

REVIEW ARTICLE / ARTÍCULO DE RESEÑA

Jacques Roumain and *Gouverneurs de la rosée*

The year 2007 was the centennial of the birth of Jacques Roumain, the greatest Haitian author of all times. During his short life (he died in 1944) he cultivated a number of literary genres, publishing poems, novels and essays. All these have been collected for the first time in an impressive volume edited by Léon-François Hoffman: Jacques Roumain, *Œuvres complètes*, (Roumain, 2003). Here we find *Bois-d'ébène* (1945), as well as other poetry, the two volumes of short stories, *La proie et l'ombre* (1931) and *Les fantoches* (1931), both dealing with the Haitian upper class, and his two great peasant novels, *La montagne ensorcelée* (1931) and *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), his absolute masterpiece, published only after his untimely death at the age of 37, as well as his essay on the sacrifice of a voodoo drum, *Le sacrifice du tambour-assôtô(r)* (1943).

Jacques Roumain came from a solid *haut bourgeois* background, from a rich mulatto family. His grandfather, Tancrède Auguste, had been president of Haiti for a short period, 1912-13. After studies at the prestigious Saint-Louis de Gonzague school in Port-au-Prince Roumain received a European education (Switzerland, France, Germany, Spain) between the age of sixteen and twenty. Thereafter he returned home and began his literary and political activities, founding the *Revue Indigène*. This was during the time of the American occupation of Haiti (1915-34). Roumain became an outspoken critic of the American presence, and it only took some two years before he was arrested for his political writings and received a one-year prison sentence, which, however, in the end he did not have to serve, only to be arrested again a couple of months later, finally to be freed in a general amnesty of political prisoners at the end of 1929.

In 1931 Roumain met Langston Hughes, who was spending several months in Haiti. This marked the beginning of a life-long friendship between the two, characterized by fertile intellectual cross-fertilization. When the masterly English-language translation of *Gouverneurs de la rosée* appeared in 1947, Hughes (together with Mercer Cook) was the man behind it. Eventually, the triad would be completed with the addition of the Cuban Nicolás Guillén (cf. Cobb, 1979).

After the publication of his collections of short stories and *La montagne ensorcelée*, a stay in New York in 1932, and another period in a Haitian prison

the following year, Roumain founded the Haitian Communist Party in 1934. This earned him a three-year prison sentence. He was out again in June 1936, and left for Brussels two months later. By then, he had spent a total of thirty-two months behind bars, between 1928 and 1936, and his party had been outlawed.

In 1937 Roumain met with Hughes and Guillén in Paris, and eventually moved his family there. During this time he pursued studies in anthropology, continued at Columbia in New York after the outbreak of World War II. In 1940 he was invited to Cuba by Nicolás Guillén to pursue scientific investigations. The following year he was finally allowed to come back to Haiti after a five-year absence. There he was instrumental in establishing the *Bureau d'Ethnologie de la République d'Haïti*, and he became its first president, teaching courses and carrying out research on pre-Columbian Caribbean issues. Between 1942 and 1944 Roumain was in Mexico, appointed by President Lescot as Haitian chargé d'affaires. During this period he worked on the manuscript to *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, which he finished only about a month before his death.

Gouverneurs de la rosée had been translated into 17 languages when Roumain's complete works (Roumain, 2003) were published. The following year, 2004, the number increased to 18, by an edition in Swedish (Roumain, 2004), carried out by Jan Larsson with the assistance of Göran Lundin, the author of the novel *Den svarte generalen* [The Black General], about Toussaint Louverture (Lundin, 1982). It is a welcome addition to the list.

Gouverneurs de la rosée brought international renown to Jacques Roumain, as the first Haitian author. It is the most famous of all Haitian novels, the only one translated into a number of languages. The book is about both ideology and reality, two of the recurrent themes of Haitian literature (cf. the title of Fleischmann, 1969).

On the reality level, it deals with two of the most important problems of the Haitian countryside. The first one is the destruction of the ecological base. When the population grows, the cultivation of food products is extended. Haiti is an extremely mountainous country so in practice this means moving to steeper and steeper hillsides that were formerly either forest-clad or covered with coffee trees that bound the soil. When cultivation expands the trees are uprooted and the heavy tropical rains quickly destroy the soil. This is the main plight of rural Haiti (Lundahl, 1979, Ch. 5, provides a detailed account of the mechanics of the process.).

