

HUMANISM AND NEGRITUDE

NOTES ON THE CONTEMPORARY

AFRO-AMERICAN NOVEL

The rise of numerous African states to independence and participation in international organizations is only a moment—undoubtedly a very powerful moment—in the extraordinary process of historical acceleration which our epoch has both the misfortune and privilege of witnessing. Future historians will very likely determine that the true revolution of the 20th century was not the Russian revolution or the nuclear revolution. Infinitely more important for the destiny of mankind and civilization is the fact that, for the first time since the beginnings of the human race, the great majority of men have the right and possibility to intervene actively in the consideration of world affairs. This sudden evolutionary leap can only be compared with what hap-

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pened when our Germanic ancestors, fifteen centuries ago, seized from the Roman empire its hitherto uncontested supremacy. One must go back to the 5th century of our era to find an occurrence equally capable of exercising on the future of the human race and the evolution of civilization, consequences as wide and as deep as those which the events we are witnessing today will undoubtedly have. For these new-risen peoples, if only by force of numbers, are inevitably summoned to take not only their own destiny into their hands, but also—and perhaps sooner than is imagined—the destiny of the globe.

Now, these peoples are insufficiently known by the white man, who is as ignorant of the basis of their cultures as of the logic underlying their behavior. Many recent events have made it possible for the white man to become aware of his lack of preparation which often leads him to unduly scorn the behavior of black peoples and their leaders, behavior whose incomprehensibility is willingly attributed to their inexperience, their lack of logic, their naïveté, not to mention their capriciousness or childishness. And given this point of view, certain people are wondering, with a sense of disturbance, whether the 20th century is not the beginning of the end of white civilization, which they readily confuse with all civilization. But that is forgetting that a revolution is never merely the end of something: it is also the beginning of another thing. The massive irruption of the colored peoples upon the scene of history is not going to destroy civilization: it is going to divert it in another direction.

In this regard, it is not without interest—it might even be a source of comfort—to try to define the positive contributions which black peoples, isolated up to now from the main current of history, might furnish toward future humanist orientations. Here is where literature may play an important role, which would consist of helping men to understand each other by the power of the imagination and sensitivity rather than by the coldness of abstraction. And in order to accomplish this, we may make use of a too-little exploited instrument of information: the works, more numerous every year, written in French or English, in which black authors have recorded their own life experience.

Obviously one might wonder to what degree the Afro-

American novel actually reflects African reality. As the Negro poet, Countee Cullen (1903-1946) wrote in *Heritage*:

One or three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

It is true that, although three centuries separate the continent of huts from that of skyscrapers, Negro-American poets have continued to feel a nostalgia toward their ancestral home, which the Caribbean poet Jacques Roumain has chanted in French:

Afrique, j'ai gardé ta mémoire Afrique
Tu es en moi
Comme l'écharde dans la blessure
Comme un fétiche tutélaire au centre du village...

[Africa, I have kept your memory, Africa / You are within me / Like the thorn within the wound / Like the tutelary fetish at the center of the village...]

This romantic *Heimweh* would scarcely have any meaning if circumstances had not conspired to maintain a profound psychological relationship between Americans and Afro-Americans. This explains the very particular place occupied by Negro literature in the vast pattern of American literature. Booker T. Washington said, not without humor, that of all the foreigners who have settled upon the soil of the United States, the Negro is the only immigrant who came there by special invitation, travel expenses paid. This primordial historical fact has given rise to those differences between white and black literature, which, as a specialist on this question, Robert A. Bone, observed, "are the result not of innate 'racial' characteristics but of a distinctive group experience in America. They stem from the group past, with its bitter heritage of slavery, and from the group present, with its bitter knowledge of caste ... They stem from long experience with separate institutions: with a Negro press and a Negro church, Negro hospitals and Negro colleges. They stem from the fact that most Negroes still spend most of their lives within the geographical and cultural confines of a Negro community. These and similar circumstances have combined to produce a distinctive minority culture which is neither obliterated

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by the larger culture nor completely separate from it. The Negro novel, like Negro life in America, is at once alike and different from the novels of white Americans... It is no accident that approximately 85 per cent of the novels written by American Negroes deal principally or exclusively with Negro characters in a Negro setting. This racial emphasis is simply a literary echo of cultural reality." (*The Negro Novel in America*, New Haven, 1958, p. 2).

