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An Island of one's own

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The images created around the island have always been multifaceted, even contradictory at times. Both sensual and mythical, the island has often been shown and analysed as the archetypal symbol of primitive happiness and refuge, embodying the dream of the lost garden of Eden. But it has also emerged as the quintessence of the enclosed space, bearing strong connotations of isolation, by definition, uprootedness and alienation. Caribbean literature is probably one in which the awareness of this dual aspect of the island is most acute. Besides, it may not be pure chance if so many of the narrators and protagonists featured in Caribbean fiction, who are so concerned with the quest for identity, are children or young adolescents. Thus the image of the island is of the utmost importance as an essential element in this quest and it will be looked into as such. What exactly are the connections and how do they establish themselves? Why do an incredible number of novels and short stories lead to the young hero leaving his or her native island, thus putting an end to childhood itself? Could it be that the island and childhood bear some resemblance?

I have selected a few works by Caribbean authors in which children on their native island take a prominent place, hoping that it will enable me to unravel some of the threads that unite the developing child and the island on which he lives: *Annie John*[2] by Jamaica Kincaid, *The Humming-Bird Tree*[3] by Ian McDonald, *The Lights on the Hill*[4] by Garth St Omer, *Christopher*[5] by Geoffrey Drayton. This is for example what Jamaica Kincaid writes:

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> I dreamed that the boat on which [the Red Girl] had been travelling suddenly splintered in the middle of the sea, causing all the passengers to drown except for her, whom I rescued in a small boat. I took her to an island, where we lived together for ever, I suppose, and fed on wild pigs and sea grapes. At night, we would sit on the sand and watch ships filled with people on a cruise steam by. We sent confusing signals to the ships, causing them to crash on some nearby rocks. How we laughed as their cries of joy turned to cries of sorrow. (*AJ*, 70-71)

This is almost too beautiful to be true, as it corresponds so well to the dream of autarchy and perpetual happiness that is often conveyed in the texts using the image of the island. Annie saw the Red Girl behind her mother's back because she knew her friend did not correspond to the model of the proper little girl. Annie went to great lengths in order to find a probable excuse whenever she wanted to meet up with the Red Girl, until one day it was not safe any more to skip away. The two girls stopped seeing each other; the Red Girl was sent off to Anguilla and Annie dreamt that dream as a compensation. It is no longer possible to escape from her mother's and other people's gaze and take refuge with the Red Girl at the top of the lighthouse, at the precise spot where it is forbidden to go, at the precise spot where she could enjoy the sensation of being on an island:

> ...only staring out at sea, watching the boats coming and going, watching the children our own age coming home from games, watching the sheep being driven home from pasture. (*AJ*, 62-63)

In her dream she turns herself and her friend into little Crusoes (the rescue on the small boat, the island, feeding on wild pigs and sea grapes), with the notable difference that these Crusoes reinforce their isolation and even go as far as suppressing any possibility of seeing it come to an end. Thus the delight of being marooned runs parallel to the sheer cruelty of depriving others of life. Joy is coupled with sorrow, as will often be the case on the islands depicted in Caribbean fiction.

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[2] . Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1985).

[3] . Ian McDonald, *The Humming-Bird Tree* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

[4] . Garth St Omer, *The Lights on the Hill* (Faber & Faber, 1968; rpt. Heinemann, 1986).

[5] . Geoffrey Drayton, *Christopher* (William Collins, 1959; rpt. Heinemann, 1972).

The first part of the novel is devoted to the description of Annie's early childhood, embedded in the Caribbean landscape, making use of the sea and the sun, and eating the fruit and seafood offered by the island of Antigua. This golden age of harmony with nature, reinforced by the fact of living on an island, occurs in several other stories. In *Christopher* and *The Humming-Bird Tree*, the child-narrators also fully belong in their environment. In the latter, the existence of the island and that of the narrator on the island seem to be taken for granted (and maybe this should be put in perspective with the fact that Alan is one of the narrators who does not leave his native island at the end of the novel). In this respect, it is quite significant that the island should be mentioned first only in relation to Alan's father who supervises "estates belonging to one of the largest companies in the island." (*HBT*, 45) It is almost as if there were two islands in one: the father's island, appearing in the economic, socio-political light, with the reference to the "island-wide riots;" (*HBT*, 46) and the children's island, where Alan (the white master's son), Kaiser (the yard boy) and his sister Jaillin, inhabit a much more intimate and sensuous island.

