

# The Negro Writer and his World<sup>1</sup>

I was invited, originally, to speak on the subject of the Negro novel in English, but I have chosen, with your permission, to consider a situation that is at once wider and more manageable: the Negro writer and his world.

We shall find in the challenge of the word "Negro" a strange and conflicting set of factors. It would be very difficult to establish, from the premise of literature, the close connection between the matter and method of three such writers as Mr. Richard Wright in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Mr. Amos Tutuola in the *Palm Wine Drinkard*, and the late Jamaican novelist Roger Mais in *Brother Man*. America, Nigeria, and the British Caribbean have me there under the embracing function of an activity called writing; but the manifestations of that activity in the work of these three, are at once delightful and perplexing. The only thing which holds them together, apart from the belief they are men, is the fact they are black.

My second reason for extending the first title . . . has to do with my impression that you are concerned with matters which go far and fast beyond the strictness and delicacy of creative literature. It is not without reasons, other than dedication to your particular disciplines, that you should want to establish

the validity of the African contribution to human civilization. There is on the whole a psychology here at work which prompts us to remind others of things we know already, or at worst, to prove something that the other tends to dismiss or deny. 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. The Other being, of course, the equally wide category of men we must, for the purposes of such a conference, regard as Non-Negro.

I shall consider the term Negro, first of all, as a word which represents at one shot a fact and a fallacy, although I am not at all sure that the fallacy I have in mind is not itself a fact, or the fact I shall try to define is not, after all, a fallacy. Our speculations and actions are so often reactions to the Other's impact in our world. They lean heavily on the very fact that the Other exists. It is this aspect of the word Negro which I want you to consider as fallacy.

If we are going to be honest with ourselves, it is necessary too to consider, and to express with some indignation, some of the ways a Negro may use to cash in on this fallacy, and in our concern with the afflictions and the possible prosperity of one group of men, we must take care not to construct props for a man who may not differ in any way from his enemy in the quality of their bad faith. Rumour has it, and rumour may be right, that many a Negro is doing extremely well in the skin trade; cashing in, that is, on the extraordinary and perverse privilege of being a quite fascinating black in a world of well-meaning and unthinking whites.

This aspect of the word leads straight to the Other, which I am suggesting represents a fact of the man's existence as a Negro. This is not now the case 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.

The Negro writer is a writer who through a process of social and historical accidents, encounters himself, so to speak, in a category of men called Negro. He carries this definition like a limb. It 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 . . . As

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a result he 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.

The Negro is a man who the Other regards as a Negro; and the 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. For it is one of the mischievous powers of language, and particularly that aspect of language which relates to names that it enables us to rob things of their power to embarrass us. Language in this respect is intentional, and the intention seems clearly part of the human will to power. A name is an infinite source of control.

[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.]

A good example turns up in *Hard Times*. Dickens calls that chapter, *Murdering the Innocents*, and although it is a savage comment on the crudeness of educational method of the time, it suggests much more. Let us for a brief moment watch Dickens situate his character, Sissy Jupe.

"Girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, "I ain't know that girl. Who is that girl?"

"Sissy Jupe, sir," explained number twenty, blushing, standing up and curtsying.

"Sissy is not a name," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia."

It's father as calls me Sissy, sir," returned the young girl, in a trembling voice, and with another curtsy..

"Then he has no business to do it," said Mr. Gradgrind. "Tell him he mustn't. Cecilia Jupe. Let me see. What is your father?"

"He belongs to the horse-riding if you please, Sir," says Sissy. Mr. G. frowned and waved off the objectionable calling with his hand.

"We don't want to know anything about that here. You mustn't tell us about that here. Your father breaks horses, don't he?"

"If you please, sir, when they can get any to break, they do break horses in the ring, sir."

"You mustn't tell us about the ring here. Very well, then. Describe your father as a horse-breaker. He doctors sick horses, I dare say?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Very well, then. He is a veterinary surgeon, a farrier and a horse breaker. Give me your definition of a horse."

(Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand).  
"Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!" said Mr. Gradgrind for the general behalf of all the little pitchers. "Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours."

Of course Sissy knows all about horses, but it is, in the particular context, an irrelevant knowledge. It is a knowledge which suggests participation, and where there is real participation there tends to be an absence of determinants, definitions, directions. But let us hear from Bitzer who is an alternative to Sissy.

"Bitzer," said Thomas Gradgrind. "Your definition of a horse."

"Quadruped, Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring, in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth. Thus (and much more) said Bitzer.

"Now girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind, "You know what a horse is."

This is a sad knowledge but it is appropriate; for having found our references we can all, with the exception of Sissy Jupe, move forward. Following such an example, we can see a contradictory intention at the very heart of words. They may equip us through their power of symbolisation for an investigation into what is not known to us and they may also be an unconscious mechanism for our fear of the unknown.

