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“I GOING AWAY. I GOING HOME”: AUSTIN CLARKE’S “LEAVING THIS ISLAND PLACE”

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Austin Clarke’s “Leaving This Island Place” is one of scores of Caribbean autobiographical works that focus on a bright, young, lower-class islander leaving his/her small island place and setting out on “Eldorado voyages.”¹ The narrative of that journey away from home to Europe or Canada or the United States and the later efforts to return may be said to be *the* Caribbean story, as suggested in the subtitle of Wilfred Cartey’s study of Caribbean literature, *Whispers from the Caribbean: I Going Away, I Going Home*, which argues that while in Caribbean literature there is much movement away, there is also a body of literature in which “the notion of ‘away’ and images of movement out are replaced by images of return” (xvi). Traditionally, however, the first autobiographical works, such as George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*, Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and Elizabeth Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, have focused on the childhood in the Caribbean and the journey away—or at least the preparation for that journey. Such is the case with Clarke’s “Leaving This Island Place.”

This brief story treats an unnamed illegitimate son of a lower middle-class mother and an even lower-class father, who had, the mother told the son, come “from no family at-all, at-all” (25). Though the now-properly-married mother prohibits her son from any interaction with his father, he nonetheless occasionally sneaks to visit him and seems to enjoy the attention, love, and money he receives from the father, a “kind . . . man” who “held a family circle of compassion in his heart” (30, 25), who is proud of his son’s academic and sports achievements, and who runs out to get his son’s favorite treats when he visits. On one visit, perhaps not too long before he graduates from Harrison College, the boy sees among the photographs on his father’s walls of himself (the son), the pin-ups of movie stars, and the pictures of several women (some with too many clothes and some with none) a photograph of a naked woman at which he gazes intently until he realizes it is his mother. As old as the young man is, the traumatic impact of the primal scene which the picture evokes causes him to flee screaming from his father’s home, never to return. This was undoubtedly for him even more shocking than the primal scene that traumatizes so many young people where at least the mother and father are *privately* engaged in sex and not displayed, as his mother is here, for all the world to see. He flees from his father’s house with its shocking exposé of his mother’s infamy, forced to imagine an intimate interaction between two people he had never seen together.

Thus, the young man does not see his father again until the opening scene of

the story, when he is facing the painful task of visiting the dying man in an almshouse which adjoins the field where the narrator plays cricket with his friends. As an outstanding cricket player, a great runner, and a good (if not a “bright-bright-bright” [*Growing Up Stupid* 80]) student, he has won a measure of acceptance by his privileged classmates, who are on this very day having a going-away party for him as he prepares to leave for college in Canada. He is fully aware of how tenuous is his standing in this new world: “the absence of [my father’s] surname on my report card would remind me in the eyes of my classmates that I might be the best cricketer and the best runner, but that I was after all, among this cream of best blood and brains, only a bas—” (26-27). He has put off visiting his ill father, possibly because of his traumatic reaction to the photograph, possibly because he is too involved in his new life as a popular student with an upper-class girl friend, possibly because he is embarrassed to be seen entering an almshouse, possibly because he fears that knowledge of his father’s situation will cause him to lose his tenuous standing in his new world, possibly because his father represents a past he wants to forget. At any rate, until the day before he is scheduled to leave the island, the most he had done was to search for his father’s face among the faces of the dying men at the almshouse looking out at them play cricket. The irony is that there is no way he would have acknowledged that face had he seen him.