The black community in the United States therefore, has evolved under conditions of socio-racial subjugation and discrimination which are essentially colonial. Subsisting in a cultural universe closed on all sides, the Negroes of America, like those of Africa, have kept aloof from the vast mixing of cultures characteristic of the entire modern world as well as of the United States. Although they were deprived of their original language, they have managed, with admirable resilience, to maintain their own values, their own ideals; amidst the ever-growing uniformity of world civilization, the price of cosmopolitanism, they have managed to keep alive and fundamentally intact, that African personality for which Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire about 1935 coined the term "Negritude." The Afro-American novel offers us a key to the secrets of this Negritude, destined to bear an important contribution toward the evolution of civilization during the next few centuries.

An Afro-American critic, William S. Braithwaite, observed that the black novel may be divided into two currents: a current of protest and a current of expression. A useful division, and yet in a way artificial. For the very orientation of their protest reveals the profound aspirations of the Negroes and expresses their own sensibility. For this reason, it is possible to discover the fundamental premises of a genuine Negro humanism at the extreme point of the current of protest, in the allegiance of certain black writers to Communism.

Taking advantage of the economic and social crisis in the period between both World Wars, Communism proved very active in all sectors of American life at that time. It soon realized that in its effort to upset the regime, it would be extremely useful to obtain the support of that enormous underprivileged mass, disorganized but full of latent dynamism, con-

stituted by the black population. (It will be remembered that three quarters of a century earlier, the industrial capitalism of the North had similarly used the theme of slavery in its desire to destroy for its own benefit, the supremacy of Southern agrarian capitalism). This was the time when the interracial John Reed Clubs were organized, so called in memory of the journalist John Reed (1887-1920), who had tried to organize a Communist Party in the United States, after the October revolution. The Communist Party set up magazines where young black writers could publish their work. It promised the emancipation of the black race and even went so far as to contemplate the setting-up of an independent Negro republic in the South of the United States.

Attractive as it might seem, it was not Communist ideology which led intelligent and sensitive Negroes into the Party ranks. Richard Wright (1908-1960), the father of the contemporary Afro-American novel, has cast particularly interesting insights in his autobiographical writings upon the true meaning of the momentary attachment of so many Negroes to Communism:

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role... Here, then, was something that I could do, reveal, say. The Communists, I felt, had over-simplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would try to put some of that meaning back. I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them. (*The God that Failed*, London, 1950, pp. 123-125)

But how far the misunderstanding went is clearly revealed when Wright declares: "I wanted to be a Communist, but my kind of Communist. I wanted to shape people's feelings, awaken their hearts." (*Ibid.*, p. 150)

Wright became aware of this tragic misconception on the first of May 1936 when, after having been brutally expelled from a parade "by two white Communists with black Communists look-

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ing on," (*Ibid.*, p. 165) he realized that one chapter of his life had come to an end:

I headed toward home alone, really alone now, telling myself that in all the sprawling immensity of the mighty American continent, the least-known factor of living was the human heart, the least-sought goal of being was a way to live a human life. Perhaps, I thought, out of my tortured feelings I could fling a spark into this darkness. I would try, not because I wanted to but because I felt that I had to if I were to live at all. I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo; and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human. (*Ibid.*, p. 166)

