

The Very Beautiful Africaness In Baldwin: In Memoriam

by

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They face each other, the Negro and the African,
over a gulf of three hundred years--an alienation
too vast to be conquered in an evening's good-will,
too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech.

James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown"

It is an essay by James Baldwin that may turn out to be perhaps the most important and significant cultural document of black intellectual history in the twentieth century. The significance of this literary text lies in two interrelated portraits that converge at its center: on the one hand, is the analytical description of a cultural conference which for the first time brought together intellectuals, writers and artists from the three corners of the African diaspora; on the other hand, is the remarkable and profound sketch of one of the greatest poets of our closing century, Aime Cesaire. This gathering together of thirty-one years ago, known in our cultural history as the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists, took place for a few days in the month of September 1956 at the Sorbonne University. The conference was principally organized by Alioune Diop, who himself sadly passed away seven years ago, under the auspices of Presence Africaine, then probably one of the most formidable literary and cultural reviews. The Review then had among its contributors colossal intellectuals: Aime Cesaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Albert Camus, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Andre Breton, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Michel Lairis, W.E. B. Du Bois, and the listing could be extended indefinitely. So the calling together of black intellectuals and artists by this Review was a moment of high intellectual and moral seriousness. The range of the intellectual brilliance of the participants at this conference was astonishing: besides the black stellar stars mentioned above (Mphahlele being the exception since he was still in South Africa, Gerald Sekoto, who as already in exile represented us), there were many other fascinating figures, including George Lamming, Richard Wright, Jacques Alexis, Dr. price-Mars, Cheikh Anta Diop . . . The ostensible reason for the gathering was to define Negro Culture, and perhaps tangentially, to bring about the demise of colonialism in Africa and in the African diaspora. It was this gathering that was at the center of James Baldwin's exhilarating essay, "Princes and Powers". By princes one supposes that Baldwin meant black intellectuals and writers, and by powers he intended to designate the then various European colonial systems and imperialisms.

So, the historical project of this gathering was to define the particularisms and universalisms of Negro Culture. The undertaking proved to be intractable. This very intractableness resonates in the classical sadness of Baldwin's essay. He conveys with literary verve, the very verve that places Baldwin among the premier essayists of our century, the lucidity of Alioune Diop's presentation, the indirections of Cheikh Anta Diop, the sobering Confucianisms of Pastor T. Ekollo, the poeticism of Lasebikan, etc. The Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists never specified sufficiently the central construct of Negro Culture. Nonetheless, the historic achievement of this Conference was to make clear to all black intellectuals, revolutionaries, poets and writers thereafter that liberation and culture were inseparable: in fact, that national liberation was a process of cultural renewal. It is to the legacy of this Conference that we owe the two most formidable cultural texts of the African revolution: the great essay by Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture", and Frantz Fanon's powerful essay, "On National Culture", which in fact was presented at the Second Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists that took place in Rome in 1959. Fanon's essay is a critical part of his literary and political masterpiece, *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*. From the lessons he had drawn from the Sorbonne Conference, Fanon, in this essay, was to argue vehemently that there can never be such a thing as Negro culture or black culture or African culture, but only the existence of particular national cultures. The traumatic and tragic events in Africa over the last quarter of a century, have proven the prescient nature of Fanon's judgement. Cabral's unsurpassable essay, in many ways comparable to the best in Antonio Gramsci, will have to be reflected upon on another occasion.

The real centerpiece of Baldwin's essay, "Princes and Powers", was the spectacular intellectual clash between the great black American writer, Richard Wright, and the equally great Martiniquan poet, Aime Césaire. It is this particular clash that has defined a particular moment of our intellectual history. The bone of contention was Richard Wright's praise of European colonialisms for having destroyed and maimed African cultural systems, values and indigenous African belief systems, which he believed to be backward, sterile, reactionary and regressive. Aime Césaire responded very strongly against Wright's formulations and theorizations. Employing his powerful rhetorical skills and poetical density of his prose sentences and logical argumentation, Césaire demolished Richard Wright's thesis. That Baldwin was profoundly impressed by Césaire is apparent in the long quotations which cover long tracts of Baldwin's piece. That Baldwin vehemently disagreed with the position of Wright is apparent also in the structure of his essay. In the main, Césaire, in analyzing the relation between colonialism and culture, argued for a determinate resistance to all forms of penetration by colonialism and neocolonialism. What really impressed Baldwin were several brilliant poetic perorations of Césaire which he quotes extensively, like the