In my book, *The Emigrants*, the African Azi (who, I suppose is, in Bitzer's terms of knowledge, a real Negro) has had a brilliant career as a mathematician at Cambridge. He experiences a certain dislocation of facts, in historical sense, and meanings. He is stricken by a lack of references, and as a result is forced to consider the whole problem of significance. Here is an extract from a letter he wrote to his tutor:

... I think I begin to understand two things. One is the accidental nature of social relations. This is what I think they call History. All the roles which different classes play in any collectivity might just have been reversed. Privilege is simply a relation which defines one group in terms of another, and if you examine the matter, you'll see, Andrews, that the dominated might very well have been the dominant. If you like you can explain the relations in terms of their historical *development*, but beneath the history, there's no reason we can detect for these things being what they are.

The other is the insignificance of events. The same errors are committed, the same consequences crush us. But nothing really *happens*. We adjust to some abstraction as easily as we adjust to some concrete occurrence. It does not matter what is involved, massacre or mystery. If we need things to occur before we can change, it seems that what happens is wasted on us, or nothing ever really *happens*.

So I arrived at a point, a stand-still. First of all I must leave Cambridge for a while. And I realised that I was just drifting, a bit of Notsam, if you like, but conscious of myself in that drift. I didn't know what to choose. If I acted on instinct, I couldn't call that choice because choice ultimately implies a relation of transcendence. An ultimate value by which I choose, and I had no experience of such a value. There was only habit. Honestly, telling the truth rather than a lie the instinct to survive, this opposition to death, all these constituted habit, or rather habit dictated these, and I couldn't admit that such was the true foundation of my action, my choice. For a man there is something profoundly humiliating about such an admission. But I felt there was freedom, that I was even free to do away with this humiliation. Freedom! I don't mean, Andrews, some exemption from a social force — nothing that shows my relation to another in a group — I mean something alogical, something that seems always outside the reach of any demands a particular situation might make of you, freedom as an experience of the self in a state of unconditional awareness. I do not attain to this freedom. It is an attribute of *me*...

And there is always contained in such a statement of feeling a confession of one clear desire. It is the 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 a man from himself. In the isolated case of the Negro it is the desire, not merely to rebel against the consequences of a certain social classification, but

also a fundamental need to redefine himself for the comprehension of the Other, and in the hope that the stage shall have been set for some kind of meaningful communication.

The Negro writer joins hands, therefore, not so much with a Negro audience, as with every other writer whose work is a form of self-enquiry, a clarification of his relations with other men, and a report of his own very highly subjective conception of the possible meaning of man's life.

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. But 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 to a great extent 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. And since a writer's work is meant for public consideration and, through the wonderful devices of printing, translation and distribution, is continually extending to places and people, with whom he may have no direct experience, another world is being created about him.

What, then, we may ask, is really meant by the term "world" in the particular context of these remarks? There are, I would suggest, three kinds of worlds to which the writer bears in some way a responsibility, worlds which are distinct, and yet very deeply related. There is first of all the world of the private and hidden self, a world which turns quietly, sometimes turbulently, within one man, and which might be only known by others after that man has spoken. Each who becomes aware of himself as a separate existence shares this solitude, each man has had an experience, momentary or prolonged, of the meaning of being alone. I do not mean loneliness or any similar illness of certain self-important natures. I am speaking of the experience proceeding from the depths of one's being, of *existing*.

It 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 his 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, so to speak, the kind of picture which another's eye cannot conceive. In ordinary circumstances this effort is never carried through. A verdict of guilty may be directed against others who have been betrayed not by their guilt, but by that appalling and impotent failure to communicate their innocence. And when there is no condemnation the matter is easily forgotten. [The ordinary person is, time and again, seized by an experience, a meaning perhaps, and quickly abandons the attempt to grasp it completely, because the exercise, from the start, seems too much of a burden; and after all, he will say it does not really matter.] Or even if the desire to struggle is real, the urgencies of living make it very difficult to sustain his interest: because there is something to be done, something which requires his immediate attention if life is to be liveable. Day-to-day living keeps intruding on that private and solitary world of concerns. It may take the form of the bad-tempered husband who makes trouble when he cannot find something more dramatic to occupy his energy. Or the rent is overdue. All these things make for a great nuisance. They are what the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, calls, "the immediate neighbourhood", one's family, sometimes one's enemies, and always one's friends.

