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A NIGHTMARE REVISITED? REPRESENTATION OF THE PAST IN A SELECTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS

All autobiographical texts refer mainly to the past, although it is frequently the author's present that writers try to relate to and come to terms with through analysing the past. Ethnic American autobiographies can serve as counter memory to the so-called grand narratives of Western civilisation and American culture, offering revisions of the past. In this paper I would like to discuss selected aspects of representation of the past understood as personal and communal history in three African-American autobiographies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (first published in 1942), Richard Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (first published in 1945) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (first published in 1965).

Autobiographical writing has existed in American literature since the very beginning of white settlement in the New World. Black autobiography appears mainly in the period of modern literature, although there are slave narratives created in the 18th and the 19th century, which have much in common with autobiography, and which a lot of literary critics writing about African-American autobiography refer to. As Andrews notices, 19th-century abolitionists sponsored the publication of the narratives of escaped slaves in the belief that the first-person account would mobilise white readers more than any other kind of anti-slavery discourse. The 20th-century African-American autobiography was also written with the potential to liberate the white reader from racial prejudice, ignorance and fear (Andrews 1993:1). Rosenblatt, while discussing African-American autobiography states that black autobiography actually exists as a separate genre: *it exists as a special form of literature because there are discernible patterns within black autobiographies that tie them together and because the outer world apprehended by black autobiography is consistent and unique* (Rosenblatt 1976:516). He also claims that there are two elements in black autobiography that are constant: they are the expressed desire to live as one

would choose, as far as possible, and criticism of the external national conditions that make one's freedom of choice limited or simply non-existent (Rosenblatt 1976:516).

Butterfield states that the self in black autobiography is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the members. There is less stress on individualism than in a white autobiography, growing out of the Renaissance tradition. Black autobiography grows out of the tradition of slave narratives where the identity of the slave narrator grows around his desire for freedom (Butterfield 1974:23).

Although ethnic autobiographies and memoirs tend to be historical, or as some critics claim all autobiographies are inescapably historical (Stone 1981:172), we certainly cannot treat them as historical documents. W.E.B. Du Bois (Stone 1981:175) stresses that unreliability of the information contained in autobiography at the beginning of his own autobiographical text:

> *Autobiographies are always incomplete, and often unreliable. Eager as I am to put down the truth, there are difficulties; memory fails especially in small details, so that it becomes finally but a theory of my life [...] This book then is the Soliloquy of an old man on what he dreams his life has been as he sees it slowly drifting away; and what he would like others to believe.*

Although the three texts I have selected for my brief analysis were written by authors who at the moment of publication of their autobiographies were not old yet, we have to take into consideration the subjective selectivity of the events described.

Due to the racial realities of the times in which Malcolm X's, Wright's and Hurston's autobiographies were created, the past retold in those books is to a large extent *a nightmare revisited* (Stone 1981:175). As Stone (1981:175) suggests, such a confrontation with the horrors of the past may free the self from the past, and at the same time history can *reveal the self to others and serve as a moral and political weapon, like in the case of Malcolm X.*

Many African-American writers, including Wright or Malcolm X, seemed to feel the urge to "write themselves" into American history, to manifest the historical existence of African Americans, to affirm their black identity within history. So as to have a feeling of belonging to a given culture one has to have a sense of belonging to a given history, thus the past becomes for those writers the reference area where they try to find answers and explanations through which they try to justify their existence in American reality. The impulse to write historical autobiography remains very strong in this particular ethnic group because, as Stone (1981:176) puts it, it has been the fate of numerous black Americans to have been systematically prevented from creating history. It was particularly important for African Americans to know their history, or, first of all to know that there is some black history, both in the 1940s when *Black Boy* was written and in the 1960s when Malcolm X's autobiography was to be published.

As Malcolm X states: *[...] blacks believed that their race had no history, thus considered themselves inferior* (Malcolm X 1992:277). Knowing the black version of history, the history deconstructing the white master narrative seems essential in the process of constructing new African-American consciousness. Malcolm X stresses the fact that *the original black man was stripped of his language, culture – until he did not even realise who he was* (Malcolm X 1992:294). Reversing the logic of this sentence: to re-establish his identity a black man needs his own culture, knowledge about the culture and language of both his African and African-American ancestors.

For young Malcolm the moment of learning about the history of Harlem becomes extremely significant. Knowing black history gives him a sense of pride and much stronger identification with his race. Another change in this respect comes in prison. There he acquires what he calls *the true knowledge* – he gets to know the history of humanity according to Black Muslims. According to that history, it is the white race that originates from the black one. White men had *whitened history*, leaving the black men out. It leads Malcolm to a new attitude towards the white race, and to even stronger identification with black people and their culture. When he starts to perceive white men as devils, he finds proof for it in books of history, from ancient to contemporary times. Looking back at his life he realises that so far in his life he had been trying to "be white", and thus he lost himself. His racial pride starts to grow out of his understanding that black culture is richer than he could realise. As Abbot notices, Malcolm's conversion *orders what had been chaos* and it *allows him to make sense of his privation and clarifies a history of suffering which, in his ignorance, he had not even understood as suffering* (Abbot 1979:142).

