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A matter of colour: Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Swarthy Boy*

Francesca SCALINCI

The name of Edgar Mittelholzer (1909-1965) is still quite unknown outside the area of Anglo-Caribbean literary studies. Many, however, recognise his pioneering role in Caribbean literature as he was one of the first of his generation to emigrate to England in order to have his work published. His novels, moreover, anticipate the main themes and concerns typical of post-1950 West Indian literature: the question of identity, the problem of ethnic and cultural admixture, the sense of rootlessness. In spite of this, much of his rich production has frequently been interpreted as «the work of a novelist *manqué*» (GILKES 1979: 95) for its insistence on sensational and morbid aspects. The peculiarity of Mittelholzer's literary work lies, above all, in its particular closeness to biography. As a matter of fact, the author's personal obsessions, his multifarious interests and his unconventional ideas on life overbearingly emerge throughout the whole of his literary production. For this reason, Mittelholzer's autobiography, *A Swarthy Boy*, published in 1963, has seldom been the object of separate study but has often been used as a reference in the criticism of his fiction. As I will point out in my paper, *A Swarthy Boy* is nevertheless a very interesting work: by focusing on the issue of skin colour, the work not only provides a precious insight into the life of a very troubled author but also, as it were, a picture of British Guyana at the beginning of the 20th century, that is of a country divided between colonial heritage and future independence, and afflicted by more or less overt social and ethnic conflicts.

Although geographically set on the mainland of South America, Guyana (British Guyana, up to a few years ago) is considered a Caribbean country, especially because of the many similarities it holds with West Indian islands such as Trinidad & Tobago and Jamaica. Whereas it was originally inhabited by Amerindian tribes (Arawaks and Caribs), the first colonies were founded in 1615 by the Dutch who established sugar-cane plantations exploiting the work of hundreds of slaves eradicated from the African continent. The English arrived in the late 18th century and, after having created big sugar and tobacco plantations west of Surinam river, officially acquired power in 1796. The abolition of slavery in 1834 compelled plantation owners to turn to indentured labourers coming above all from India, China and Portugal. This definitely altered the demographical balance of the country creating basic conditions for subsequent social and ethnic hostilities. Guyana achieved independence in 1966 and is nowadays a Co-operative Republic within the Commonwealth. Its extremely ethnically heterogeneous population encloses the offspring of people who arrived as slaves or indentured labourers. The largest ethnic groups are those of East Indian and African descent who, in the last fifty years, have constantly been fighting to obtain the political control of the country.

Mittelholzer's personal history is strictly connected to that of his country. Born as the first child of a middle-class family of Swiss, English and partly African descent, Mittelholzer grew up as an ordinary West Indian middle-class boy among stamp-collecting, silent movies, and tales of adventure and suspense read on Imperial youth periodicals like *Union Jack*. Reading and writing, in particular, became true passions for young Edgar who, from the beginning of the 1920s, spent a good part of his spare time keeping a diary and writing short stories on school note-books. It was in 1928 that Mittelholzer seriously started sending his stories and novels to English publishers and magazines. Being the political and cultural centre of the Empire, London was the natural objective of Caribbean writers who could not rely on significant local publishing houses and on a meaningful West Indian reading public. Eventually, some of Mittelholzer's works were issued on magazines and periodicals, but in the following twelve years the author received an incredible number of rebukes. His first novel, *Corentyne Thunder* was accepted and issued by an English publisher in 1941. This was also the year the novelist left Guyana to join the Trinidad Royal Naval Reserve and, succeeding, the local government at the Harbour Engineer's Office. Nevertheless, a certain restlessness, together with an undeniable psychological instability and an endless search for inspiration, pushed the writer to frequent moves: after a short period in Barbados, in 1948 he went to England. In London, he became clerk in the Books Department of the British Council, a job which in all likelihood gave him the opportunity to read a lot. During all these years, Mittelholzer went on writing strenuously: he composed novels, started collaborating on important Caribbean literary magazines such as *Bim* and began working with *BBC Caribbean Voices*. In the 1950s, anyhow, the writer relocated in Canada, Barbados again and England once more, where he committed suicide – burning himself alive— in 1965. On the whole, Edgar Mittelholzer has left twenty-two novels, an autobiography, a travelogue, a fable, and various poems and short-stories. Among his major works we find: *Shadows Move Among Them* (1951), *The Kaywana Trilogy* (1952-1958), *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (1953), *My Bones and My Flute* (1955). From 1962, his novels are set in England and have English characters: among them we have *The Aloneness of Mrs Chatham* (1963) and *The Jilkington Drama* (1965).