The protagonist of Roumain's novel is Manuel, a *viejo*, i.e. someone who has been to Cuba, who returns to his native Fonds-Rouge after fifteen years abroad in the sugar *bateyes* [camps] where he has worked as a cane cutter. Economic reasons forced him to emigrate, and when he comes back he finds the village caught in the grip of a prolonged drought, in even worse circumstances than when he left. All the trees that he remembers are gone and only naked rocks are showing. Everyone is hungry and despair is spreading everywhere. The

water that the village needs is nowhere to be found. In the opening sentence of the book, old Délira, Manuel's mother, claims that everyone is going to die. The soil has had to let go of its flesh and blood all the way to the marrow.

The second problem that is dealt with in *Gouverneurs de la rosée* is that of enmity, over one of the perennial objects of quarrel in the Haitian countryside: land. "... the drive to obtain property is an obsession with the Haitian peasant", writes Melville Herskovits in his classic *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Herskovits, 1971:135), which deals with rural Haiti around the same time as when Roumain wrote his novel. Heading the list of coveted assets is land. "Because of a few feet of land a peasant will, if necessary, spend a thousand gourdes at court", remarked one of Herskovits' informants. "... there are few, among the peasants ... who do not seek by all means to add to their heritage, for among those folk the ambition to obtain more and more land is a dominating one. To this end the peasant skimps and saves, depriving himself even of his important needs, until at the proper time some choice parcel comes on the market" (Herskovits, 1971:131, 134).

The land issue is reflected in the novel through the division of the village into two opposing camps. A past land inheritance issue has resulted in the killing of a villager named Dorisca, the father of Gervilen, by Manuel's uncle, Sauveur, setting the family of Manuel against that of Gervilen. It is of course inevitable that the girl with whom Manuel falls in love – Annaïse – comes from the opposing faction. She is the cousin of Gervilen. The novel thus has a Romeo and Juliet story as well. On that level it is a novel about love in the pastoral setting given by the Haitian landscape.

Manuel is a reformer who wants to solve both evils besetting the village of Fonds-Rouge. He realizes the difficulties. In the most sublime passage of the novel he displays his thorough understanding of the erosion problem (Roumain, 1947:24):

But the earth is a battle day by day without truce, to clear the land, to plant, to weed and water it until the harvest comes. Then one morning you see your ripe fields spread out before you under the dew and you say – whoever you are – ‘*Me – I’m master of the dew!*’ and your heart fills with pride. But the earth’s just like a good woman: if you mistreat her, she revolts. I see that you have cleared the hills of trees. The soil is naked, without protection. It’s the roots that make friends with the soil, and hold it. It’s the mango tree, the oak, the mahogany that give it rainwater when it’s thirsty and shade it from the noonday heat. That’s how it is – otherwise the rain carries away the soil and the sun bakes it, only the rocks remain. That’s the truth. It’s not God who betrays us. We betray the soil and receive his punishment: drought and poverty and desolation.

Manuel is obsessed by the necessity of finding water, and he is convinced that he will do so. He spots a flock of wood pigeons in the sky and realizes that they prefer cool places. There must be water somewhere nearby. Manuel follows the pigeons into the mountain where they roost, and there he finds *malangas* [a

root crop], a certain sign of water, and there it is – the spring. He tells Annaïse and brings her to the spot.

The water must, however, be brought from the spring to the village, and this is a heavy task. Manuel preaches the gospel of working together, in a large-scale *koumbit* [the traditional Haitian cooperative work team], instead of fighting each other. In Cuba he has learned the importance of unity among the workers in the face of the powerful sugar companies oppressing them. Wrath is an important asset, but it must be channeled into the right groove, used as a positive force, capable of changing people's living conditions (Roumain, 1947:16): "Being mad makes you grit your teeth and tighten your belt when you are hungry. Being mad is a great power." Manuel has ambitious plans (Roumain, 1947:55-56):

We're *this country*, and it wouldn't be a thing without us, nothing at all. Who does the planting? Who does the watering? Who does the harvesting? Coffee, cotton, rice, sugar cane, cacao, corn, bananas, vegetables, and all the fruits, who is going to grow them, if we don't? Yet with all that, we're poor, that's true. We are out of luck, that's true. But do you know why, brother? Because of our ignorance. We don't know yet what a force we are, what a single force – all the peasants, all the Negroes of plain and hill, all united. Some day, when we get wise to that, we'll rise up from one end of the country to the other. Then we'll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big *coumbite* of farmers, and we'll clear out poverty and plant a new life.

