades. For insofar as national personification is one of Priestley’s chief artistic and ideological devices, it specializes “Englishness” to a particular constellation of qualities and excludes those whom

* This characterisation of Priestley is from Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939 (1940; rpt. New York; Norton, 1963), 352; they coin it, however, to describe his rhetorical stance in criticising Surrealism.

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Priestley cannot imaginatively identify with it. The effect of English xenophobia and racism is precisely to deny Selvon's spades this identification: when Moses Aloetta declares that "no Englishman with black blood in his veins can stand aside and see innocent victims hang" (*Moses Ascending* 96) the effect is almost certainly comic — *but it ought not to be*. As a native of Trinidad, which had been part of the British Empire since the end of the eighteenth century, and by birth the holder of a British passport, Moses has every right to speak "as an Englishman" asserting the rights and liberties that he holds in common with every other British subject, and a reader who finds his declaration "funny" in either sense of the word should pause for reflection.

* The rights of someone like Moses changed drastically between *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*. When Moses arrived in England, his passport guaranteed him automatic right of entry under the British Nationality Acts of 1914 and 1948. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968 took away that right from any Commonwealth citizen without a parent or grandparent born in the UK. The Immigration Act of 1971 consolidated this change, replacing the old distinction between Commonwealth citizens (who had right of entry and settlement) and aliens (who didn't) with a new division between "patrials" (those born, adopted, naturalised or registered in the UK, and those who had a UK citizen as parent or grandparent), and "non-patrials" (none of the above). Non-patrials do not have a right to enter and settle but may apply for permission to do so. Since *Moses Ascending* was written, procedures have been tightened even further: the 1981 Nationality Act removed the right of those born in Britain to automatic British nationality; the Immigration Act of 1988 "streamlined" the formerly lengthy process required to deport an immigrant for breach of conditions of stay, and denied the right of appeal.
Priestley himself was speaking for an "England" much more homogeneous than it is today, and he was loud in his condemnation of those who opposed immigration:

These exchanges are good for everybody. Just lately, when we offered hospitality to some distinguished German-Jews who had been exiled by the Nazis, the leader-writers in the cheap Press began yelping again about Keeping the Foreigner Out. Apart from the miserable meanness of the attitude itself — for the great England, the England admired throughout the world, is the England that keeps open house, the refuge of Mazzini, Marx, Lenin — history shows us that the countries that have opened their doors have gained, just as the countries that have driven out large numbers of their citizens, for racial, religious, or political reasons, have always paid dearly for their intolerance. (125)

Yet while Priestley welcomed "distinguished German-Jews" and admired the "curious leaven of intelligent aliens, chiefly German-Jews and mostly affluent" who raised the tone of his native Bradford with their Schillerverein (124), he deplored the effect upon native English culture of "gramophones... scratching out those tunes concocted by Polish Jews fifteen storeys above Broadway" (21). A proud "Little Englander" — "I wish I had been born early enough to have been called a Little Englander. It was a term of sneering abuse, but I should be delighted to accept it as a description of myself" (310) — he deplored the effect of American popular culture on the patterns of English working-class life, and was nostalgic for a generation that had "rapturously enjoyed" a seaside holiday in Blackpool through the courts against a deportation order in the case of those with less than seven years' stay. See Jonathon Green, Them, 7, 408-9

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... and had never once insulted its breezy majesty by singing about their 'blues'. In those days you did not sing the woes of distant negroes, probably reduced to such misery by too much gin or cocaine. You sang about dear old Charlie Brown and his pals, and the girls, those with the curly curls. These songs were nonsense too, but they were our own silly innocent nonsense and not another country's jaded weary nonsense; they had a fresh lilting quality, and expressed high spirits not low spirits. The Blackpool that sang about Charlie Brown and the girls with their curly curls was the Mecca of a vulgar but alert and virile democracy. I am not so sure about the new Blackpool of the weary negroid ditties. It would not be difficult, I feel, to impose an autocracy upon young people who sound as tired as that.

(203).