In this grief-stricken break with Communism something essential is revealed, constituting the active nucleus of a black humanism which is profoundly different from white humanism. For the will to reject the abstraction of the "party line" in order to seize the living and the lived, the profound concern with "feeling" and "experience," the need to abolish the anonymity of general theories in order to point up the particular suffering of individuals—all this indicates a kind of "emotional personalism" deeply rooted in the black soul. To quote Senghor: "Here we are in the royal domain of the Negro, which is that of emotion." (*Témoignages sur la poésie du demi-siècle*, Brussels, 1953, p. 52). At the origin of the struggle of the colored peoples against politico-economic subordination and socio-racial segregation, one may discern their pathetic and justifiable desire to be recognized as human beings—and, for them, the essence of humanity is not to be found in intellectual and technological accomplishments but in the capacity to feel and suffer, in communion with the *earth*. As Aimé Césaire wrote, the Negroes are:

ceux qui n'ont inventé ni la poudre ni la boussole
ceux qui n'ont jamais su dompter la vapeur ni l'électricité
ceux qui n'ont exploré ni les mers ni le ciel
mais ceux sans qui la terre ne serait pas la terre
gibbosité d'autant plus bienfaitante que la terre déserte
davantage la terre
silo où se préserve et mûrit ce que la terre a de plus terre
ma négritude n'est une pierre, sa surdité ruée contre
la clameur du jour
ma négritude n'est pas une taie d'eau morte sur l'œil mort
de la terre

ma négritude n'est ni une tour ni une cathédrale
elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol
elle plonge dans la chair ardente du ciel
elle troue l'accablement opaque de sa droite patience.

[Those who have not invented either gunpowder or compass / those who have never known how to tame steam or electricity / those who have not explored either the seas or the sky / but those without whom the earth would not be the earth/ a hump the more beneficent as wasteland is more than earth / silo where that which is most earthly in earth is kept and ripened / my Negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the day's clamour / my Negritude is not a film of dead water on the dead eye of the earth / my Negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral / it plunges into the red flesh of the soil / it plunges into the ardent flesh of the sky / it bores a hole in the dark dejection of its straight patience.]

This primacy of emotion and this telluric and cosmic world-feeling cannot but be compared with the deepest orientations of European Romanticism. There is nothing surprising in this: Romanticism is the expression of modern man's anxiety in the face of the menace weighing upon him as a result of the hypertrophy of reason, science and technology. Although Communism, for tactical purposes, may readily appeal to a sentimental humanism, its mechanistic spirit, its scorn of the individual and its cult of abstract patterns place it clearly at the antipodes of Negro culture. In the eyes of the Negro it is only another expression of the de-humanization afflicting white culture.

The profound conviction that East and West meet in an equal contempt for the individual personality is the principal theme running through the poignant work by Richard Ellison, *Invisible Man*: "That invisibility to which I refer," declares Ellison's hero, "occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality." (*Invisible Man*, New York, 1953, p. 7) Dense, luxuriant, extremely complex, this novel is nevertheless skillfully constructed, describing the growing awareness of this invisibility and blindness in two long episodes, one of which is subsumed under the symbol of paternalism and the other of Communism.

Ellison's hero, is an intelligent and ambitious Negro youth who remains anonymous. As a student in a Southern college financed by Northern philanthropists, he shares the American

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dream of success. He doesn't even conceive of struggling against racial discrimination. Of course, he pretends that he would want to work for the betterment of his people, but in reality he is scornful of the poor, squalid and ignorant Negroes who live in hovels near the University campus. His true aspiration is to become like the whites in order to win their esteem and merit, and to be admitted into their company. The selection of this situation permits Ellison to deal searchingly with the dilemma of the black intellectual. As William Faulkner wrote in *The Mansion*: "No white man will understand Negroes so long as the white man obliges the Negro to be first of all a Negro and then only a man." And several months before his death Richard Wright declared during an interview: "Color is not my country. I'm a human being before being a Negro... I'm opposed to all racial definitions." (*L'Express*, 18 August 1960) Nonetheless, the fact remains that racial distinctions are social and psychological facts. By working for his personal success, Ellison's hero cuts himself off from his people, he destroys within himself the vital feeling of communal solidarity, he de-Negrifies himself, he prepares to become a deserter, a man without roots.