“Leaving This Island Place” is a direct account of Clarke’s own life with only very minor modifications. His mother, Gladys Clarke, whom he described in an interview with me as “middle class” (Dance 67), was “two or three social levels” above his father, Kenneth Trothan (66). When she became pregnant at sixteen, her family forbade any further contact or communication between them (66), and, Clarke continued, “In my own home my mother never *once* mentioned my father’s name” (67). Clarke insisted that he did not miss his father: “My mother was my mother *and* my father, and my stepfather was my father” (66). He said that his father was “a bit of an artist; he used to paint and write poetry” (66). Clarke himself began writing poetry when he was in the fifth form, “. . . copies of English poetry. What other poetry would I know?” (*Growing Up Stupid* 137). He also excelled in athletics, becoming, as he says in *Growing Up Stupid*, “a running fool” (80). Clarke went to Combermere Secondary School and Harrison College, which he described as the factors that overcame his lowly class status, insisting that he could not have been rejected “because of the school I attended. . . . And if you attended any of those schools, then your status was assured . . . education crossed [class] lines” (Dance 72). However, his friend Keith Sandiford has noted that the slights the dark and illegitimate boy faced at Harrison College left him with “deep psychological scars” (Algoo-Baksh 26). During his school days in Barbados, Clarke, like his character, embraced many of the colonial values that stigmatized him, “growing up stupid under the Union Jack,” as he writes in his later autobiography. When he completed his education, he was already an exile in his own land. He writes, “We lived in Barbados, but we studied English society and manners. . . . I was more at ease in England, the Mother Country, than in Barbados” (*Growing Up Stupid* 72).² Like the father in “Leaving,” Clarke’s own father died of tuberculosis

in an almshouse. Clarke left Barbados to attend college in Toronto. He went on to write numerous novels and collections of short stories, most of them dealing with the Caribbean exile in Canada. Many of his male exiles suffer a real or symbolic death in Canada as they destroy themselves through their rejection of their background, their culture, their family, and their identity, in the effort to emulate, assimilate, and adopt a foreign culture, something that the persona of “Leaving” seems well on the way to doing.

That impending sense of doom and death permeates “Leaving This Island Place” as we witness our young protagonist, who knows he should be full of hope at the privilege he has to leave Barbados with all its social prejudices and escape on a “plane bound for Canada, for hope, for school, for glory” (29), face the daunting task of visiting his father before he leaves. However, he is haunted by that doomed father whose fate he knows should be his: “my life . . . ought to have been spent in the gutters round the Bath Corner, or in some foreign white woman’s rose garden, or fielding tennis balls in the Garrison Savannah Tennis Club where those who played tennis could be bad tennis players but had to be white” (28). As he reluctantly enters the almshouse, he fears the death, destruction, and damnation that await all who enter there. The life in Barbados that is fated to be his is indeed symbolized by his father and by all the other dying men who are imprisoned in that hell, men in rotting clothes with sores and scales on their bodies, their hair matted, their fingernails and toenails long and dirty, their bodies skeletal. Even the nurse is old and haggard and resembles a half-dead fish. She has to push the boy into the father’s ward where “the smell of stale urine and of sweat and faeces whipped me in the face,” and he apprehends, “There is death in this room and I am inside it” (23). As he looks at the skeleton of his father there on the bed holding out a “dead hand, a dirty hand” that he cannot bring himself to touch, he is desperately seeking ways that he can escape. Escape, of course, is not just a matter of walking out of the door. Escape is avoiding this doomed father’s fate, which he fears is his. Escape is fleeing Barbados. Throughout this visit, he seeks ways to save himself from being engulfed by the death that surrounds him. One technique he uses is to keep himself alive by focusing on the image of his beautiful young girlfriend and the vibrant young friends who are a part of the world of cricket and the social events he enjoys with them. That world is pictured constantly in terms of youth and abandonment, cleanliness and vibrancy, cricket and shouts of applause, as opposed to the grime, filth, stench, and eerily silent dying men of the almshouse. The major technique for salvation which he uses whenever he is confronted with any of the discomfiting issues of class, father, and/or nation, is to repeat like a mantra “I am leaving this island place.” At least thirteen times during the course of the story he declares, “I am leaving this island place,” “I am leaving,” “I was leaving,” or another similar variation. This leaving, he anticipates, will solve all his problems. He thinks he will escape the life that he was destined to live as a poor bastard. He thinks he will escape his father’s fate. He thinks he will escape the poverty and rejection and death associated with his father. He thinks he will escape Barbados, also symbolized by his father.

When he leaves his father and attempts to get a Catholic nun to pray for his father and a canon to bury him, doors are slammed in his face: the Sister prefers to testify and shout to God rather than pray at a poor man's bedside; those at the rectory make it clear that such as he are out of place there. Their slamming of the doors reinforced yet again "that I was out of place here, that I belonged with the beginning in the almshouse" (28).

