

C. L. R. JAMES "THE ARTIST IN THE CARIBBEAN" (1959)

James, C. L. R. "The Artist in the Caribbean." Lecture, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, 1959. The Future in the Present. Vol. 1 of Selected Writings. London: Allison and Busby, 1977. 183-190.

James's intention here is to demonstrate how "the analysis of the artist in the Caribbean properly done" (183) is a "pointer to the general social and political problems there" (183). He begins by defining the artist as "a person who uses one, sometimes more than one medium of communication with exceptional force" (183). The "crucial" (183) question, to his mind, concerns the "medium" (183) which he defines as a "thoroughly artificial construction through which an individual is able to express the world around him" (183). The medium may vary from the "human voice" (183) to the "material equipment at the disposal of the movie director, prose or even music" (183). James asserts that the artist's exceptional mastery in the medium is intimately related to the natural surroundings in which the artist has grown up, to the society in which he lives, and his national and even regional ancestry; these may or may not be directly related to the specific artistic tradition which he has inherited or encounters in his search for a mode of expression, but they most often are. (183)

James stresses that the particular artistic medium utilised is normally largely linked to the social and historical context in which an artist like Cezanne lived and grew up.

The key question for James is this: "How long and in what form had these early impressions been a part of his artistic consciousness" (184). Confessing his concern specifically with the "great artist" (184), James attempts to situate Shakespeare in relation to the time and place in which he wrote. James asserts that the "incomparable vividness and facility of expression" (184) of Shakespeare's writing has much to do with his national origin and the specific period during which he lived. The same, James contends, is true of Racine who is very much a product of a particular nation (France) and a specific stage of its history. James' concern here is accordingly with whether there is any medium so native in the Caribbean, so rooted in the tight association which I have made between national surroundings, historical development and artistic tradition, is there any such medium in the Caribbean from which the artist can draw that strength which makes him a supreme practitioner? (184)

James stresses that he uses the term 'artistic tradition' "in a very wide sense to include all that goes to making it" (184) and that "it is never more powerful than when the artist is consciously breaking with it or some important aspect of it" (184). It is from this perspective that he argues that "there is nothing of the kind in the Caribbean and none in sight" (184) for the simple reason that, whether in the "plastic arts, in musical composition, as well as in literature" (184), we are merely "using forms borrowed from other civilisations. Language for us is not a distillation of our past (184). The artistic forms which we appropriate "have no artistic roots among people like ourselves from which we can instinctively draw sustenance" (184). "There is no Donne in our ancestry for us to rediscover and stimulate the invention of new forms and new symbols" (184-185), James claims, in the way that Eliot did when he sought to topple Milton from his preeminent place in English literary history and in his quest to discover new but forgotten masters from which he could derive inspiration. This is responsible for the "lack" (185) and what he even terms the "astonishing barrenness" (185) which plagues not just the Caribbean but other former colonial outposts such as Canada and Australia.

James points out that this may not be all that bad given that "artistic production is essentially individual and the artistic individual is above all unpredictable" (185). He argues that the

great artist is the product of a long and deeply rooted national tradition. . . . He appears at a moment of transition in national life with results which are recognised as having significance for the whole civilised world. By a combination of learning (in his own particular sphere), observation, imagination and creative logic, he can construct the personalities and relations of the future, rooting them in the past and the present. By that economy of means which is great art, he adds to the sum of knowledge of the world and in doing this, as a general rule, he adds new range and flexibility to the medium that he is using. But the universal artist is universal because he is above all nation. (185)

James goes on to state that a "supreme artist exercises an influence on the national consciousness which is incalculable. He is created by it but he himself illuminates and amplifies it, bringing the past up to date and charting the future" (185). Writers like Shakespeare are a "pole of reference in social judgement, a source of inspiration in concept, in language, in technique . . . to succeeding generations of artists, intellectuals, journalists, and indirectly to ordinary citizens" (185).

However, what James is more concerned with is the "immediate influence of the great artist upon the society in which he actually lived" (186), and "particularly to people like us, with our needs" (185). Studying from the vantage-point of the present the work of artists like Shakespeare or Michelangelo from eras long gone reveals profound "relations and affinities" (186) but these can never be exhausted for we "do not know the half of what the men of the time felt and thought" (186). Arguing that islands like Barbados and Trinidad are "already very close in their demographic structure to the cities of ancient Greece and the Italian towns of the middle ages" (187), James is of the view that it was the smaller size of societies such as those found in fifth century Athens or Renaissance England, each a "world in little" (187), which "created more men of genius" (187) there than in much more massive modern societies.

But, he anticipates, "what about the artist in the Caribbean?" (187). James stresses that he has not come here to "deliver encomiums or disapprovals of West Indian writers and artists" (187). He is convinced, rather, that it is "only when we are able to give them the concrete freedom of the conditions I have sketched that we shall get from them the best of which they are capable and, more importantly, get from them what at this stage of our existence we so much need" (187). Mentioning "very gifted" (187) Caribbean writers such as Lamming, Naipaul and Vic Reid, James contrast the situation in which they find themselves with that of a super talented cricketer like Gary Sobers who "was born into a medium which though transported was so well established that it has created a Caribbean tradition of its own" (187). He argues that there are "things we can do" (187) to foster such conditions on the cultural front. In the

age in which we live and in the present social and political stage of the undeveloped countries, we cannot leave these (and other) matters to an empirical growth which took centuries to develop in other countries. We cannot force the growth of the artist. But we can force and accelerate the growth of the conditions in which he can make the best of the gifts that he has been fortunate enough to be born with. (187)

James draws on the example of the Trinidadian calypsonian Sparrow who works, he says, "in a medium that would not be ranked very high in the hierarchy of the arts" (188). He praises Sparrow for making use of a "medium which has persisted in Trinidad, in spite of much official

and moral discouragement, and has survived to become a world favourite" (188). He is delighted at the way Sparrow

uses the calypso tradition, the way in which he extends it, the way in which he makes it a vehicle for the most acute observations on the social life and political developments around him, for his genuine musicianship, his wit and his humour. (188)

All in all, to James' mind, he is "using a national form and . . . his audience is a national audience" (188). James declares that "when our local dramatists and artists can evoke the popular response of a Sparrow, the artists in the Caribbean would have arrived" (188).

The solution, in James's view, is for Caribbean artists to return home because he is unable to understand how a "national artistic tradition, on which I lay so much stress as an environment in which the artist must begin . . . can be established by writers and artists, however gifted, working for what is essentially a foreign audience" (188). James stresses that what the "nation needs at the present time" (189) is the "creation of a national consciousness" (189):

if the threads of a tradition can be discovered among us and made into a whole, if we are shocked into recognition of what we are and what we are not, with the power that this will bring, it is the great artist who will do it. He may by fiction or drama set our minds at rest on the problem which intrigues so many of them: what is Africa to us? He may be a great historian. . . . But such work cannot be created under the conditions in which our artists work today. (189)

These conditions can be changed, James asserts. The "production of a supreme artist and all that he or she can give to us (including what lesser artists will gain), that we need not despair of" (189). Our "native talent is astonishing" (189), therefore let us "do what we can do. Let us create the conditions under which the artist can flourish. But to do that we must have the consciousness that the nation which we are hoping to build, as much as it needs the polling of resources and industrialisation and higher productive of labour, needs also the supreme artist" (189-190).