The casual crack about the "blues" being an art form engendered by "too much gin or cocaine" is not only nasty but gratuitous; Priestley's feelings about negroes seem basically to have been his feelings about Polish Jews on Broadway — they were at the root of an American influence that was corrupting native English culture. In a similar vein, while he was quite prepared to accept into his England German Jews who, with their Schillerverein, represented high European culture, he found the foreignness of the middle-east Jews of the Old Testament an inappropriate element in English Nonconformist religion:

... how odd it was that these mild Midland folk, spectacled ironmongers, little dressmakers, clerks, young women from stationers' shops, should come every Sunday morning through the quiet grey streets and assemble here to wallow in wild oriental imagery.... They sat with bent heads listening to accounts of ancient and terribly savage tribal warfare, of the lust and pride of hook-nosed and raven-bearded chieftains, of sacrifice and butchery on the glaring
deserts of the Near East. They chanted in unison their hope of an immortality to be spent in
cities built of blazing jewels, with fountains of milk and cascades of honey, where kings
played harps while maidens clashed the cymbals; and one could not help wondering what
these people would do if they really did find themselves billeted for ever in this world of the
Eastern religious poets. What, in short, had these sober Northern islanders to do with all this
Oriental stuff? What did it, what could it, really mean to them? Could anything be less aptly
shaped and coloured to match their own lives?99

Priestley objected to “this far-away fantastic world of goats and vines and deserts and smoking
sacrifices and tribal kings” (1934 edition: 109) because it was so faraway, so un-English, like the
weariness of “negroes” so “distant” that their blues could only be understood by an Englishman
as the result of intoxication. But in one instance he objected also to an influence that comes
from much nearer home, from another group of “Northern islanders:”

A great many speeches have been made and books written on the subject of what England
has done to Ireland. I should be interested to hear a speech and read a book or two on the
subject of what Ireland has done to England. If we do have an Irish Republic as our
neighbour, and it is found possible to return her exiled citizens, what a grand clearance there
will be in all the Western ports, from the Clyde to Cardiff, what a fine exit of ignorance and
dirt and drunkenness and disease. The Irishman in Ireland may, as we are so often assured
he is, be the best fellow in the world, only waiting to say good-bye to the hateful Empire so
that, free and independent at last, he can astonish the world. But the Irishman in England too
often cuts a very miserable figure. . . . The English of this class [navvies and dock hands and
casual labourers] generally make some attempt to live as decently as they can under these
conditions.... From such glimpses as I have had, however, the Irish appear in general never even to have tried; they have settled in the nearest poor quarter and turned it into a slum, or, finding a slum, have promptly settled down to out-slum it. And this, in spite of the fact that nowadays being an Irish Roman Catholic is more likely to find a man a job than to keep him out of one.... I imagine Liverpool would be very glad to be rid of them now.

After the briefest exploration of its Irish slums, I began to think that Hercules himself will have to be brought back and appointed Minister of Health before they will be properly cleaned up, though a seductive call or two from de Valera, across the Irish Sea, might help. But he will never whistle back these bedraggled wild geese. He believes in *Sinn Fein* for Ireland not England. (1934 edition: 248-9)

It is hardly necessary to comment in detail on this passage, with its thinly-veiled call for what we have come to term “ethnic cleansing,” except to say that practically all items on the bill of particulars — ignorance, dirt, drunkenness, disease — would be familiar to Selvon, for they have all since been levelled against the spades. It is important to note, however, that Priestley’s apparently uncharacteristic lapses in the generosity of spirit elsewhere typical of his book are not accidental but structural — these exclusions are entailed by his attempt to construct Englishness and English virtues. Central elements of this construction are an “alert and virile” democratic spirit and a robust national determination that — once roused to action — will redress the inequities that the Depression has wrought and triumphantly haul a united nation out of the Slump. This in turn entails the repudiation as alien, as un-English, of anything potentially inimical to that spirit and determination — whether it be the apparent defeatism of the Irish who “appear never even to have tried” to better their lot, or the similar defeatism Priestley detected in
the “jaded weary nonsense” of “weary negroid ditties,” or the discord of the Old Testament’s “savage tribal warfare” on the one hand and the lassitude of its vision of heaven as an orgy of “Oriental” hedonism on the other.