following: "The situation, therefore, in the colonial countries, is tragic. Whenever colonization is a fact the indigenous culture begins to rot. And, among these ruins, something begins to be born which is not a culture on the margin allowed it by European culture. This then becomes the province of a few men, the elite, who find themselves placed in the most artificial conditions, deprived of any revivifying contact with the masses of the people. Under such conditions, this subculture has no chance whatever of growing into an active, living culture . . . In the culture to be born there will no doubt be old and new elements. How these elements will be mixed is not a question to which any individual can respond. The response must be given by the community. But we can say this: that the response will be given, and not verbally, but in tangible facts, and by action . . . We are here to proclaim the right of our people to speak, to let our people, black people, make their entrance on the great stage of history." It cannot be doubted that the cogency of such argumentation, accompanied now and then by rhetorical flourish, deeply affected the young Baldwin. His then dormant ambivalence towards Richard Wright was to flare-up. James Baldwin's love-hate relationship with Richard Wright was to express itself in one of his early essays, "Everybody's Protest Novel". This essay of 1949, which was assembled by him with other of his magisterial essays in 1985 (*The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*), two years before his death, sought to situate Richard Wright's *Native Son* within a literary lineage of American protest novel stretching from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet B. Stowe. Baldwin found this literary tradition to be mediocre, the novels written within it extremely bad, because it tended to formulate the complexity of human behavior in simplistic absolutizing categories. He thought both novels similar in their extremist categorization and consequently forming a paradoxical unity of opposites: the sentimentalism of the nineteenth century novel is related to the 'phobism' of the twentieth century novel. Now, this is very questionable. A careful reading of Baldwin's essay makes clear that he was not really concerned with literary continuities or forms of literary tradition, but rather, more deeply concerned with psychological matters. In actual fact, this essay classically exemplifies and sociologically confirms Harold Bloom's literary theory of 'the anxiety of influence': Baldwin was much more preoccupied with the task of committing patricide than analyzing *Native Son* in and of itself as a brilliant American novel. The American literary tradition in which Richard Wright's novel can with justification be placed is American naturalism which for all intents and purposes was founded by Theodore Dreiser: *Sister Carrie* and *Native Son* have more things in common which reveal the nature of American ideology and culture, than the unity Baldwin sought to draw. Baldwin was to display a greater appreciation of Wright's complex literary mind in an essay written as a memorial upon Richard Wright's death in 1961. In this later essay, Baldwin was attempting to understand the convoluted patterns of a historical process rather than merely mapping a literary space for himself, as had been the case in the earlier essay. In "Alas, Poor

Richard", Wright is examined in relation to the determining forces of American history. Whereas the earlier essay was polemical, the latter essay is meditative, also philosophical. What both these essays reveal is that Baldwin hardly writes with a certainty that he is a culminating point of a particular literary tradition: namely, the black American tradition. It is remarkable and astonishing to contemplate that Baldwin never devoted one of his extraordinary and great essays to an appraisal and evaluation of the Harlem Renaissance, certainly the greatest literary school or movement in black American cultural history. For Baldwin to a large extent the name Harlem signified the detested childhood he wanted to forget, rather than the historical cultural space where his literary predecessors did some marvellous things.

Yet Baldwin has devoted some of the very splendid pages of his essays to characterizing the nature of Harlem. For him Harlem was the social reality which revealed the ugliness, racism and chauvinism of American capitalism and its cultural forms of oppression. In this, he has been a very important corrective to our very South African literary and cultural habit of romantically and nostalgically celebrating Harlem in remembrance of the Harlem Renaissance. Witness the writings of the Sophiatown Renaissance writers attempting to recapture the aura of that by-gone cultural efflorescence: Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nathaniel Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi haunted by Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Alain Locke. Within the cultural arch of the black world, this was the first instance in which a national literary movement had a profound influence on another national literary school. Of course the intellectual importance of the Harlem Renaissance cannot be doubted. In fact, the recent publication of Houston A. Baker's, Jr. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* makes clear the astonishing literary powers of the constellation of black American writers who founded the Harlem literary renaissance. Therefore, it is not surprising that the American literary movement, in many ways, gave rise to the Negritude Movement and the Sophiatown Renaissance.