The description of the children's island gives us a glimpse of what Barbados can be in its exuberance and lushness. The *prologue* and the first page of Ian McDonald's novel immediately set the characters into the heart of his garden of Eden, where the child has his own freedom on the same footing as the fruit or the bird, and where all his senses are awakened. The union with nature on the island will best be conveyed when rain starts falling and all frontiers become blurred — between black and white on the one hand, and further between human beings, vegetable and minerals; it is only by being at one with the natural elements and by coming closer to Kaiser's way of life that Alan will have the long desired impression of being in communion with himself and the world he lives in:

> ... The smell of rain new on the baked ground, in it the fragrance of fresh nutbread, of salmon pools, of green-fern roots dug out of the ground, seemed to make us drunk. We leaped like monkeys around a hoard of bananas.
>
> 'We is fish!' Kaiser shouted. ...
>
> I repeated what he said, delirious with the joy of rain. We shouted and laughed and danced about. It was a wild glory of boys. We were near to each other in the joy. (*HBT*, 6)

The protagonists and narrators seem to say that living on an island as a child is to be allowed those precious moments of total absence of inhibition. Christopher experiences such a moment of freedom in the sea, just a little way off the shore, just a little out of reach of his parents and nurse. He has been playing on the beach and deliberately filling his swimming costume with sand:

> Then, of course, he had no alternative but to go into the sea so as to rid himself of the gritty feeling between his legs. Nobody was there to see, so he pulled his trunks off and washed out the last particles. He had never before been in the sea without trunks, and the smoothness of the water against his belly proved a most agreeable sensation. According to Gip, it was wicked to be naked — probably even under water. (*C*, 178)

Just after this passage, Christopher plays at being Crusoe, or rather "Captain Christopher Stevens" (*C*, 179), shipwrecked on a desert island and setting out to get some food and fresh water. The island of his own body, the real island and the imaginary one all merge together.

Christopher's sensations already prefigure those of the narrator of *The Lights on the Hill* ; a young man going from one island to another, in search of some kind of self-reliance and identity:

> ... the waves came in uninhibitedly from the ocean. Berthed by them, up and down as he floated on his back, he felt in complete harmony with their free, uncontrolled nature. He had a sensation of well-being, unqualified, as though he were immortal or a God. ... And it was as if this confidence in the feel and power of his body had replaced the other confidence left shattered behind him. (*LH*, 34)

This pre-lapsarian world of the island seems to be made of that closeness with nature, with one's own body and, in Annie's case, with her mother, untroubled, as if forming another island within the island, that makes childhood so unique and rich, so secure and ephemeral at the same time: a privileged period also when the little girl can form with her mother an unbroken, unquestioned dyad, lost in mutual contemplation and sensuous proximity:

> ... I sometimes sat at her side, leaning against her, or I would crouch on my knees behind her back and lean over her shoulder. As I did this, I would occasionally sniff at her neck, or behind her ears, or at her hair. She smelled sometimes of lemons, sometimes of sage, sometimes of roses, sometimes of bay leaf. (*AJ*, 22)

On the opening school day, Annie's new teacher asks the class to write an "autobiographical essay." This is an interesting passage, particularly as it is written by Annie at the precise moment when she feels she is losing, or has already lost, this wonderful paradise she was living in, simply by growing up. As it is two or three pages long, I can only quote a few lines. It starts with: "When I was a small child, my mother and I used to go down to Rat Island on Sundays right after church..." (*AJ*, 41-42) The description that follows is of mother and daughter, the latter not knowing how to swim and being afraid of going into the water, but deriving extreme pleasure from clasping her hands tightly around her mother's neck and letting herself be taken away from the shore on her mother's back:

> I would place my ear against her neck, and it was as if I were listening to a giant shell, for all the sounds around me — the sea, the wind, the birds screeching — would seem as if they came from inside her, the way the sounds of the sea are in a seashell. (*AJ*, 43)

Just as she feels that being at one with her mother is no longer possible, Annie writes this autobiographical piece, as if to reconstitute this treasured island, as if to delay its inevitable loss. Once, she loses sight of her mother and only after a while, quite distressed, she can spot her on a large rock a little way out:

> A huge black space then opened up in front of me and I fell inside it. I couldn't see what was in front of me and I couldn't hear anything around me. I couldn't think of anything except that my mother was no longer near me. ... Still she didn't see me, and then I started to cry, for it dawned on me that, with all that water between us and I being unable to swim, my mother could stay there forever... (*AJ*, 43-44)

Then she writes that she kept having a dream about her mother sitting on the rock, that is to say being her own island and leaving her to be another one. This is where the image of the island becomes a little warped: instead of the garden of Eden and the corresponding golden age, it has become a place of separation and isolation. *Annie John* is interesting in that respect in so far as both aspects merge together. Later on, when she is really ill, among the many dreams and nightmares she has, there is one in which it is she who becomes the island itself, in a very striking image expressing her alienation and helplessness, as she feels she is becoming another person unable to control the process:

> When I got [to the beach], I started to drink in the sea in huge great gulps, because I was so thirsty. I drank and drank until all that was left was the bare dry seabed. All the water from the sea filled me up, from my toes to my head, and I swelled up very big. But then little cracks began to appear in me and the water started to leak out...
> (*AJ*, 112)