Among many themes and subjects, the concern with the genetic, psychological and social implications of skin colour and miscegenation is at the heart of much of Mittelholzer's work. The Guyanese novelist's attitude towards race (and racism)

emerges in most of his novels and is usually shaped by a contrast between strong and weak individuals. In the *Kaywana Trilogy*, a set of three historical novels¹ following the vicissitudes of a family of Dutch plantation owners over three centuries of Guyanese history, characters of Dutch-German descent are made to appear as extremely strong, determined and self-willed persons while others show signs of weakness and effeminacy. Mixed-bloods are particularly doomed to a fate of indecision, failure and moral decline. This is particularly evident in *The Life and Death of Sylvia* (1953): Sylvia, the daughter of an English middle-class man and of a Guyanese low-class woman of African and Amerindian descent, loses her battle against a corrupt and lascivious society and finally dies poor and sick. However, the novel clearly points out that Sylvia's real tragedy lies in the taint which is the result of her racial admixture. In another novel, *A Morning at the Office* (1950), ethnic conflicts are made explicit through the depiction of working relationships in a Port-of-Spain (Trinidad) office. As a matter of fact, Mittelholzer's novels seem to bear witness to the novelist's fierce despise for the non-European part of his genetic and cultural heritage. It is as if, as it were, the writer transposed his self-abjection above all in black and mixed-blood characters. Seeing his slightly dark complexion as a mark of ignominy and *débauche*, Mittelholzer felt divided and inherently disharmonic; with time, this conflict between different 'bloods' progressively took the shape of a continuous battle between intellect and emotion, spirituality and sensuality, the 'Apollonian' and the 'Dionysian.' This sense of interior splitting, strictly connected to the problem of race and profoundly influenced by the parents' attitude, was probably among the causes determining the writer's tragic vision of life.

The autobiography describes only a period of nineteen years, from 1909, the year of Mittelholzer's birth, to 1928, when one of the young novelist's short stories was accepted by a review. The work focuses therefore on Mittelholzer's childhood and youth with a particular attention to family life and relationships. In it we find – besides the descriptions of the daily routine of a young middle class Guyanese boy – the author's repeated attempt to explain his fixation for ethnic matters as well as his rebuke of his black heritage. The title, *A Swarthy Boy*, sets a direct connection with the problem of race, whereas the subtitle, *A Childhood in British Guyana*, immediately establishes the nexus between Mittelholzer's personal experience and the background of Guyana at the beginning of the 20th century, thus sanctioning the representative value of the author's life. In rebuilding his own «mythic tale» (GUSDORF 1980: 45), Edgar Mittelholzer describes his individual attempts to come to terms with the taboos and conventions of his family and of his society as well as with the problem of class divisions and prejudices. However, in dealing with the Guyanese novelist's autobiography it is important to highlight how in every transposition of personal experience «the process of selfdiscovery is [...] inseparable from the art of self-invention» (EAKIN 1985: 55). If, on the one hand, the narration provides a fundamental reading key of the author's work and ideas, on the other hand Mittelholzer's statements about his individual and social life should be taken *cum grano salis* and partly considered as functional to the creation of his 'character'.

It is quite interesting that, in a book bearing clear references to the protagonist's dark complexion, the first chapter, entitled "Background", should contain a long digression on Mittelholzer's Swiss origin:

The manager of Plantation de Vreede was a Swiss-German, Herr C. Mittelholzer, the first Mittelholzer, so far as anyone knows, to come to this part of the world. He came from the canton of Geneva, but was probably born in Appenzell which is the original home of the family. There are two districts in Appenzell where the family was firmly established as far back as the early seventeenth century-Rämsen and Mittelholz. (MITTELHOLZER 1963: 10).²

Mittelholzer goes on narrating his own visit to Appenzell, where a relative, Dr. Johann Mittelholzer, shows him a «large ledger-like book» (p. 10) anonymously sent to his father in 1886 by someone in South America and containing the record of life on a plantation. As the book is hardly readable and is only accompanied by a silver spoon, the writer's Germanic past and family history appear from the outset as surrounded by a thick mystery worthy of a romance. The retrieval of a lost manuscript, not by coincidence, is a typical device of romances and ghost stories. The narrator, furthermore, refers to these objects as 'relics', as sacred artefacts recalling a sort of distant golden age. Besides the book and the spoon, another item acquires relevance, that is a sabre found in the home of Edgar's Uncle John in Georgetown:

The story is that our ancestor used this sabre to defend himself against the negro slaves when he was a fugitive in the jungle during the savage and bloody slave insurrection of 1763. He is reputed to have hacked off the hand of at least one of his attackers and laid out a number of others before eventually winning his way to safety. (p. 11)

In Mittelholzer's eyes, the sabre is a reminder of the ancestor's courage in fighting the savagely evil slaves. By assuming the Swiss ancestor's point of view, however, this chronicle totally cancels the humanity of the African slaves and says nothing about the true reasons hiding behind the revolt. For that matter, the Berbice Slave Rebellion had broken out as a consequence of the cruelty and ruthlessness which the Dutch plantation owners had used in treating their slaves.