And this corresponds exactly to the desires of those who pay for his education. At the same time as Ellison describes his hero's state of mind he also gives a perspicacious analysis of paternalism as embodied in the character of a New England financier, Mr. Norton. Without questioning the beneficial results of paternalism, he demonstrates, by means of symbolic episodes, its psychological mechanism: the racial problem torments American conscience because the actual situation is in complete opposition to those Christian and equalitarian ideals which the American people pretend to believe in; if northern philanthropists endow the college, it is not so much because of love for the Negroes, as rather to appease their own consciences. Besides, their attitude toward their pupils is made up of an abstract and impersonal good will, inadequate because it rests upon an unbroken sense of superiority, and consequently does not make possible a dialogue between man and man, between equals on a personal level—that dialogue in which the Negroes rightly see the first sign of full recognition of their human dignity. Thus, a first equation is established in which paternalism and racialism coincide in the

same premise: the conviction that the Negro is an inferior being whose own personality warrants neither respect nor attention except on a humorously tolerant folkloristic level, the idea that the black man such as he is, is without value.

As a result of a thoughtless blunder, the young man is expelled from college. He leaves for New York, and in the second part of the novel, comes into contact with an organization called the Brotherhood. This name thinly veils the Communist party. Here one finds one of the basic patterns of the Afro-American novel, so many of whose heroes are tracked down, deceived, or betrayed by their original environment and seek in revolutionary action the fulfillment of their personality and the liberation of their people. Perhaps Richard Wright's lived odyssey is the prototype of these. Like him, Ellison's protagonist hopes to be able to use the power of the Brotherhood in order to build a world where the Negroes would be full human beings, a world where the dignity of persons would be respected, no matter what might be the color of their skins. He wants to express the sensibilities of his outraged people, to give a voice to the conscience of his race. Again, in the wake of Richard Wright, he soon understands the extent of his illusion. As Brother Jack, one of the members of the Brotherhood says, "We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to tell them." (*Invisible Man*, p. 408) The Brotherhood intends to make use of the emotional energies in Harlem for ends in which the emancipation of the black people only plays a very subordinate role. When tactics demand it, the Brotherhood sends our hero to make speeches elsewhere on the woman problem, and allows the cells which he has set up in Harlem to break up in utter inefficiency.

Thus, a second equation is established in which paternalism and Communism meet in the same contempt for the living concrete individual. Of course, the Brotherhood does not consider its black members as sub-human beings. But neither does it consider them as persons. For it, a man is only an abstraction and an instrument, as the young man realizes at the end of his second experience:

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I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men... For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton... merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton... to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except I now recognized my invisibility. (*Ibid.*, p. 439)

This impartial criticism launched against the three main attitudes (racialism, paternalism, communism) of white society with regard to colored peoples, singularly widens the scope of Ralph Ellison's observations: it is white civilization itself which is thus put on trial. Obviously, it must be recognized that the Negroes, whether in Africa or in America, have made contact only with the most disreputable aspects of white civilization: its technological materialism, its lust for power, its dehumanization of the individual reduced to a function. Nevertheless, during the course of the past half century, numerous artists and thinkers have denounced the growing tendency of our civilization to ignore the rights and dignity of the human being. All the proletarian novels between both world wars are a protest against the habit of modern society to consider the individual as an anonymous instrument, interesting only to the extent that he fulfils his function in the economic mechanism. And they are in protest, also, against the internal degradation of the individual himself who consequently loses his emotional richness and spiritual depth in order to be reduced to a mediocre core of instincts and interests. Nor can one ignore the fact that there has developed in European and American 20th century literature a neo-exoticism exemplified by E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence, by Paul Morand and André Malraux, and whose most recent example is a very mediocre novel by Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King*. These writers hoped to find in other, less materialistic cultures, whether in the Far East or in Mexico, in India or in Africa, the antidote to an evil which Forster called: "the under-developed heart." Surely this self-criticism exhibits a romantic utopianism which seems typically Western. It was

Rousseau who gave this romanticism its most familiar shape, but it is not sufficiently known that even at the end of the 16th century, Ronsard considered as an earthly paradise, the America which had been discovered not so long before, and where, he believed,

... le peuple incognu

Erre innocemment tout farouche et tout nu,
D'habit tout aussi nu qu'il est nu de malice,
Qui ne cognoist les noms de vertu ny de vice,
De Senat ny de Roy, qui vit à son plaisir,
Porté de l'appétit de son premier désir,
Et qui n'a dedans l'ame ainsi que nous empreinte
La frayeur de la loy qui nous fait vivre en crainte,
Mais suivant sa nature est seul maistre de soi,
Soymesme est sa loy, son Senat et son Roy.

