

NEGRO CRITICS ON NEGRO LITERATURE

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When Europeans think about American Negro literature they usually contrast it with literature produced by white Americans and tend to overlook the fact of controversial ideas among black Negro writers concerning literature.

As early as 1926, a Negro poet and fiction writer, Langston Hughes, said that he pitied young Negro poets who say: "I want to be a poet — not a Negro poet", which really means: "I would like to be white". This according to Hughes, is a dangerous desire to run away from his race, for "no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself." The urge toward whiteness is running away from one's own race into the American standardization. Especially the representatives of Negro bourgeoisie try to be "like white folks". Fortunately the majority of Negroes are not like that. There are still "the low-down folks" who remain true to themselves and they "furnish a wealth of colourful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations" (Hughes 1975:471—72). Hughes also complains that American Negro artists and writers become appreciated by their own community only when they get some praise from the white critics. He quotes the case of Charles Gilpin, who got acclaim from his own people only when Broadway noticed him, and similar stories of Chesnutt, Dunbar and Jean Toomer, who were not appreciated as writers by either the white or the black critics for a long time.

At the same time a black critic and writer, George S. Schuyler, stated that Negro art and Negro writing produced in America are not truly those of Negro race. Whatever they produce is really as Negro American as folk dancing and music produced by the Appalachian highlanders is characteristic of the Caucasian race (Schuyler 1975:467).

If Schuyler is right then the problem discussed by Hughes does not really

exist: as you cannot avoid being like other Americans even when your skin is black, it does not matter if you consciously try to be "like white people". The problem whether a black writer is a Negro writer or just an American writer who happens to be a Negro reappeared when the whole discussion took the form of a questionnaire. A Symposium prepared the following questions in *The crisis* in 1926:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters, is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?

2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?

3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?

4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?

5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as "Porgy" received?

6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?

7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?... (quoted in *Negro in art* 1926:479).

The answers of the Negro writers and literary critics (Jessie Fausset, Benjamin Brawley, Georgia Douglas Johnson) were mostly "No" to the first question, demanding objectivity of the artists at the same time. The answer to the second question was also negative with the proviso that the author should not always choose to describe the worst types stimulated by malice.

Answers to the third questions differed: some respondents said that publishers must consider a return on the investment of their money, others that especially white readers will like to have Negro characters to be as similar to them as it is possible.

Answers to the fourth question either demanded definite protest on the part of the Negroes or finding a way to truthful portrayal through any possible channel.

Again the next two questions were accepted as valid by the majority of answers with some indignation against the white publishers with preconceived ideas about what is really and essentially Negroid "When it is fully realized

that 'a man's a man' the problems will cease to exist'', says Georgia Douglas Johnson (1926:481).

A much better known critic and poet, Countee Cullen, adds in his answer that there is a derogative type of the Negro fictional character which already exists and should be fought against, as this is

an ignorant, burly, bestial person, changing somewhat today, though not for the better, to the sensual habitué of dives and loose living, who represents to the mass of white readers the be-all and end-all of what constitutes a Negro (Cullen 1926:482).

Another well-known Negro writer, Charles W. Chesnutt, is perhaps the first among the speakers who argues strongly for well written Negro literature as the real answer to all the questions. He is definitely against "color line in literature" and stresses the fact that Negro characters and Negro problems offer as much good material for good writing as those referring to the white population.

In a slightly similar tone, W.E.B. Du Bois at the Chicago conference of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) advocated truth as the primary criterion for Negroes writing about themselves regardless of the pressures of publishers who often want the distorted image of the Negro in what they publish.

When the eminent writers appeared on the scene of black literature, the discussion shifted to interpretation and criticism of their work. Frequently they criticized each other, as was the case with the famous Baldwin—Wright controversy over Wright's *Native son* in the fifties. James Baldwin attacked the novel in an essay "Everybody protest novel" in which he suggested that Wright's protest was not very far from the attitude of Harriett Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's cabin*. According to Baldwin, Bigger Thomas does not try to be himself — he tries to be white:

All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through this violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood. Below the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh... For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold and hungry, not even that he is American, black; but he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained therefore to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult — that is accept it (Baldwin 1955: 17).

Wright was deeply offended by the criticism and accused Baldwin of having betrayed not only him but all the American Negroes by his attack on protest literature. They had never been reconciled. Baldwin tells the detailed

story of their disagreement in an essay "Alas, poor Richard" written after Wright's death.