In spite of his heroism, it is this ancestor, Jan Vincent, who, according to Mittelholzer, «dropped the pebble that started the ripple of black blood in the family» (p. 11). Dark skin, probably introduced into the family through sexual intercourse between the ancestor and one of his African slaves (an event to which Mittelholzer only implicitly alludes) is depicted as a «ripple», that is a wrinkle, a flaw in the genealogy of this once purely Germanic dynasty. It is undoubtedly true that in most cases white plantation owners had black mistresses, but in his anthropological study of kinship in the West Indies Raymond T. Smith has also identified «the archetypical union of a slave woman and a white master» (SMITH 1990: 88) as a sort of myth of origins for the Caribbean middle class. Mittelholzer, anyhow, sees this original racial admixture as a veritable corruption of his pedigree. The idea of miscegenation as contamination is of course not new as it accompanied Europeans, and the British in particular, in the conquest and colonisation of – to Westerners- unknown territories. In explaining the ideological origin of South African apartheid, for example, Coetzee highlights how the idea of a disease, of a dangerous infection brought about by 'inferior races', was common in the pseudo-scientific, ethnographic and genetic texts supporting ethnic separation (cf. COETZEE 1999: 12-35).

In Mittelholzer's case, however, the refusal of 'blackness' – and the sense of interior division even the shadow of it brings – is undeniably tied to family relations, in particular to the father described as a «confirmed negrophobe» (p. 17). Chapter 2 bears a meaningful title, “A Swarthy Baby”, and tells the story of Edgar's father's reaction to his olive-skinned first-born:

[...] I was born at 2 a.m. on the sixteenth of December, 1909. For my father, it was an occasion of momentous disappointment. I turned out a swarthy baby! Himself fair-complexioned with hair of European texture, [...] and his wife also fair-complexioned and European in appearance, he had, naturally, assumed that chances were heavy in favour of a fair-complexioned baby. [...] However, there it was. His first-born – a swarthy boy! (p. 17)

In spite of this early rejection, Mittelholzer shows empathy for his father: «It requires a minimum of effort for me to put myself in his place. In a community like that, at that time, he would have had to be a superhuman not to be disappointed» (p. 17). The writer then goes on explaining the parent's attempt to demonstrate his «compensatory side» (p. 21): «I can almost hear him thinking behind scowls: “Oh, well, he may be dark-skinned, but he does seem to have some intelligence”. These demonstrations would take the form of quizzes. He would ask me questions before my grandfather and aunts in order to hear me give the correct answers» (p. 21). The author tells us how, in one of these occasions, he had not been able to answer one question. The father had then got so angry as to violently scold and humiliate him in front of the whole family. In his mother, Mittelholzer sees a similar, though different, offsetting attitude. The mother is depicted as a sentimental, anxious and sometimes oppressive woman. She afflicts her children, Edgar in particular, with her maniacal attentions and sense of protection: in spite of his son's protests and humiliation in front of friends, she insists, for example, on little Edgar going to school with an umbrella for fear that the strong Caribbean sun might damage his health. In the Guyanese matriarchal family organisation, she represents, together with her own mother and sisters (Edgar's grandmother and aunts), «the Authorities» (p. 56), that is those who univocally decide every single aspect of the children's life. Yet, also Mittelholzer's mother's authoritative and protective behaviour is read by the author through the lenses of racial discrimination:

In these days I did not feel like a boy, and it was because my mother treated me with a sentimentality peculiarly her own. First of all, she felt she had to protect me against my father's impatience; I was the Dark One at whom he was always frowning and barking. Secondly, she was very feminine and just could not help being fonder of me than of my sister [...]. Thirdly, like my father himself, she was enough of a negrophobe to treasure my dead-straight European texture hair. The result was she let my hair grow long right to my waist like a girl's [...] (p. 28).