(*Œuvres complètes*, Paris, 1914-1919, V, p. 154)

[Innocent, naked, unknown, the savage folk wander, / Nude of clothing as they are nude of malice, / Knowing neither the names of virtue nor of vice, / Of Senate or of King; living as they please, / Swept by the hunger of their first desire, / Their souls free of what in us is stamped: / Terror of the law which makes us live in dread, / But following nature alone are masters of themselves / Themselves their law, their Senate and their King.]

It would seem, therefore, that regarding its aspect of protest, the Afro-American novel joins hands with a long western tradition inspired by fear of the bondage of the individual, first to political, then to economic, and ultimately to technological and ideological mechanisms. It might be said in passing that here may be found the psychological and moral roots of a political attitude called positive neutralism, too often attributed to a sordid bargaining spirit.

The revolution of the colored peoples against white civilization sometimes takes the form of a deliberate return to ancestral savagery, as when Césaire cries: "Because we hate you and your reason we utter our protest in the precocious madness and flaming folly of tenacious cannibalism!" However, it must be admitted that up until recent years it would have been difficult for colored peoples, impotent in the face of the enormous material and intellectual superiority of the white world, to conceive of a positive solution to their problems. One may observe that Afro-American novels devoted to racial conflicts often end on a conspicuously

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weak conclusion. After having vigorously and pertinaciously denounced the evils of the time, the writers have been incapable of proposing a concrete realistic therapy. It is significant that Ellison's novel rejects both paternalistic reformism and revolutionary Communism, but does not even try to offer a valid alternative: at the end of the book the hero abandons the struggle and withdraws into solitude with the pious hope that he will some day see things more clearly. Directed toward the criticism of conditions which were still prevailing ten years ago, the Afro-American novels which grew out of the current of protest, have perforce a rather negative character. Men like Wright and Ellison rose up against contemporary society in the name of an emotional personalism which they defined only in vague general terms, and of which one might legitimately wonder whether it has any more validity than the Utopian naturalism of a Lawrence of the romantic orientation of so many others.

But since then, the situation has changed considerably. Most of black Africa is independent and the accession of the Negroes of America to the full exercise of their constitutional rights is only a question of a little time. Already today on the international scene the colored peoples hold a political power that cannot be easily overlooked, with the result that they are being courted from all sides. It is clear that in the long run their influence will overflow the bounds of politics to act upon the evolution of civilization itself. That is why the problem of their identity is no longer of interest to anthropologists only. All mankind will, within the centuries and perhaps the decades to come, feel the impact of their promotion to an active role in the theatre of history. Once this is understood, it may be seen how important are those Negro works directed not toward protest, but toward the expression of the black personality formulated in terms accessible to the white reader.

In a novel written in French, *L'Aventure ambiguë*, Hamidou Kane, a Senegalese Muslem writer, puts the following words in the mouth of one of his characters: "We are among the last men in the world to possess God as he really is in His Unity." (p. 23) But the first concrete manifestation of this exalted sentiment which Kane offers in his book is also the most absurd, if not the most repugnant, which could be conceived for a

western mind: the old Islamic master compels, if necessary by brutal means, his young black pupils to recite the Koran by heart in Arabic, which they do not understand! Under this apparently inept formalism there is gradually revealed a profound veneration of the Divine, an intense perception of the world as mystery, a sharpened sense of the spiritual.