The old problem whether a Negro brought up in America can escape being an American returned. Baldwin discussed it in two collections of essays: *Notes of a native son* (1955) and another, under a significant title: *Nobody knows my name* (1961). Baldwin began to reflect upon the problem especially after feeling the impact of Europe. So the first essay in the second collection is entitled: "The discovery of what it means to be an American" and starts with a quotation from Henry James: "It is a complex fate to be an American". According to Baldwin, an American writer discovers only in Europe "just how complex this fate is". He continues:

America's history, her aspirations, her peculiar triumphs, her even more peculiar defeats, and her position in the world — yesterday and today — are all so profoundly and stubbornly unique that the very word 'America' remains a new, almost completely undefined and extremely controversial proper noun. No one in the world seems to know exactly what it describes, not even we motley millions who call ourselves Americans.

Baldwin left America because he doubted his "ability to survive the fury of the color problem". He wanted to save himself from becoming "merely a Negro" or "merely a Negro writer". What he discovered in Europe was that he was "as American as any Texas G. I."

It turned out to make very little difference that the origins of white Americans were European and mine were African — they were no more at home in Europe than I was. The fact that I was the son of a slave and they were the sons of free men meant less, by the time we confronted each other on European soil, than the fact that we were both searching for our separate identities. When we had found these, we seemed to be saying, why, then, we would no longer need to cling to the shame and bitterness that had divided us so long (Baldwin 1961 : 17-18).

In 1960 a conference was organized on the subject: *The Negro writer and his roots*. A Negro critic and writer, Jay Saunders Redding, took up this subject stating that "American situation has complex and multivarious sources and these sources sustain the emotional and intellectual life of American Negro writers". But:

...first, I suppose you must grant me, if only for the sake of this brief exposition, that the American Negro writer is not just an American with a dark skin. If he were, I take it, the theme of this conference would be mighty silly and the conference itself superfluous. This granted, you want to know what the frame of reference is, and about this I shall be dogmatic...

The human condition, the discovery of self. Community. Identity. Surely this must be achieved before it can be seen that a particular identity has a relation to a common identity, commonly described as human. This is the ultimate that the honest writer seeks. He knows that the dilemmas, the perils, the likelihood of ca-

tastrophe in the human situation are real and that they have to do not only with whether men understand each other but with the quality of man himself. The writer's ultimate purpose is to use his gifts to develop man's awareness of himself so that he, man, can become a better instrument for living together with other men. This sense of identity is the root by which all honest creative effort is fed, and the writer's relation to it is the relation of the infant to the breast of the mother (Redding 1971 : 352-55).

A little later (1964) Hoyt W. Fuller in the essay "The role of the Negro writer in the era of struggle", gives examples of writers who were fighting for human rights, as Thomas Paine, and criticized the existent American situation or fled "the American nightmare" like Henry James, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway and ... James Baldwin. He sums up:

And that, ultimately, states the problem and defines the protagonists. The problem concerns the human freedom and dignity, and those who believe in it have joined battle with those who do not. It may be that some black writers being only human and therefore frail, can stand aside and pursue only their Muse. But in this era of struggle, as in all the others which have preceded it, such men are not easy to imagine (Fuller 1971 : 392).

At the same time something of the idea that a black writer should have an independent aesthetics survives in the essay by Addison Gayle written in 1969 and entitled: "Cultural strangulation: black literature and white aesthetics". It is true, says Gayle, that Americans of all races, colours and creed share a common cultural heredity. But within this heredity starting with ancient literature and Plato white was the symbol of goodness and beauty while dark and black were symbolic of evil. And this must be changed by Negro writers:

The acceptance of the phrase "Black is Beautiful" is the first step in the destruction of the old table of the laws and the construction of the new ones, for the phrase flies in the face of the whole ethos of the white aesthetics. The step must be followed by serious scholarship and hard work; and black critics must dig beneath the phrase and unearth the treasure of beauty lying deep in the untoured regions of the Black experience-regions where others, due to historical conditioning and cultural deprecation, cannot go (Gayle 1971 : 374).

In this way the discussion of how American Negro literature should be written returned to the question raised in the twenties: Is a Negro writer an American with a black skin or are his roots more important than his nationality and require special aesthetics?

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