In the biography, the writer tells of his deep-seated resentment towards his mother for the feminisation of his childhood, with all its racial implications. This notwithstanding, by defining himself as the Dark One and by attempting to justify the father's behaviour Mittelholzer proves to have internalised negative stereotypes about his African origins. At the same time, as we have seen, the writer seems to linger on a compensating attitude which comes close to that of his parents: he continually takes pride in his Germanic «innate sense of orderliness» (p. 90) and «discipline» (p. 45), and tells the reader of his endeavour to re-establish a connection with his Swiss origins.

[...] I discovered among a roomful of old books [...] a number of German grammars, and instantly I resolved to begin learning German. The German text did not dismay me. I soon mastered it [...]. In no time I had discovered that the plural of *Holz* was *Hölzer* [...]. The pastor must have been careless! Or he must have wanted to make a concession to his British nationality – hence the non-appearance of the Umlaut in our name. Very well, I would put the matter right. I would restore the Umlaut. I began to spell our name Mittelhölzer. 3 (p. 137-138)

So, the Umlaut, which is the visual indicator of Mittelholzer's predilection for his Swiss ancestry, represents for young Edgar a sort of escape from – if not a denial of – his 'other' heritage and, consequently, of his swarthinness. The writer's attitude towards his black origins is in the book constructed around the ambivalence attraction / repulsion, as the following episode suggests:

Another very clear and vivid memory [...] is of my nurse, a shapely negro girl, seated on a large travelling trunk in the corridor outside the big bedroom, with me in her lap, casually fumbling out a full breast and letting me fondle it. I'm sure this happened more than once, and I'm equally sure that on one occasion my father passed us [...] but pretended not to notice. [...] It must have been my earliest erotic experience which probably explains why I remember it so distinctly. (p. 18)

If the nurse with her comforting, but also strongly erotic, demeanour is a reassuring figure and represents the stereotypically warm femininity of the black mother, Elvira, the cook, depicted as «a terror» (p. 22), represents the menacing, mysterious and revolting side of blackness:

She was the cook – a negress with cross eyes. She would appear suddenly just before I was taken upstairs to see my grandfather [...] and she would say something to me, her eyes rolling fantastically. I would recoil and whimper, shuddering and wriggling in fright. [...] I can remember, even at home, my nurse threatening, when I was naughty, to take me to Elvira if I did not behave myself. Ever since those days, the name Elvira has lurked in my imagination, a symbol of evil. (p. 22)

Indeed, the young boy's fear is enhanced by the transfiguration of the nurse as well who, when necessary, proves to be a secret ally of the evil cook. As we have also seen in the description of the 1763 slave rebellion, by identifying blackness with savagery, backwardness, darkness and evilness, Mittelholzer is necessarily speaking against his own black part. This sense of repugnance turns thus into self-abjection, a feeling that, not by coincidence, in Mittelholzer's novels identifies mixed blood characters in particular. For Kristeva, the abject precisely embodies all that is in-between, ambiguous, composite (KRISTEVA 1980: 114) and that prevents the psyche, or a culture, from recognising a coherent identity. Mittelholzer's sense of unease in front of blackness, however, does not only stem from his inability to find a stable identity, but also from his fear of regressing to a beastly and primitive state, which is, in his view, the possible implication of his swarthinness. In his *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Franz Fanon has well described this feeling: «D'abord il y a la négresse et la mulâtresse. La première n'a qu'une possibilité et un souci: blanchir. La deuxième non seulement veut blanchir, mais éviter de régresser» (FANON 1952: 64). As a matter of fact, Mittelholzer explains in his autobiography that racism has above all to be imputed to people of his own class: middle-class people of «coloured admixture but of fair olive complexion» (p. 155). It is especially in coloureds, those that are the result of the Caribbean melting pot, that we find the painful rejection of blackness and the burning desire to whiten. As Mittelholzer also describes in his novel *A Morning at the Office*, in Guyana as in Trinidad, coloureds can be divided into infinite classes according to skin pigmentation and hair texture. Of course, people with light olive skin and straight hair find themselves in an upper position of the social ladder. No wonder that, as narrated in Chapter Two, the father's consolation lies in the fact that little Edgar's hair shows no sign of «negroid kinks» (p. 18) but is «dead straight» (p. 18). In the first appendix to the book, just like in the second chapter, the writer again as it were justifies the parents' attitude by inscribing it in the social and ethnic situation of Guyana at the beginning of the 20th century: «Had I been an adult in 1909, the year of my birth, it is just possible that I might have felt the disadvantage of my swarthy complexion, for at that time complexion was sometimes a barrier to advancement» (p. 155). There are, of course, exceptions: for example Mr. Cummings, the headmaster of Edgar's general school, portrayed as a «pure-blooded negro» (p. 61) but also as a «well-bred man» (p. 61) who has achieved a certain status and has unproblematically been accepted into the coloured middle class. Mittelholzer's himself admits that «it was not until [he] got much older that [he] thought of him as being a negro» (p. 162). Still, it is through marriage that Mr. Cummings has achieved the right to rise socially, as he has married a woman «much lighter than himself in complexion» (p. 161). Nonetheless, in Mittelholzer's words, racism in Guyana is not simply a matter of white vs. black but it involves all ethnic and social groups and, paradoxically, is not only about skin colour. Discrimination, instead, often refers to the role these groups have held in colonial history and to their order of arrival:

