

GEORGE LAMMING "THE NEGRO WRITER AND HIS WORLD" (1956)

Lamming, George. "The Negro Writer and his World." Conversations: Essays, Addresses and Interviews, 1953-90. Ed. Andaiye and Richard Drayton. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990. 35-44.

Lamming, in this address to the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956, contends that our "speculations lean so heavily on the attention of the Other, that it is difficult to think at all without being constantly mindful of the sympathy and attitude of the Other" (36). Our "speculations and actions are so often reactions to the Other's impact in our world" (36). Arguing that by the 'Other' he means the "Non-Negro" (36), Lamming contends that the "term Negro" (36) is both a "fact and a fallacy" (36). The Other, he argues, "represents a *fact* of the man's existence as Negro" (36), not in the sense of the "Other defining the Negro but rather of the Negro becoming conscious of his own presence as a result of the regard of the Other" (36). The Negro writer is one who "through a process of social and historical accidents, encounters himself . . . in a category of men called Negro" (36). This is a "definition" (36) that he carries "like a limb" (36) and which

travels with him as a necessary guide for the Other's regard. It has settled upon him with an almost natural finality until he has become it. He is a reluctant part of the conspiracy which identifies him with that condition which the Other has created for them both. He does not emerge as an existence which must be confronted as an unknown dimension; for he is not simply *there*. He is there in a certain way. The eye which catches and cages him has seen him as a man *in spite of*. . . . (36)

The result of this is that the Negro "encounters himself in a state of surprise and embarrassment. He is a little ashamed, not in the crude sense of not wanting to be this or that, but in the more resonant sense of shame, the shame that touches every consciousness that feels it has been *seen*" (37).

Lamming contends that the Negro is a "man whom the Other regards as a Negro" (37). The result is a split psyche: this

dichotomy, the split, as it were, which may exist at the very centre of this consciousness, shall have been created by that old, and it would seem eternal conflict between the naming of a thing and a knowledge of it. . . . Language is intentional, and the intention seems clearly part of the human will to power. A name is an infinite source of control. (37)

Language, he points out, is the means by which we "attribute to any class of objects (stones, leaves, birds, insects) these names, and we have immediately found a way of avoiding the mystery which clothed these objects in their original state of silence and anonymity" (37). In other words, the Negro has been named and classified (most often pejoratively) by the European with detrimental effects upon his or her self-image.

The negro, Laming argues, experiences a "desire for totality, a desire to deal effectively with that gap, that distance which separates one man from another, and also in the case of an acute reflective self-consciousness, separates man from himself" (39). Accordingly, it is by virtue of the "fundamental need to redefine himself for the comprehension of the Other" (40) and in the "hope that the stage shall be set for some kind of meaningful communication" (40) that the negro writer

joins hands, not so much with a Negro audience, as with every other writer whose work is a form of self-enquiry, a clarification of relations with other men, and a report of his own very highly subjective conception of the

possible meaning of man's life. (40)

The negro writer joins all other 'Others' (females, other non-Europeans) in the quest for self-redefinition, that is, in an effort to redefine the categories and classifications imposed upon him or her.

Lamming stresses that, for the negro writer, to "speak of his situation is to speak of a general need to find a centre as well as a circumference which embraces some reality whose meaning satisfies his intellect and may prove pleasing to his senses" (40): a

man's life assumes meaning first in relation with other men, and his experience which is what the writer is trying always to share with the reader, is made up not only of the things which happen to him, in his encounter with others, but also of the different meanings and values which he chooses to place on what has happened. What happens to him depends on the particular world he happens to be living in, and the way he chooses to deal with his own experience is determined by the kind of person he considers himself to be. In other words, he is continually being shaped by the particular world which accommodates him, or refuses to do so; and at the same time he is shaping, through his own desires, needs and idiosyncrasies, a world of his own. (40)

Lamming stresses in this regard that there are "three kinds of worlds to which the writer bears in some way a responsibility, worlds which are distinct and in some way related" (40). These include, firstly, the "world of the private and hidden self . . . which might be only known by others after that man has spoken" (40). He has in mind here the "experience proceeding from the depths of one's being, of *existing*" (40). This is a moment marked by silence. It is a moment when a man's utterance cannot catch and convey the shape and shade of his thought and feeling. Language, it would seem, has actually surrendered just when his need is greatest. It is then he requires this weapon of words to enter that hidden area of his consciousness, and bring back with it . . . the kind of picture which another's eye cannot conceive. (41)

"This world is private. It contains the range of his ambitions, his deceits, his perplexity, his pride, his shame, his guilt, his honour, his need. All the qualities are there, hidden in the castle of his skin" (43). It is this "possession which is responsible for his relation to words" (41), Lamming argues:

He has failed until he has caught some part of that world and given it form in language. Words are his anchor and spear; he has got to keep them in preparation and in order, and when they begin to wear under their work, he must find new ones, or new combinations of the old ones. . . . A writer does not only use language. He helps to make language. (41)

This insight into the deepest parts of himself is necessarily interrupted, however, by the intrusions of the second world of "[d]ay-to-day living" (41), what Kierkegaard calls the "'immediate neighbourhood,' one's family, sometimes one's enemies, and always one's friends" (41), on "that private and solitary world of concerns" (41). Lamming stresses that the writer's private world is necessarily "modified, even made possible, by the world in which he moves among other men" (43). It is "through the presence of others that his own presence is given meaning" (43).

The question consequently arises: "[w]hat then is the relation of a writer to society in which . . . he regarded as difficult?" (43). Since this "misfortune of difference enters his private world, one expects his work as a writer to be, in part, a witness to that misfortune" (43):

there is a fundamental need to present his private world in all its facets, and

one of its vivid experiences will of necessity be the impact which that social world, with all of its reservations and distinctions, has made on his consciousness. (43)

From this perspective, the writer has a "real and primary responsibility to himself" (43). However, the negro writer also speaks for all who have suffered injustice: when such "differences carry consequences of injustice, his relation is not different from that of any other who shares a similar misfortune" (43).

Lamming stresses that the "social classification which manifests itself most violently through race, is a peculiar torment and a peculiar challenge for the writer who suffers its disadvantage" (43). Arguing that when one is "bombarded by floods" (43), one can "easily forget how precious a gentle shower of rain can be" (43), so when a "writer's senses have been consistently assaulted by the vast pressure of a single issue, it is not difficult for him to lose sight, for a time, of the connection between the disaster which threatens to reduce him and the wider context and condition of which his disaster is but the clearest example" (44). For Lamming, the Negro, especially in the USA, "symbolises an essential condition of man" (44) not just because of his "need to correct a social injustice through powers of law, but also in his need to embark upon a definition of himself in the world of men" (44).

This brings Lamming to define the third 'world' which he has in mind: that of "human beings" (44) in whose "community" (44) he also shares. In finding "meaning for his destiny" (44),

every utterance he makes in this direction, and every utterance he makes in this direction is an utterance made on behalf of all men. And his responsibility to that other world, his third world, will be judged not by the authenticity and power with which his own private is presented, but also by the honesty with which he interprets the world of his social relations, his country . . . for those who have no direct experience of it, but are moved by the power of his speech, his judgement and his good faith. (44)