It may be that this pattern results inevitably from the very nature of the subject. Perhaps the Negro writer who wants to make the spirit of his race available to the imagination of other peoples can do no other than take as his point of departure as "savage" or "primitive" a situation as possible, in order to permit its internal logic and moral significance to emerge bit by bit. At any rate, a similar pattern is found in James Baldwin's beautiful novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a very elaborated and even, in a sense, very classical work, since the author skillfully utilizes the most modern techniques, counter-point, flashback, interior monologues, while thoroughly respecting the unities of time and place—a work, above all, which is revealing to the highest degree. For Baldwin has renounced the choice theme of his predecessors, the racial struggle. His story develops entirely in Harlem, in the family of a modest deacon of an obscure sect pompously called the Temple of the Fire Baptized, that is to say, in a relatively undeveloped environment, little touched by Americanism, and by the same token, representative of an authentic black sensibility.

As Hamidou Kane has done, James Baldwin begins his novel with a scene which at first glance is shocking, a description of a Sunday service in the church:

The Sunday morning service began when Brother Elisha sat down at the piano and raised a song...then Elisha hit the keys, beginning at once to sing, and everybody joined him, clapping their hands, and rising, and beating the tambourines...

They sang with all the strength that was in them, and clapped their hands for joy. There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder. Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed, it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real... Something happened to their faces and their voices, the rhythm of their bodies, and to the air they breathed; it was as though wherever they might be became the upper room, and the Holy Ghost were riding on the air. His father's face, always awful, became more awful now; his father's daily anger was transformed into prophetic wrath. His mother, her eyes raised

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to heaven, hands arced before her, moving, made real for John that patience, that endurance, that long suffering, which he had read of in the Bible and found so hard to imagine.

On Sunday mornings the women all seemed patient, all the men seemed mighty. While John watched, the Power struck someone, a man or woman; they cried out, a long, wordless crying, and, arms outstretched like wings, they began the Shout. Someone moved a chair a little to give them room, the rhythm paused, the singing stopped, only the pounding feet and the clapping hands were heard; then another cry, another dancer; then the tambourines began again, and the voices rose again, and the music swept on again, like fire, or flood, or judgment. (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*, New York, 1953, pp. 7-9)

In this passage are combined those elements which are so striking and enchanting to the romantic tourist and the journalist in quest of exoticism: Negro spirituals, ritual dances to the rhythm of drums, shouts and ecstatic contortions. But the true question is to determine whether this surface primitivism, which combines ancestral rites—memories of an ancient African and pagan tradition—with Christian liturgy, reveal only savagery and superstition; or else, on the contrary, validly express a genuine moral and spiritual experience. Now, the theme of the novel cannot be reduced to the picturesqueness in which it is swathed; it lies, rather in an ethical realm: it is the religious and moral crisis which John Grimes, the Deacon's adopted son, undergoes on his fourteenth birthday.

Like all gifted adolescents coming from a socially inferior environment, John is drawn between two contradictory aspirations. On the one hand, he is conscious of his superiority over those around him. His sensibility is grievously wounded by the miserable squalor in which his family and the other Negroes in Harlem live. In his eyes, Harlem is a narrow way... "where the streets and the hallways and the rooms were dark, and where the unconquerable odor was of dust, and sweat, and urine, and homemade gin." (*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37) This is the road of the cross, where "...there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's, and a job like his father's, where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil." (*Ibid.*, p. 37) John longs for self-realization and the material compensations of success. For his naive imagination, to succeed in life means to be well fed, to wear fine clothes, to go to the films as often

as one wishes, to drink real Scotch and to smoke Lucky Strikes. In his eyes, success and freedom are symbolized by Broadway, whose very name here is full of symbolic suggestiveness, the broad way leading to richness, power—all the pleasures of life.