It was my class who looked down upon the East Indian sugar plantation labourers («coolies» we called them, whether they were labourers or eventually became doctors or barristers or Civil Servants). It was my class who considered the Portuguese social inferiors because of their background of door-to-door peddling, rum-shops [...] and their low standards

of living. We, too, treated the Chinese sweet-sellers and shopkeepers with condescension because of their poor immigrant status. (p. 155)

Nonetheless, as Mittelholzer points out in the appendix, in the colonial Guyana of his childhood, racial discrimination, though pervasive, is not overtly manifested. The writer ascribes this sort of discretion to the influence of British culture: «The colony was too British in spirit by then (a century of continuous British rule had already elapsed), and the polite hypocrisy of the British forbade any public display of prejudice» (p. 155). In Mittelholzer's autobiography this is particularly evident in the relationships the family entertains with the neighbours: the Luckhoos, a middle-class family of East Indian origin, and the Eggs, of clear British ancestry. If, on the surface, the three families share time and friendship, all of them secretly nurture a sense of superiority towards those who could be considered, from an ethnic and social perspective, their inferiors. The writer well describes this convolute net of social relations:

The East Indian family to the west of us had been accepted into middle-class circles, for Mr. Edward Luckhoo was a solicitor – a legal man [...]. But those were the days when only a very few East Indians had “emerged” from the plantation swarm of coolies – a people looked down upon socially by the whites and middle-class admixtures. So even though we were friendly with the Luckhoos [...] there persisted among my aunts and my mother a continual whispering snobbism... My sister and I were made to feel that we could go over and play with the children, but that it must not be overdone... “After all, they're really not our sort”. [...] With the Eggs relations were freer and more relaxed. Old Mother Egg and my grandmother, both blue-eyed and Caucasian, were unquestionably social equals. And Mr Tyer Egg, though of mixed blood, was fair-complexioned like my own parents. (p. 33-34)

Despite the snobbism of Edgar's mother, the Luckhoos are quite well off and, unlike the Mittelholzers, they own a car. The relationship with the Eggs is at the same time easier, as both families stand on the same level, both socially and racially, and more difficult, since the visibility of a streak of blackness, the discernibility of mixed-bloodedness in a member of one of the two families, as well as the suspicion of racism, can perturb and deteriorate this atmosphere of good neighbourhood. One day, for example, Old Mother Egg quarrels with little Edgar's grandmother about a remark the child has made while visiting her home.

Mother Egg said that when she had tried to take me into her lap I had said: “No. I mustn't sit on your lap.” And when she had asked me why not, I had replied: “Mother says I mustn't because you don't like me. Only Lucille you like [...] Mother says I'm too dark, and you don't like me to come over here”. (p. 34)

Mother Eggs decisively refuses these accusations but as readers we are left uncertain about the truth. We do not understand whether it is Mother Egg who has shown a marked preference for Edgar's sister because of her fair complexion, or if it is Edgar's mother – or the boy himself – who has projected her own prejudices in the neighbour. All the same, these episodes emphasize how, in this Caribbean colonial context, human relationships are constantly threatened by questions of colour and class.

To conclude, Edgar Mittelholzer's autobiography can certainly be seen as a mirror of the author's idiosyncrasies, and of his personal preoccupations with the problems stemming from ethnic admixture. Yet, the work also provides a faithful picture of Guyana in the early decades of 1900. The image is that of an unstable – colonial – society where balances are precarious and limits blurred, a situation which, as Mittelholzer's own history has demonstrated, pushes the individual towards a perpetual condition of anxiety, frustration and loneliness.

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Notes

[? 1](#) *Children of Kaywana* (1952), *The Harrowing of Hubertus* (1954), *Kaywana Blooa* (1958)

[? 2](#) From now on, quotes from *A Swarthy Boy* will be followed by page numbers between parentheses.

[? 3](#) In 1951 Mittelholzer dropped the Umlaut as he found out that the family had actually never used it.

[? 4](#) This novel is actually set in Trinidad but from an ethnic and social point of view the two countries bear many similarities.

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