It takes one more killing, however, before the village can be united and the *koumbit* undertaken. The victim is Manuel himself, who is killed by Gervilen as he leaves the house of Larivoire. There he has met with the members of the opposing camp, after having revealed to them that he has found water, and requested their cooperation in the effort of channeling it to the village fields. Gervilen leaves the village. Manuel refuses to reveal his assailant before he dies, urging cooperation instead. The two opposing factions make peace. A *koumbit* is organized to bring the water, and the novel ends with Annaïse expecting Manuel's baby.

On the ideological level, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* is a novel about the power of the collective, the power to overcome hard times and oppression. Roumain's biographer, Carolyn Fowler (1980:229), has called the book a "song of human solidarity". Not very much is said about Manuel's fifteen years in Cuba, but the reader learns that they have been hard. When he comes back home, he has not managed to save a lot and what little savings he has vanish as he has to stage a voodoo ceremony. In Cuba the sugar workers received harsh treatment by landowners and overseers, especially the Haitians: "*Matar a un ... [h]aitiano o a un perro*" – to kill a Haitian or a dog amounts to the same (Roumain, 1947:29). But the workers managed to improve their conditions somewhat by striking and sticking together.

Manuel wants to build the new consciousness and spirit of cooperation that is to pull the inhabitants of Fonds-Rouge out of their lethargy on class

solidarity. It is not men like Gervilen who are the true enemies of the people – they are simply the ignorant victims of the system – but the rich who don't work but simply exploit the poor. "... if work was a good thing, the rich would have grabbed it all up long ago!" says Simidor, the old man who leads the *koumbit* with his drum (Roumain, 1947:29). The *otorite* [public officials] run their errands and it is no coincidence that Hilarion, the *chef de section* [the rural policeman, and the head of the smallest administrative unit in Haiti], is portrayed as a crook and that he is married to an *ex-bouzen* [prostitute] who is currently running a store, exploiting the people in her own way. The relation between the state and its representatives and the masses has never been a happy one in Haiti. Only by uniting as a collective can the poor overcome these structures and take their fate into their own hands.

Jacques Roumain founded the Haitian Communist Party, but is Manuel a revolutionary? This is a difficult question. As Michael Dash (1981:147) has pointed out, "The novel's Marxism is both explicit yet curiously unsatisfactory when examined closely." On the one hand Manuel stands out as the typical revolutionary hero. He has been to Cuba and learnt some of the revolutionary groundwork. He is the enlightened one in the midst of ignorant people, he organizes the peasants around a common, collective, effort: to bring water to the village and distribute it to everybody in an egalitarian fashion, and his end is that of a revolutionary who does not hesitate to put his life at the disposal of the all-important cause, but it is also the death of Christ the Savior, of the individual who without aid has discovered the life-giving water. Manuel the individual is in a sense more important than Manuel the organizer of the collective. The scene where Manuel comes to Lavoire's house and persuades the members of the opposing camp that cooperation is necessary is one of the least convincing in the novel. The real cooperation is the one between Annaïse and himself. The union between the two individuals is a union that symbolizes fertility and the future in exactly the same way as the water does. *Gouverneurs de la rosée* is also a love story, an 'idyllic' one at that (Hoffman, 1995:162), and as such outside the scope of the purely 'proletarian' novel.

Manuel does not fight against the traditional society of rural Haiti. That society has been put out of order in Fonds-Rouge. The soil no longer yields what it used to and the village is divided and passive. This is not traditional Haiti but an anomalous situation that must be changed so as to allow the return of the modest prosperity that was once present and the return of the dignity that used to be present among the villagers instead of the hatred that dominates the village after two killings. Manuel's fight against the drought is simultaneously a fight against the blind irrational hatred. The water cannot bring its blessings unless the village is once more united. Manuel is in this sense more of a primitive rebel in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm (1971), a leader who wants to re-create the

paradise lost, than a Communist revolutionary attempting to turn the established order upside down.

His fight is not primarily that of one class against another either, although there is an oppressor in the village: Hilarion. But he is secondary, and Manuel does not target him. His adversaries are rather the members of his own class: the peasants who have fallen into the fatal passivity that greets him immediately upon entering Fonds-Rouge, and they are not enemies who have to be destroyed or removed for the revolutionary cause to triumph. Instead they have to be enlightened and convinced. Manuel's message is that of unity, forgiveness and reconciliation rather than confrontation.