Thus the sense of being on an island can very quickly turn from dream into nightmare. Those feelings can be linked in the first stage with the fear of being submerged or swallowed by the surrounding sea:

> The last time there had been a hurricane, Gip told him, the sea had washed right into Fairmont churchyard. The church had collapsed and all the records that were kept there had been destroyed — so that afterwards nobody knew who was married or who his parents were. (*AJ*, 81)

Beyond this childlike expression, this passage does convey a genuine fear of annihilation, of chaos disrupting the familiar order. It is individual and communal memory that is in danger of being erased for ever. However we should note this is a fear the child likes to play with: "It had all been very horrid but, he was sure, very exciting."

The Lights on the Hill offers another type of alienation and uprootedness, and will put us on a different track. Three islands form the backdrop of this short novel, all remain unnamed though the first one can be likened to St. Lucia and the last one to Jamaica, if we follow autobiographical elements. After having spent his childhood, his teenage years and his early adulthood on his native island, Stephenson has to leave (he could not find any work there because of a crime he had committed, and the reader has to wait until the end of the novel to know he was involved in smuggling and bribery and was sent to jail for it). He finds a teaching job on another island in the Eastern Caribbean but soon decides he wants to resume his studies and goes to University College. The whole novel is in fact devoted to the changes in Stephenson's consciousness, which result in narrative shifts between past and present, although the point of view is most often that of the narrator's memory. More than mere flash-backs, this process shows an actual interrelation of both. Each present moment offers him an opportunity to think back:

> He was in the present but it was a present that included the remembered and imagined times of past and future. ... There was no break in the line; no break between the past he remembered and the present and future he was in now. (*LH*, 64)

The examination of his consciousness leads him to turn back:

> In this way he was retracing, like a traveller going back along the line of imprints of his feet in sand, the events he had lived. It seemed, as he related them, that no single part of the recital was complete without what preceded or followed it. (*LH*, 92)

The recurring question is that of how he has become what he is, of the responsibility of his own destiny. The problem is that this continual self-observation jeopardises communication with others, on the one hand, and a certain capacity for action in his own life, on the other hand:

> It was just another game. Some people played games, others watched them. He was of those who watched and, he reflected, he had not chosen to be.
>
> He was a spectator, had become, been made one. (*LH*, 115-16)

In that perspective, Stephenson's permanent flight from one island to the other is quite significant: he can neither stay nor leave. In his case the oppressive enclosed space of the island is the representation of his own consciousness which has become his prison. The relation he maintains with his islands is in fact a reflection of the relation he cannot help having with himself. Geographical distance seems to suit him. It looks as though this enclosed space framed in infinity were going to set the boundaries the protagonist is looking for in his quest for identity.

If the island can first be analysed as emblematic of the protected world of childhood (*The Humming-Bird Tree*, *Annie John*, *Christopher* among many others), or even symbolic of the smooth safety of the mother's womb, one cannot help wondering at the resemblance the child himself bears with the island. The child is like an island in himself, separate from the continent, separate from others, adults or children. Standing at the edge of an immensity, this has become one of his only refuges. But the island holds a constant mirror to remind him of his difference. Thus it is understandable that the child (as he takes shape in Caribbean fiction) should seek other frontiers to his world, either by trying to leave his native island, or by trying to expand his own self within the same limits. These are two different ways to try and grasp one's identity.

The first time Annie refers to living on an island, she does so through evoking her mother's youth:

> When my mother, at sixteen, after quarrelling with her father, left his house on Dominica and came to Antigua, she packed all her things in an enormous wooden trunk that she had bought in Roseau for almost six shillings. ... Two days after she left her father's house, she boarded a boat and sailed for Antigua. ... a hurricane blew up and the boat was lost at sea for almost five days. By the time she got to Antigua, the boat was practically in splinters, and though two or three of the passengers were lost overboard ... my mother and her trunk were safe. (*AJ*, 19-20)

Besides the striking similarities between this early passage and Annie's ensuing dream about the Red Girl, there are other things worthy of interest here. The departure from the island occurs for Annie's mother at the end of childhood, or rather this departure has a role to play in this ending. The young girl, who is already a young woman, has to leave her father's island in order to start a life on her own island. Annie will leave Antigua at about the same age her mother left

Dominica, though not exactly in the same circumstances. If she needs first to evoke the event under her mother's shape, the same will be true of her and of other child-narrators in Caribbean novels, like a leitmotiv reinforcing a necessity. Besides, the trunk is the object symbolising both the severance from the past and from childhood and the continuity with the future. It will eventually be used to store all the objects that belonged to Annie in her infancy. When the days of harmony between mother and daughter are far and gone and Annie grows into a teenager, she will ask her father to make such a trunk for her, so that she can have her own and not only her mother's. In order to grow into a young woman and constitute her own *island* (her own *I-land*, or her own *is-land* as Janet Frame would say[6]), Annie will have to leave her cocoon too. It is the same quest that pushed Stephenson from one island to another.

