

Vic Reid's treatment of race and politics

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by W. I. Carr

bar' and 'eyes making four': one has a little too much of it, so that the cumulative effect is of a language as deliberate, as artificial, as literary, as Paradise Lost.

Real and moving

This springs, I think, partly from Vic Reid's relation, his private relation, to his theme. For me the Campbell family (till the massacre of the parents) were real and moving.

What happened to them mattered; the fate of them and their community was genuinely disturbing. Any reader will remember his first encounter with the father; the scene after the church service; the (over-omniscient) narrator stealing mangoes on the Custos' property; the attack on the Court-House and so forth indeed, most of the section dealing with the uprising. And it isn't a matter of its being a more dramatic historical episode than anything else in the (Continued on PAGE 19)

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book — it's a matter of its being more real, the place, the people, the events.

Nearly every time I am in that part of the world, the book comes into my mind. However, the business of the little community establishing itself on one of the Cays has nothing like so much to recommend it. The underlying diagnosis (the addiction to self-righteousness of political heroes) is subtly rewarding enough.

But Vic Reid's account hasn't the authority, hasn't the insight to give it much weight in the fiction. It reads like a fill-in for a period when there was a shortage of history. (Captain Adam Grantley, indeed!) And the last section — the twentieth century — reads like a combination of 'Gone With the Wind' and 'A House History'.

The politics may be accurate (though it's all a bit too pat), but the fiction is dull. Garth Campbell, the lawyer, remains as thinly anonymous as most political celebrities. The axiom here is 'never trust the artist trust the tale'. Gordon, Paul, Eogle, and the life of '65 are imaginatively alive for the novelist and Morant Bay has the quality of a moving personal episode. The politics of the twentieth century hasn't — and imaginative delicacy is replaced by a sort of tart complacency. (see e.g. Mr. Reid's introduction to the number of the Tamarack Review devoted to West Indian writing. I'm sure the history is accurate; but I'm equally sure that Mr. Reid's leaden irony does him no good — save with an audience that looks for that kind of thing.)

Grave disappointment

THE LEOPARD came to me as a grave disappointment. Nasty, brutish and short. The kind of abbreviated stylistic artifice for which one stores up expressions like 'tour de force'. The white man is an impossible caricature; the sex is conventional and rather self-appraising; the African is as unlikely as someone out of Ronald Fairbank. And the business about 'making beautiful' — which means carving someone up with a panga — is distasteful; not because it happens to be

the white Kenyans who get it, by and large, here, but because it's phoney. Of course the half-witted cat or a planter has to be 'made beautiful' after evacuating his bowels.

Realism? No, an implicit jeer. It all seems to me to constitute irresponsible dealing with a complex and tragic situation. The obvious contrast is supplied by the Rhodesian novelist Doris Lessing's 'The Grass is Singing'. There the tensions between white and coloured impact with engaging force because Miss Lessing is so imaginatively fair and responsive. All her characters are allowed to live — as do Dan Jacobson's in his short novel 'A Dance in the Sun'. The political and racial sympathies of these two are evident — but they work with people, and experiences, not with racial clichés.

You can't write novels with nothing but the aspirations of an angry liberal — finally, your responses will be highly illiberal. You must feel your characters in all their reality, in all their private complexity. If you don't then what you write is bogus.

'The Leopard' may be alright for the politically self-righteous with pretensions to literature; it certainly isn't for anyone with a concern for the possibilities of fiction, nor more impartially for anyone who has a feeling for human beings — not just those that are like oneself.

Negative solution

And as for style? Who really feels the pain of Nebu's wound amid the exotically insistent imagery that surrounds it? Who feels the jungle, the leopard, the rain, and so forth to be there, in the book, to be more than a gaudy prose? Who can honestly say he is faced with much more than a gilded tract; young African of elaborately delicate sensibility versus beef wittedly satiric opponents? And the crippled malicious little coffee-coloured lad that Nebu has to carry about him. His role could be that

of nagging judge of a collective responsibility. But I don't say this with much conviction, though I find moving Nebu's waning strength shackled to the spiteful impotence of the boy; and Nebu's inability to use the rifle, the symbol of white supremacy.

However, my expression was a grave disappointment. It is disappointing to find Vic Reid with his evocative sympathy for actual people as we meet them in the first section of 'New Day', succumbing to categories, to abstractions, which make the problem he envisages in 'The Leopard' capable of only a negative solution. If the complex of subtly varied issues which we call the colour problem is ever 'solved' then the next major problem is likely to be the aftermath of the 'solution'.

What to feel about each other when the brute realities and the savage inequalities are finally removed. Doesn't one know it even now in one's ordinary relations, in one's ordinary exchanges — the pleasantness, the courtesy, and the coldly detached, Philistine assessment underneath? It's a rich field for a novelist, given the resources the novelist has; resources which Vic Reid, in 'The Leopard' misuses, thus contributing neither to politics nor fiction. One hopes for the restitution of what is essentially a vigorously humane talent.

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