On the other hand, John is vaguely aware of the price which Broadway makes one pay. He knows that the world of success is also the world of emotional isolation, indifference and hostility, the modern jungle where the merciless combat of selfish interest takes place. At the very moment when he abandons himself to the fascination of Manhattan, "He remembered the people he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him." (*Ibid.*, p. 36) On the contrary, the world of renunciation is also that of the family, of the community, where the individual is not alone, but feels himself surrounded by the solicitude of his people. And in the 42nd Street movie house where he goes to celebrate his birthday by seeing a story of passion and decay,

...John thought of Hell, of his soul's redemption, and struggled to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit. But there was none, for he had been raised in the truth. He could not claim, as African savages might be able to claim, that no one had brought him the gospel. His father and mother and all the saints had taught him from his earliest childhood what was the will of God. Either he arose from this theater, never to return, putting behind him the world and its pleasures, its honors, and its glories, or he remained here with the wicked and partook of their certain punishment. Yes, it was a narrow way—and John stirred in his seat, not daring to feel it God's injustice that he must make so cruel a choice. (*Ibid.*, pp. 45-46)

John makes this choice in the course of a Sunday service similar to that which Baldwin described at the beginning of his book, and which constitutes the narrative frame of the entire novel. But although this ceremony takes place in the sordid little Harlem church, although the novice rolls about in the dust, and although the faithful prance about to the rhythm of tambourines, shouting inarticulate cries, it is certainly a lofty moral and almost mystical experience which takes place in this setting where the outward observer would find only subjects for curiosity or perhaps disgust.

Certainly, Baldwin's characters seem primitive to the western reader trained to the doctrines of self-control, concealment of passions, restraint and skepticism. Their feelings are without

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moderation. Their emotions are different, changeable, powerful. They pass without transition from laughter to tears, from hatred to love, from rage to terror. Only indifference is unknown to them. Only Dostoyevsky's heroes show a similar and as obviously genuine exaltation. However, these violent emotions are related to moral values: the search for goodness, the flight from evil, the remorse for sin, the education of children, obedience to the will of God, acceptance of suffering. And undoubtedly the most significant trait of Baldwin's heroes is the exceptional integration of the emotional, moral and physical elements of their personality. They do not suffer from any dissociation of self. They react with all their being in the face of any situation. With them the deed coincides with the movements of the soul and the heart, and the physical rites by which their devotion is externalized, have an authentic spiritual resonance. The ardors of their faith are not separated from physical expressions of enthusiasm. The rhythmic dance is an appeal. Ecstasy is expressed by catalepsy. The contortions of the body reflect the torments of the soul and the ineffable expresses itself in tears. What we have here is a well known phenomenon, the significance of which Aldous Huxley emphasized in *Ends and Means*:

Most savage peoples and even certain devotees of the higher religions make use of repeated rhythmical movement as a method of inducing unusual states of mind. This rhythmic movement may take almost any form, from the solitary back-and-forward pacing of the Catholic priest reading his breviary, to the elaborate ritual dances of primitives all over the world. The repetition of rhythmical movement seems to have much the same effects as the repetition of verbal formulas or phrases of music: It lulls to rest the superficial part of the consciousness and leaves the deeper mind free either to concentrate on ultimate reality (as in the case of the solitary priest, pacing up and down with his breviary), or to experience a profound sense of solidarity with other human beings and with the presiding divinity (as happens in the case of ritual dancers). Christianity, it would seem, made a great mistake when it allowed the dance to become completely secularized. For men and women of somatotonic type, ritual dances provide a religious experience that seems more satisfying and convincing than any other. (*Ends and Means*, London, 1951, p. 232)

The interest of Baldwin's novel resides in the fact that it establishes in the eyes of the imagination the concrete, physical and emotional, reality of this observation. He shows that his characters' emotionalism, their tears, their gesticulations have a

moral and metaphysical content which has nothing to do with being savage or infantile. He shows that these external expressions are capable of revealing a singularly keen spiritual insight. He gives life to men and women, among whom cerebral agreement is not separated from emotional assent; among whom belief engages the entire being; among whom thought, emotion and action are based upon a total monolithic attitude of their entire personality.