Christopher is also a child who experiences growing-up as a separation, almost a tearing apart, though he finds a way not to leave his island — or should I say *his islands*. He had always been a solitary child, feeling much more at ease with animals and plants than human beings: "They played together under the trees, the solemn child and the lizards" (*C*, 11). He is the child of a garden, who takes refuge in the orchard or in the orchid house. He transforms his favourite spots into secret islands of his own, where he can play away from public eyes. The prospect of going to the seaside makes him overcome his usual reserve. Gip, the black nurse, notices the change in Christopher:

> He barely restrained himself from jumping up and down. ... This was the nearest she ever saw to excitement on Christopher's face. Little boys, she thought, should be excited most of the time, not solemn and using long words like a grown-up. (*C*, 35)

It seems that going to the edge of the island where he lives brings him out of his seclusion, closer to his own childhood and closer to himself.

Gradually Christopher learns to grow up and to build up his own self — each chapter of the novel bears as a title the name of the person he has to separate himself from: the father, the mother and Gip. As a child, Christopher locks himself up in his own secret gardens and private islands. As he becomes a teenager, he finds ways to accomplish himself without losing either secrecy or privacy. By developing his artistic talents in drawing and painting, he will recompose his own island of self, breaking away from the old moorings of childhood and crossing new bridges, with art as a messenger.

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[6] . See *To the Is-land*, the title of a volume of Janet Frame's autobiography (London: Paladin, 1987).

In order to lay more emphasis on the exploration of these islands of the self that the child-narrator builds for himself, I would like to refer to another novel: *A High Wind in Jamaica*[7] by Richard Hughes — a classic among childhood novels, even if it was not written by a contemporary Caribbean author but only set in the Caribbean islands.

Basically, this is the story of a Creole family in Jamaica, the Bas-Thorntons, "not natives of the island," (*HWJ*, 6) with five children who live in a paradise of an island until their parents, frightened by a hurricane, decide to send them to England. An act of piracy alters the course of events and exposes certain features of human nature. The book is a gem of a novel in all respects and would be worth an extensive analysis, if only for the sheer pleasure of reading it once again. I would like to concentrate only on two aspects: the wandering from island to island and the character of Emily and how she matures.

Having spent almost all of their childhood on a tropical island that would look like Paradise to anybody else, the children nourish exotic fantasies and wild dreams about another island, England: "Needless to say it was a very Atlantis, a land at the back of the North Wind." (*HWJ*, 35) So when they embark on *The Clorinda* they quickly forget home and their parents and transform the ship into their play area and new cocoon. Little by little, the theatrical metaphor sets in: first with "a Free Fun Fair and Circus," (*HWJ*, 53) the pirates' device to climb on board *The Clorinda*. Then with the show of the auction for the goods taken. The children spend their time having fun on their mobile wooden island — isn't it like *a wooden O*? —, and when they are taken on board the pirate ship, they hardly notice it, such is their feast.

It is being on an island, a moveable island at that, both a stage and a microcosm, that will make Emily change and mature.

> The weeks passed in aimless wandering. For the children, the lapse of time acquired once more the texture of a dream: things ceased happening: every inch of the schooner was now as familiar to them as the *Clorinda* had been, or Ferndale: they settled down quietly to grow... (*HWJ*, 94)

Emily, ten years old at the time, "suddenly realised who she was. ... it suddenly flashed into her mind that she was *she*." Then comes the passage of Emily's self-discovery:

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[7] . Richard Hughes, *A High Wind in Jamaica*, (Chatto & Windus, 1929; rpt. Penguin Books, 1949).

> Once settled on her perch, she began examining the skin of her hands with the utmost care: for it was *hers*. She slipped a shoulder out of the top of her frock; and having peeped in to make sure she really was continuous under her clothes, she shrugged it up to touch her cheek. The contact of her face and the warm bare hollow of her shoulder gave her a comfortable thrill, as if it was the caress of some kind friend. (*HWJ*, 95)

This emergence of the consciousness of herself occurs at that precise moment. It has been prepared by the wandering from island to island and by the playing on the wooden stage of the ship, lost in the middle of the blue sea, in direction of another island that will not correspond to the dreams she has about it.

I referred to *A High Wind in Jamaica* because Emily's trip towards herself can also be found in the other characters mentioned so far. The island is in fact the time and the space of a growing inner maturity. It allows the consciousness of oneself to emerge and confront the outside world. Such is the case for Christopher, Alan, Annie and Stephenson: living on a secluded island and leaving that native island to go even further away brings the child closer to his own self. A necessary departure to feel at home, if possible, with oneself.

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