Though he is frustrated by his failure and he reflects that he should forget those who are throwing a party for him, he finally joins them, and there is much drinking and cursing, and congratulating him as a "lucky bastard" (29), all of which, like that perhaps unsignifying reference to bastard, nonetheless "pointed a finger back to the almshouse" (28).

After the party, he and his girl friend Cynthia go for a walk on the beach. It becomes clearer and clearer that she was always part of a different world, with her canon father and his Jaguar car which she drives. Like his own mother a generation before, Cynthia is undoubtedly fascinated by the striking young man's athletic prowess, his success in school, and his acceptance in a Canadian university, and she contemplates marriage. However, despite her ardent desire to marry him, her pleading with him to write her letters and poems, and her reminders of what they did on Sundays, "far far up the beach where nobody came . . . [ellipses in the original]" (30), he and she always recognized that their class differences would make their union unacceptable to her family and planned to keep their relationship secret from her father. It is already clear that if they continue their relationship, it will be a replay of the tragedy of his own mother and father—or worse—since the class differences are even greater. The reader may be a bit surprised that on his last night in Barbados, though he is on a "beach . . . full of moonlight and love" with a beautiful, wealthy, and passionate young girl who is practically throwing herself at him, he in no way seems inclined to take advantage of this opportunity to make love to her (20). He makes no response to her insistence that they should have married earlier and must now make plans to marry when he graduates. Undoubtedly, he does not want to leave behind another unnamed bastard who is forbidden to mention his father's name, or to become another father whose past high school fame would be recalled by pictures on the wall of a dilapidated island shack. Undoubtedly he fears that like his father he may have his heart broken and be driven to ruin his own life (24). Furthermore the romance of the whole scene is undercut by the fact that they are on "Gravesend Beach," a beach where, Clarke informs us in *Growing Up Stupid*, tombstones are sunk into the sand (135). The suggestions of death are almost as prevalent here as in the almshouse. There were "crabs scrambling among dead leaves and skeletons of other crabs . . . and the scarecrows of masts on the fishing boats now lifeless and boastless, taking a breather from the depths and deaths of fishing" (29-30). By this time Cynthia's conversation is described as "chatting and chattering," and when he tells her his father is dying in an almshouse, she is so appalled that there is absolutely no more conversation between them. She does not react to the fact that his father is dying, but that he is in an almshouse. By this time the narrator probably recognizes that Cynthia is not his savior from death as he

thought when he focused on her when he was in the almshouse, but just a symbol of another even more formidable (because she is so attractive) kind of death from which he must escape. As the reader expects, she does not come the next morning to the airport, as she had promised, to see him off, get her picture in the social column of the newspaper, and use her newly acquired French to say "au revoir." The reader is relieved that Cynthia is out of the picture, for this phony *soucouyant* is one death we are happy he escaped.

Despite Clarke's frequent insistence that he did not miss his father and that he was not affected by his illegitimacy and class status, it is clear that in this story (as in many other Clarke pieces) the father is the central figure in the son's dilemma. The son sees himself in his father—a successful cricket player whose prowess no doubt won over the narrator's mother, an artist whose work is not appreciated by his community, a man who loves his booze, a "riotous" personality (25), and a ladies' man. The son's victories on the cricket field and with the ladies undoubtedly made him the target of the policeman Barrabas,³ who delighted in jailing him, which ultimately led to the disease that was now killing him (probably tuberculosis). The father is certainly not without blame, but his destruction is the direct result of a nation's blind acceptance of a colonial class system with its social hierarchy⁴ and misuse of judicial power. The story implies that the mother was forced to separate from and repudiate him. It is also suggested that the mother may have contributed to his downfall: The boy ponders, "Did my mother hate this man so much to drive him [to the almshouse]? Did she drive him to such a stick of love that it broke his heart, and made him do foolish things . . . ?" (24). It is clear that a policeman, acting out of jealousy, jailed him several times, leading to the illness that killed him. It is also clear that the father was a figure of some admiration. The godmother tells the son, "That man was a man" (24). He was also an impressive cricket player and he continued throughout his life to be attractive to women. But more importantly, he was an artist whose talent was not appreciated; the godmother told the son, "Your father is some kind o' genius, but in this island we call him a blasted madman, but he may be a real genius" (25). Finally, the story makes it clear that the father was eager to have a relationship with his son. Indeed, it appears that this otherwise obedient child regularly risked his mother's wrath and even beatings to visit him. And though the narrator suggests that it was the two shillings his father gave him that motivated his visits, it is obvious that he loved his father ("But I loved him, in a way" [25]; his farewell is a "departure of love" [24]), that he admired his father's compassion, and that he was drawn to his father's talents as a photographer.