This spontaneous integration is not the only trait sharply separating black and white heroes. The central problem of Baldwin's novel is the choice which John Grimes must make at the moment he becomes a man responsible for his actions. This choice works selectively: the soul distinguishes impulses in itself which are good and which it must follow, and by an excruciating act, discards its own impurities. That is why the third and last part of the book is entitled "The Threshing-Floor." It is here that John, in the course of a terrifying inward experience, obtains the clear vision of the way he must follow, and also of the wrenching-away which his choice implies, and the sufferings and temptations that it will bring to him. But in this terrible crisis in which a man's soul is born, John is not alone as are Mauriac's adolescents: "On this threshing-floor the child was the soul that struggled to the light, and it was the church that was in labor, that did not cease to push and pull, calling on the name of Jesus." (Baldwin, p. 148) The image, brutally obstetrical, has a literal as well as a figurative meaning. The other members of the faith physically help in the birth of John's soul, dancing and singing around him, leaning over him to help him in his prayers, crying and praying, moaning and weeping as in child-birth. The church is not a collective abstraction; the community is a living entity and this participation of everyone in the life of everyone, is almost inconceivable for western individualism. It is undoubtedly a form of that clan feeling so powerful among colored peoples and whose moral virtues are so often overlooked while stressing its economic disadvantages. This in no way signifies that Baldwin's characters live in the idyllic harmony naively imagined by our romantics. Like all human beings they are subject to jealousy and anger, envy and hate. What does matter is the intensity of their feelings for each other; it is the evident fact that

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the only attitude which would be foreign to them is that indifference to others which so often imprisons western man in an individualistic solitude under the guise of well-bred tolerance.

Emotional personalism, the natural integration of the personality, spontaneous spirituality, an instinctive communal sense—the Afro-American novel offers in action a series of values which the white world has long yearned for. Are these specifically African values? It is true that when Richard Wright visited Ghana he wrote: “I was black and they were black, but that did not help us understand each other at all” (*Black Power*, London, 1954). It is just as true that at the present time, one can no more consider Wright—important as may have been his seminal role—as the representative par excellence of the Afro-American novel. At the same time as his work struggles against racial discrimination, it tends to deny the existence of a black cultural identity which his successors, on the contrary, seek to define. The gap separating Wright from his successors may already be perceived in the matter of style. While the author of *Native Son* made talented use of the objective, stripped, taut style of Hemingway, a Ralph Ellison gives free rein to a lyrical fluency, a verbal richness, and a gift of imagery and symbolism which characterize peoples whose literary tradition is essentially oral. And the contemporary African feels fully at home in the world described by James Baldwin. Today, the Afro-American novel does not only express the aspirations of a minority people in the United States; it reflects, rather, the deepest characteristics of an entire continent.

Under this aspect, the interest of the Afro-American novel extends far beyond the limits of literature. “The justifiable complaints,” writes Janheinz Jahn, “being raised at present in all parts of the western world, deploring the fact that the technological epoch is also the epoch of cultural levelling, that cultures are becoming more and more indistinguishable from each other, and that the old world is becoming ‘boring’, may be interpreted as an appeal for qualitative aspects of reality. African culture brings an answer to this appeal..., while European civilization can bring African culture those things, those material elements which it needs. If European culture would take clear cognizance of itself in its present state, it cannot permit itself, and especially

during the machine age, to desire the disappearance of African culture. On the contrary; nothing is more necessary to it than a style in which meaning and significance might express themselves, instead of the alternative between pursuing a goal considered as an end in itself, and the complete absence of a goal, which is nothing else but the negation of the very idea of a goal." (*Muntu*, Paris, 1961, p. 227) It would be foolish to imagine that this cross-fertilization of cultures which is the major event of our time can take place without clashes or loss on one side or the other. Some incompatibilities exist which seem irrevocable. For example, one may observe that the most ethereal spirituality seems quite unconcerned about hygienic and medical preoccupations. And it would seem difficult to achieve such a reciprocal adaptation of modern technology and the small organic communities of underdeveloped societies—an adaptation which has been hoped for by thinkers like Herbert Read and Aldous Huxley, who may sound somewhat utopian. Nevertheless, the syncretism will inevitably take place, and the African novel, whether it comes from America or the black continent, is a privileged mode of expression, more capable than any abstract studies, of formulating and communicating the intimate and vital realities of which modern humanity, black as well as white, so urgently needs to become aware.