But for the writer this private world is his one priceless possession. It is precisely from this point that everything else will proceed. And in these circumstances it cannot be sacrificed to his immediate neighbourhood (even when that neighbourhood means a group defined by an artificial misfortune which includes him). Nothing can take its place. It is his initial capital. He may gain by it, or lose by it, but without it he cannot function. Why he should be possessed in this way is a matter we do not wholly understand. We must accept it as a fact of his experience. But it is this possession which is responsible for his relation to words. He has failed until he has caught some part of that world and given it form in language. Words are his anchor and his 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, for the work must go on. A writer does not only use language. He helps to make language. To any decent man who is anxious to feed his children and comfort his wife and be amiable to his neighbours, this personal rage with words must seem a kind of lunacy and

that judgement will not be far wrong; for the writer is, in fact, a kind of lunatic whose insanity is only kept in control by his occasional triumph of expression. In *the Castle of My Skin* opens with a passage which may help to throw some light on the mechanics of this private world as well as the process through which certain currents of emotion move to touch and assimilate the world of social relations:

Rain, rain, rain... my mother put her head through the window to let the neighbour know that I was nine, and they flat-tered me with the consolation that my birthday had brought showers of blessing. The morning laden with cloud soon passed into noon, and the noon neutral and silent into the sodden grimness of an evening that waded through water. That evening I kept an eye on the crevices of our wasted roof where the colour of the shingles had turned to mourning black, and waited for the weather to rehearse my wishes. But the evening settled on the slush of the roads that dissolved in parts into pools of clay, and I wept for the watery waste of my ninth important day. Yet I was wrong, my mother protested it was irreverent to disapprove the will of the Lord or reject the consolation that my birthday had brought showers of blessing.

It was my ninth celebration of the gift of life, my ninth celebration of the consistent lack of an occasion for celebration. From a window where the spray had given the sill a little wet life I watched the water ride through the lanes and alleys that multiplied behind the barracks that neighboured our house. The white stalks of the lily lay flat under the hammering rain, then coaxed their roots from the earth and drifted across the upturned clay, into the canals and on to the deep black river where by agreement the floods converged. The water rose higher and higher until the fern and flowers on our verandah were flooded. It came through the creases of the door, and expanded across the uncarpeted borders of the floor. My mother brought sacks that absorbed it quickly, but overhead the crevices of the roof were weeping rain, and surfacing the carpet and the epergne of flowers and fern were liquid, glittering curves which the mourning black of the shingles had bequeathed. No one seemed to notice how the noon had passed to evening, the evening to night; nor to worry that the weather had played me false. Nothing mattered but the showers of blessing and the eternal will of the water's source. And I might have accepted the consolation if it weren't that the floods had chosen to follow me in the celebration of all my years, evoking the image of those legendary waters which had once arisen to set a curse on the

course of man.

As if in serious imitation of the waters that raced outside, our lives — meaning our fears and their corresponding ideals — seemed to escape down an imaginary drain that was our future. Our capacity for feeling had grown as large as the flood, but the prayers of a simple village seemed as precariously adequate as the houses hoisted on water. Of course, it was difficult to see what was happening outside, but there were paddling splashes of boys'-feet and the choke of an engine stuck in the mud.

This world is private. It contains the range of his ambitions, his deceptions, his perplexity, his pride, his shame, his guilt, his honour, his need. All these qualities are there, hidden in the castle of his skin.

But that private world of the writer is modified, even made possible, by the world in which he moves among other men. Much as he might think it otherwise, it is through the presence of others that his own presence is given meaning.

What then is the relation of a writer to a society in which for reasons which have nothing to do with his work, he is regarded as different? When the differences carry consequences of injustice, his relation is not different from that of any other who shares a similar misfortune. Any identical suffering holds him together in defence or attack with those who are part of his misfortune, and 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. Not because there is a moral law which demands he address himself to his social world, but rather because 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 its reservations and distinctions, has made on his consciousness. This is the sense in which it is true to say that a writer has a real and primary responsibility to himself.

From the point of view of imaginative literature, this social classification which manifests itself most violently through race, is a peculiar torment and a peculiar challenge for the writer who suffers its disadvantage. About the situation in America, I would say briefly, that the torment has been real, and so overwhelmingly challenging that the meaning of the challenge has not always been clearly seen, in all its largeness, by all Negro writers of distinction. And the reason is simple. If you are continually and ruthlessly bombarded by floods, you can easily forget how precious a gentle shower of rain can be. And the floods,

which may spring from rain, soon lose that identification with rain in their common source of water. It seems after a while that there is no real connection between water and water, the gentle shower and the opposing flood, for the abundance of the one has severed it from its real link with the other.

Similarly, if through the character and the fate of his country, 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. The Negro in the United States symbolises an essential condition of Man, not merely in his urgent need to correct a social injustice through powers of law, but also in his need to embark upon a definition of himself as man in the world of men.

For the third of his worlds, the world to which he is condemned by the fact of his spirit is the world of human beings. He shares in their community. What he cannot escape is the essential need to find meaning for his destiny, 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 world is presented, but also by the honesty with which he interprets the world of his social relations, his country, that is, for those who have no direct experience of it, but are moved by the power of his speech, his judgement and his good faith.