In rejecting his father ("Let him die. I am leaving this island place" [28]), the son is rejecting Barbados, his culture, his past, and his family, while striving for the colonial values that have led to his and Barbados' downfall. The dying men in the almshouse are frequently described like fallen soldiers on a battlefield to whom he should "pay some respect in his thoughts" (23). The embrace of the elite class in Barbados marked the beginning of his departure from father and culture. When he is visiting his father, instead of paying the requisite respect to this dying man, all he can think about is running out of the almshouse away from him and joining

his friends on the cricket field, at “tea in the pavilion” (23), and in “the Saturday afternoon matinees with the wealthy middle-class girls from Queen’s College (27); these are all things that he has “now made a part of my life” (27). But even at the same time that he keeps trying to convince himself that he needs to forget this man, let him die, escape to the safe and comfortable enclaves of the well-to-do, he wrestles with his obligations to him.

His much anticipated leaving is not easy, and the problems stem from his unresolved issues with his father/nation. As his mother says in her last caution to him as she packs his bags: “Look, boy, leave the dead to live with the blasted dead, do! Leave the dead in this damn islan’ place!” (31). As he waits to board the plane, he is wondering, “is he dead yet?” (31). He considers looking in the obituary column of an abandoned newspaper, but someone grabs it to wrap up some rum, “And I know I will never find out how he died” (31).

To read this story in the broader context of the Caribbean autobiography of leaving, is to recognize that it deals only with the first part of the Caribbean persona’s journey. In almost all of the autobiographical accounts, the most difficult journey is the lonely, cold, alienated exile’s attempts to return home, for, as Dennis Scott reminds us in “Exile,” “To travel / is to return / to strangers” (5). Similarly Derek Walcott’s narrator finds upon his return home that nothing is the same as it was—“it was a book / you’d read a life ago” ; and, disillusioned, he leaves, taking one last look “at things that would not say what they once meant” (113). Clarke, who, himself, returned to Barbados to serve as cultural officer and advisor to the prime minister from 1975-78, told me later, “if you’ve been away from your country for as long as I have . . . the person who returns . . . is an expatriate and a foreigner, and really has no right to come back. . . . we all want to go back . . . we belong there” (Dance 74). Clarke’s story ends with his protagonist in the airplane, looking down on his island: “Below me on the ground are the ants of people . . . the beautiful quiltwork patches of land . . . and then there is the sea, and the sea, and then the sea” (32). One expects that that sea, like that “powerful tug” that pulls him into the almshouse to see his father, “grabbing me and almost swallowing me to make me enter these doors” (22), will one day pull him back to Barbados. Clearly that unforgettable sea that defines the Caribbean will remain in his mind and he will wrestle with an old woman’s admonition to a younger woman traveling with him:

“Don’t take long to return back, child! Do not tarry too long. *Come back* again soon . . . and don’t forget that you was borned right here, pon this rock, pon this island. This is a good decent island, so return back as soon as you get yuh learning, *come back* again soon, child . . .” (32; emphasis mine; ellipses in orig.)

Her repetition of “come back” counters the narrator’s “I am leaving”—and we know this is only one part of an oft-told two-part tale: “I going away. I going home.”

¹The phrase is used by Dennis Scott in his poem “Homecoming,” which he begins with the “sea of dreams” Caribbean children grow up with as they hunger for journeys to rich ports far from their homes (6-7).

²Clarke was writing of a time before he visited England, which in fact, he despised and where he felt very uncomfortable (Dance 72).

³We do not question the culpability of a man who bears the name of Barrabas. In accord with the practices to release one prisoner and crucify the other, Pilate asked the people whom he should release, Barabbas or Jesus, and the crowd chose Barabbas. Thus many have seen him as responsible for the crucifixion of Christ.

⁴Clarke told me that “Barbados is perhaps the most socially proper, or improper, country in the world” (Dance 66).

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