It is in the essays on the social decay of Harlem, which for him merely indicates the moral degeneracy of white America, that we can see the awakening and development of Baldwin's political consciousness. In "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" and "East River, Downtown" the social awakening of black America is directly related to the political awakening of African peoples: the historical interconnection between the two worlds is analyzed. In the latter essay Baldwin shows how the dastardly role of the United States in Lumumba's death in 1961, which precipitated the first of the many Afro-American riots that haunted that decade, was to compel black Americans to act on their political and historical responsibilities to Africa. To be sure, this acting of Afro-Americans on their political commitments was propelled by the emergence of social movements in the black communities across America: ranging from the Black Muslims through

the Civil Rights Movement to the Student Movements. Therefore, the politicization of Baldwin was intimately connected to the politicization of black America. It is in these circumstances that we encounter Baldwin, the political analyst, rather than Baldwin, the moralist engulfed in pessimism. It is in the essays such as "No Name On the Street" and "The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King", that we find searing and brilliant portraits of, respectively, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. It is perhaps these two men who have been the most remarkable leaders to emerge in America since the Second World War. They define between them, a complex spectrum of political choices in resolving the White Problem concerning black Americans. One great achievement of Baldwin's writings is in teaching us that there is no "Negro Problem" in America, only a White Problem. Hence the salutary warning of "The Fire Next Time".

The Africaness of Baldwin, in the sense of the aura of Africa deeply permeating his consciousness, stretches from his early essays which he wrote on his arrival in Paris in 1948 to a short series of essays on South Africa which appeared in late 1986 in *The New Statesmen*, exactly a year before his passing away. In the early essays, the young Baldwin cartographed the deep cultural unities of the black experience. This search for cultural unities on the part of Baldwin, places him within an intellectual movement which was predominant in the whole black world of the 1930s and 1940s, stretching from the negritude Movement of Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor and others to the Negroismo of Alejo Carpentier, Luis Pales Matos and Nicolas Guillen in Latin America. The controlling focussing point of these later cultural movements was the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. In fact, the world-wide importance of the Harlem Renaissance could be indicated by the fact that it was Langston Hughes who was among the early, if not the first, to translate Jorge Luis Borges in the English language in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The very great Langston Hughes who was to introduce African literature into the American culture in the late 1950s. And all of this makes it all more remarkable that Baldwin never felt impelled or compelled to confront the historical importance of the Harlem Renaissance for his generation of black American writers.

If it was Langston Hughes who introduced Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams and others to black America in his book *The African Treasures*, the old Baldwin was continuing a well established tradition when he sought to indicate the political importance of South Africa for Afro-Americans and the black world. The interconnections between South Africa and Black America are deep rooted and of long duration: stretching from the profound effects in South Africa of the emergence of Afro-American independent churches in the late nineteenth century through the effects of Marcus Garvey's movement on the awakening of political consciousness in the South Africa of the 1930s to Ezekiel Mphahlele's essay of 1957 in *Presence Africaine* on Langston Hughes to his later

magisterial essays on Afro-American literature and culture in the late 1970s in Chinua Achebe's *Okike*. The old Baldwin then, was following within a particular pattern. The later essays of Baldwin on South Africa are a salutary critique of the Apartheid State. But Baldwin goes further, he shows that the ideology of Apartheid is only an extreme expression of Western racism against the peoples of the Third World. These essays are a profound expression of solidarity with the peoples of Africa. This is what constitutes the very beautiful Africaness of James Baldwin.

James Baldwin will always be remembered as one of the great essayists of the twentieth century. He is unquestionably a central part of the American tradition founded by Emerson. There is a deep line of continuity between the essayism of Emerson and that of Baldwin. The position of Baldwin within American Transcendentalism is very problematical because of the racism that continues to ravage America. If today no one remembers much the poetry of Emerson, we do not expect in 1087 that many, if any, of Baldwin's novels will be remembered. It is Baldwin the essayist who forms the crucial part of the black literary imagination. The philosophical weakness evident in Baldwin's strongest essays is a product of a fundamental historical problem of American culture: if Emerson could take Transcendentalism for granted, Baldwin could not, for he was a strong black man. Paradoxically, that is the tragic greatness of Baldwin.