

Interlude

Slavery and "Americanness"*

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For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as "knowledge." This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence – which shaped our body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture – has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular "Americanness" that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. This agreement is made about a population that preceded every American writer of renown and was, I have come to believe, one of the most furtively radical impinging forces on the country's literature. The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.

These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature – individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of

innocence coupled with figurations of death and hell – are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population. Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restrictions to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence – one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows.

(...) What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary “blackness”, the nature – even the cause – of literary “whiteness.” What is it *for*? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as “American”?

(...) How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an Africanist other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter? What does the inclusion of Africans or African-Americans do to and for the work? As a reader my assumption had always been that “nothing” happens: Africans and their descendants were not, in any sense that matters, *there*; and when they were there, they were decorative – displays of the agile writer’s technical expertise (...) As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this (...)

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Bernard Bailyn has provided us with an extraordinary investigation of European settlers in the act of becoming Americans. I want to quote a rather long passage from his *Voyagers to the West* because it underscores the salient aspects of the American character I have been describing:

William Dunbar, seen through his letters and diary, appears to be more fictional than real – a creature of William Faulkner’s imagination, a more cultivated Colonel Sutpen but no less mysterious. He too, like that strange character in Absalom! Absalom!, was a man in his early twenties who appeared suddenly in the Mississippi wilderness to stake out a claim to a large parcel of land, then disappeared to the Caribbean, to return leading a battalion of ‘wild’ slaves with whose labor alone he built an estate where before there had been nothing but trees and uncultivated soil. But he was more complex than Sutpen, if no less driving in his early ambitions, no less a progenitor of a notable southern family, and no less a part of a violent biracial world whose tensions could lead in strange directions. For this wilderness planter was a scientist, who would later correspond with Jefferson on science and exploration, a Mississippi planter whose contributions to the American Philosophical Society (to which Jefferson proposed him for membership) included linguistics, archaeology, hydrostatics, astronomy, and climatology, and whose geographical explorations were reported in widely known publications. Like Sutpen an exotic figure in the plantation world of early Mississippi – known as ‘Sir’ William just as Sutpen was known as ‘Colonel’ – he too imported into that raw, half-savage world the niceties of European culture: not chandeliers and costly rugs, but books, surveyor’s equipment of the finest kind, and the latest instruments of science.

“Dunbar was a Scot by birth, the youngest son of Sir Archibald Dunbar of Morayshire. He was first educated by tutors at home, then at the university at Aberdeen, where his interest in mathematics, astronomy, and belles-lettres took mature shape. What happened to him after his return home and later in London, where he circulated with young intellectuals, what propelled, or led, him out of the metropolis on the first leg of his long voyage west is not known. But whatever his motivation may have been, in April 1771, aged only twenty-two, Dunbar appeared in Philadelphia ...

“Ever eager for gentility, this well-educated product of the Scottish enlightenment and of London’s sophistication – this bookish young lit-

térateur and scientist who, only five years earlier, had been corresponding about scientific problems – about ‘Dean Swifts beatitudes,’ about the ‘virtuous and happy life,’ and about the Lord’s commandment that mankind should ‘love one another’ – was strangely insensitive to the suffering of those who served him. In July 1776 he recorded not the independence of the American colonies from Britain, but the suppression of an alleged conspiracy for freedom by slaves on his own plantation ...

“Dunbar, the young érudit, the Scottish scientist and man of letters, was no sadist. His plantation regime was, by the standards of the time, mild; he clothed and fed his slaves decently, and frequently relented in his more severe punishments. But 4,000 miles from the sources of culture, alone on the far periphery of British civilization where physical survival was a daily struggle, where ruthless exploitation was a way of life, and where disorder, violence, and human degradation were commonplace, he had triumphed by successful adaptation. Endlessly enterprising and resourceful, his finer sensibilities dulled by the abrasions of frontier life, and feeling within himself a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctly new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world.

Let me call attention to some elements of this portrait, some pairings and interdependencies that are marked in the story of William Dunbar. First there is the historical connection between the Enlightenment and the institution of slavery – the rights of man and his enslavement. Second, we have the relationship between Dunbar’s education and his New World enterprise. The education he had was exceptional and exceptionally cultivated: it included the latest thought on theology and science, an effort perhaps to make them mutually accountable, to make one support the other. He is not only a “product of the Scottish enlightenment” but a London intellectual as well. He read Jonathan Swift, discussed the Christian commandment to love one another, and is described as “strangely” insensitive to the suffering of his slaves. On July 12, 1776, he records with astonishment and hurt surprise a slave rebellion on his plantation: “Judge my surprise ... Of what avail is kindness & good usage when rewarded by such ingratitude.” “Constantly bewildered,” Bailyn goes on, “by his slaves’ behavior ... [Dunbar] recovered two

runaways and condemned them to receive 500 lashes each at five different times, and to carry a chain & log fixt to the ancle.”

I take this to be a succinct portrait of the process by which the American as new, white, and male was constituted. It is a formation with at least four desirable consequences, all of which are referred to in Bailyn’s summation of Dunbar’s character and located in how Dunbar felt “within himself.” Let me repeat: “a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world.” A power, a sense of freedom, he had not known before. But what had he known before? Fine education, London sophistication, theological and scientific thought. None of these, one gathers, could provide him with the authority and autonomy that Mississippi planter life did. Also this sense is understood to be a force that flows, already present and ready to spill as a result of his “absolute control over the lives of others.” This force is not a willed domination, a thought-out, calculated choice, but rather a kind of natural resource, a Niagara Falls waiting to drench Dunbar as soon as he is in a position to assume absolute control. Once he has moved into that position, he is resurrected as a new man, a distinctive man – a different man. And whatever his social status in London, in the New World he is a gentleman. More gentle, more man. The site of this transformation is within rawness: he is backgrounded by savagery.

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I want to suggest that these concerns – autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power – not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as a rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.

Autonomy is freedom and translates into the much championed and revered “individualism”; newness translates into “innocence”; distinctiveness becomes difference and the erection of strategies for

maintaining it; authority and absolute power become a romantic, conquering "heroism," virility, and the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others. All the rest are made possible by this last, it would seem – absolute power called forth and played against and within a natural and mental landscape conceived of as a "raw, half-savage world."

Why is it seen as raw and savage? Because it is peopled by a nonwhite indigenous population? Perhaps. But certainly because there is ready to hand a bound and unfree, rebellious but serviceable, black population against which Dunbar and all white men are enabled to measure these privileged differences.

Eventually individualism fuses with the prototype of Americans as solitary, alienated, and malcontent. What, one wants to ask, are Americans alienated from? What are Americans always so insistently innocent of? Different from? As for absolute power, over whom this power is held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed?

Answers to these questions lie in the potent and ego-reinforcing presence of an Africanist population. This population is convenient in every way, not the least of which is self-definition. This new white male can now persuade himself that savagery is "out there." The lashes ordered (500 applied five times is 2500) are not one's own savagery; repeated and dangerous breaks for freedom are "puzzling" confirmations of black irrationality; the combination of Dean Swift's beatitudes and a life of regularized violence is civilized; and if the sensibilities are dulled enough, the rawness remains external.

These pages are excerpted from *Playing in the Dark* (1992), pp. 4-6, 9, 16, 39-45. This book is the result of questions raised in three William E. Massey Sr. Lectures given at Harvard University on whiteness and blackness in American literature. Analyzing the role and the place of the black character in the works of Willa Cather, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, among others, the author brings a very personal light on the manner in which the American identity was constituted. The title of this section was chosen by the editorial board of *Diogenes*.