It is this construction of Englishness (which has a currency far beyond Priestley and his book) that turns Selvon and his characters, stereotyped as lotos-eaters from faraway islands in the sun, into unassimilable outsiders, unable to speak as “Englishers” despite their technical and moral right to do so. Selvon’s exclusion, however, is part of the strength of The Lonely Londoners and its sequels. Prevented from membership in the group that subscribes to this self-congratulatory story of Englishness, Selvon is thereby positioned to live and to write a very different story. He also had to develop a different form for The Lonely Londoners because, as discussed above, the traditionally plotted bourgeois novel in which a protagonist earns a particular fate through moral choice is inappropriate for the immigrant experience he wishes to represent. It’s not that Selvon’s characters, unlike the protagonists of the bourgeois novel, don’t make moral choices; they do, as when Galahad resolves to find a job as soon as he arrives in London because “I don’t want to start antsing on the state unless I have to” (41). But their choices are not permitted to determine the quality of their lives, for the limits they immediately come up against are not the limitations of their human potential but of their circumstances. The ideological limitations of English society construct a social practice which denies significant structure to the lives of the spades in The Lonely Londoners, and the absence of traditional plot in the novel represents that denial. But the apparently unrelated episodes and characters are only “unrelated” in the sense that they do not achieve a coherent meaning in the rich interiority of a traditional protagonist; their real relatedness is constituted in the mind of the reader, for together they articulate a coherent and trenchant representation of an England that is very different from the one Priestley

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wanted to write into existence, even if it is uncomfortably congruent with the England that Priestley’s writing, at disturbing moments, implies.

_The Housing Lark_ also eschews a strong plot: the most prominent character, Bat, doesn’t change at all, and although something does happen in the novel — the housing club appears to be about to reach its goal at the end — this is the achievement of a group, and it is not presented as the outward and visible sign of any individual character’s moral development. _Moses Ascending_ seems, at first glance, to be more like a conventional novel, but appearances are deceptive, and it is perhaps the most radical of the three novels. It is superficially more like the traditional novel only because Selvon is inverting and parodying it, just as the relationship of Moses and Bob inverts and parodies the relationship of Robinson Crusoe and Friday. The action of the novel, far from representing Moses’ moral “development,” articulates his failure to turn himself into a self-seeking capitalist; his moral triumph is that he is fundamentally unable to change, despite his resolve to do so. Here Selvon is not dispensing with the traditional novel form on the grounds that it is an inaccurate reflection of his characters’ experience, but actively critiquing that form because of the ideological baggage it carries. The ultimate targets of his critique are the very concepts of “progress,” “self-improvement” and individual autonomy that inform not only the traditional single-protagonist novel but a society for which this novel form has become the hegemonic story. And the critique is carried down into details far below the level of plot, for the texture of Selvon’s language enacts a Bakhtinian dialogism between eighteenth-century expressions and modern colloquialisms. Selvon uses the vitality of Moses’ colorful idioms to undermine the high-minded pretensions of the mandarin dialect that he tries to affect; that
dialect, it is worth reminding ourselves, was the clothing in which the traditional English novel was dressed when it was born.

Samuel Selvon received a great deal of praise for *The Lonely Londoners*, but some critics subsequently expressed their sense that the loose episodic structure that Selvon espoused was a sign of a limitation of Selvon's talent, an indication that his gift is for the short story rather than the longer form. Francis Wyndham, writing in *The Spectator* of February 28 1958, declared that "His talent is not ideally suited to the novel" and that his "new collection of stories, *Ways of Sunlight*, shows him, I think, at his best" (reprinted in Nasta 122). V.S. Naipaul, reviewing *Turn Again Tiger* in *The New Statesman* of December 6 1958, said the new novel was "nearer in structure to *The Lonely Londoners*, although a good deal less chaotic. Mr. Selvon is without the stamina for the full-length novel, and he has here found the undemanding form which suits his talent best; the flimsiest of frames which can, without apparent disorder, contain unrelated episodes and characters" (Nasta 123). On my reading it is both ungracious and myopic to account for *The Lonely Londoners* in these terms; the danger of inventing a new form or of significantly stretching an old one is the danger of being misunderstood, of being perceived as failing to achieve the very form one had to jettison or adapt, and this is precisely what happened to Selvon.

*Michael Harper*