One of the main characteristics of Manuel is dignity. He stands above the deadly hatred of the two opposing factions of the village. Maybe it is because he has been away for so long that he feels he cannot identify with 'his own' people anymore. Maybe he is simply pragmatic. He has understood that collective action is what counts. In this interpretation, the individual can do nothing on his own. But it may also be something else that gives him dignity. He is not really one of the villagers. He has qualities that go far beyond the ordinary. In the end it is his very death – the sacrifice of Manuel the individual – that leads to the emergence of a new spirit in the village. The analogy with Christ is not far away.

Jacques Roumain belongs to the *Indigéniste* school of Haitian writers. *La montagne ensorcelée* was the first Haitian 'peasant' novel, and as Ulrich Fleischmann (1976:21) has pointed out, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* constitutes something like the beginning of the end of the school. Not much more was published within this tradition. "The ultimate aim of the Indigenists", writes Michael Dash (1981:71), "was the rejection of bland Eurocentric ideals for a more authentic, vital culture", a culture that was uniquely Haitian and which brought the African heritage to the forefront. (One of the sources of inspiration for this movement was precisely the black American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, notably Langston Hughes.) The novel is written in a 'creolized' and slightly archaic, sometimes almost solemn, French, intended to capture the peasant way of speech, and Roumain inserts scenes that are 'typical' of Haitian peasant life: a *koumbit* working on the land, cleaning a field for one of the peasants before sowing and planting, complete with the traditional *banbòch* [feast] offered by the host in the evening and a voodoo ceremony held to thank the *lwa* [spirits] that Manuel has returned home.

The two scenes serve very different purposes and the protagonist relates to them in completely different ways. Manuel is not a true believer in voodoo. His ideology is materialist. The voodoo ceremony to Legba, the guardian of the *kafou*, the crossroad, the *lwa* who establishes the contact between the rest of the pantheon and the mortals is carried out simply because Manuel realizes that the

tradition bids him to do so, not because he worships and honors the *lwa* (Roumain, 1947:68-69):

... I respect the customs of the old folks, but the blood of a rooster or a young goat can't make the seasons change, or alter the course of the clouds and fill them with water like bladders. The other night, at the Legba ceremonies, I danced and sang to my heart's content. I am a Negro, no? And I enjoyed myself like a real Negro. When the drums beat, I feel it in the pit of my stomach. I feel an itch in my loins and an electric current in my legs, and I have got to join the dance. But that's all there is to it for me.

No animal sacrifice to the *lwa* can solve the problems of the peasants. The *koumbit* is another matter altogether. This is a time-honored practical device that builds, not on religion, but on materialist rationality, on class solidarity and on cooperation to achieve a common goal, and Manuel uses it as a metaphor for the mobilization of the Fonds-Rouge peasants in the fight against drought and division and for the possibility of breaking out of a desperate situation through their own effort.

Gouverneurs de la rosée exhibits the traits of a Greek tragedy. On the formal level, the unity of time, place and action is respected. Everything happens in and around the village during just a few weeks and what we learn about Manuel's time in Cuba is what the protagonist himself chooses to tell the villagers. Also, the fate of Manuel is inevitable. It is predetermined by outside forces and Manuel walks right into it without any attempt to protect or save himself. He is not ignorant of the fact that he has a rival who hates him. Gervilen does everything he can to let him know.

The death of Manuel constitutes the beginning of a new cycle in the village. The scene at the end of the novel ends with Annaïse pressing Délira's hand against her belly so she can feel Manuel's baby to be born symbolizes the hope for a better future, but it is a future that will not necessarily materialize. The dark forces are also mobilizing, in the person of Hilarion. When he receives the news of Manuel's death he immediately starts thinking of the opportunities that this event creates: "That Manuel was a nuisance, a rebellious Negro. Now I can get the land from these peasant swine" (Roumain, 1947:146). "Perhaps, he thought, perhaps I could ask Judge Sainville, the Communal Magistrate, to put a tax on that water. I'd get my share and lay it aside. We'll see about that" (Roumain, 1947:173). We cannot be assured that a better life for the villagers has arrived.

Rural Haiti is complex and it does not willingly reveal its secrets. Precisely because of this it has attracted both scientists and writers of fiction over the years. We, however, know a great deal more about it today than we did when Jacques Roumain wrote his works. Scholars like Melville Herskovits (1971), James Leyburn (1941), Paul Moral (1961), Sidney Mintz (1960a, 1960b, 1960c, 1961), Gerald Murray (1977), Wolf Donner (1980), Christian Girault (1981) and Gérard Barthélemy (1989), to mention but a few, as

well as various collective efforts, have made it possible to arrive at a better understanding of the drama of survival that unfolds on the everyday level in the Haitian countryside. Nobody portrayed it better in fiction than Jacques Roumain.

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