Malcolm X presents himself throughout the autobiography as embodying the historical situation of the black man in North America. As Taylor (1972:355) puts it, Malcolm makes of himself the archetypal *black prisoner* in whose ineradicable *memory of the bars* is also remembrance of *the first landing of the first slave ship*. His personal history becomes just an exemplary episode in the history of the oppressed. His family as such was destroyed by white people, who murdered his father and indirectly led to his mother's emotional breakdown. Depreciated, unwanted, laughed at in Michigan, he becomes an east-coast criminal because the circumstances make him so. Looking at his life from a distance he stresses constantly that black men destroy their race because the white people's system leaves them with no way out of this destruction.

Taylor states also that *the Afro-American protagonists of autobiographical works imagine their works as both shaped and negated by historical pressures rooted in race* (Taylor 1972:342) and such shaping and negation seems overtly present in Richard Wright's work. Wright grows out of the culture of the South, but presents himself as never spiritually belonging to it. He is a black Southerner shaped by the experience of his childhood, but he rejects religion and despises

traditions, both of his mother and his grandmother. The way he presents his childhood indicates his being constantly despised and misunderstood by his relatives: *[...] how could one live in a world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything?* (Wright 1993:194). His environment limits him, both due to the racist rules by which the South is governed and through his mother's relatives who cannot see beyond their traditional interpretation of reality. Ending the chapter entitled "Southern Night" with his going to the North, he says: *This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled* (Wright 1993:303). In these two sentences he seems to identify *the culture* with *the terror*, justifying in this way his separation from the South. Circumstances forced him to leave the Southern world, and he never talks about it as something he could possibly miss.

Wright seems to assume that folk culture is inherently brutal and acts as a barrier against affirmation of individual will. Some critics point out Wright's *uneasy relationship with Afro-American vernacular*, his dismissal of the church as an *ineffective and uncreative force*, and his unwillingness *to use the positive elements from his own culture* (Capetti 1985:27). *Black Boy* presents the black man in retreat from his society, and such a picture of black experience brought criticism from other black writers of Wright's times. Ralph Ellison actually accuses Wright of not understanding the basic character of black culture. According to him, Wright misunderstands the group's basic character. W.E.B. Du Bois called Wright's book *patently and terribly overdrawn* (Davies 1993:145). Wright does stress his detachment, the feeling of being different from others. As Cappetti (1985:28) puts it, Wright's work is soaked with irreconcilable contradictions between the individual and the group, i.e. culture, tradition, family, community.

Quite interestingly, young Wright's fascination with books leads him to a much stronger cultural and spiritual identification with European modernists than with black people of the American South of whom he emerged. He justifies his interest by finding similarities of experience between his life and that described in the books: *All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them* (Wright 1993:295), and two pages later he adds: *I knew no Negroes, who read the books I liked*. He also stresses that his personal development resulted from the books, not from his immediate environment: *The extreme world of whites and blacks, which was the only world I had ever known, surely had not evoked in me any belief in myself [...] It had been only through books* (Wright 1993:226).

It might seem that one of the main reasons for writing *Black Boy* is to show the world what life of an intelligent young black man growing up in the American South was like, what place in social structure African Americans were pushed into in the 1930s. Wright does not present himself as "black American every man", because he constantly stresses the fact that he was different, with more intellectual

potential, and thus with more problems than his peers or relatives. Malcolm X states in his autobiography that he has found the truth, his place, and his mission. He looks at his past experience from the point of view of a person who has come to the place of his destination, and from that perspective he analyses his life as a pilgrimage full of wrong choices and wrong decisions, leading to the right conclusions. Wright finishes his autobiography without such a declaration. Malcolm X got killed at the moment he considered his pilgrimage to be completed. Both of the authors seem to understand one aspect of the past of their ethnic group in the same way, though: white people stripped African Americans of their culture and pride and the suffering of the past can never be forgotten.

Zora Neale Hurston's attitudes to both black history and to the relations between blacks and whites expressed in her autobiography might have been enraging to some African Americans, and remain in contrast with the two already discussed texts. For example, Hurston provides us with a rather unexpected statement concerning slavery:

> *From what I can learn about slavery and Reconstruction, it was sad. But my ancestors who lived and died in it are dead. The white men who profited by their labor and lives are dead also. I have no personal memory of those times, and no responsibility for them* (Hurston 1992:282).

Personal memory becomes for her the crucial criterion in judging the past. It is so much opposite to the "we'll-never-forget" attitude and remains in contrast with the point of view of people like her grandmother, who couldn't accept the way little Zora made friends with white people. As Hurston explains: *She had known slavery and to her my brazenness was unthinkable.[...] I got a whipping* (Hurston 1992:46). At a certain moment Hurston admits *I'm mixed blood, [...] but I neither consider it an honor nor a shame* (Hurston 1992:235), and such a statement is again quite contradictory to, e.g., Malcolm X's hatred for *every drop of the white rapist's blood* [Malcolm X 1992:84] in him.

Hurston's attitude to some extent can result from her childhood spent in a black town, where, as she claims, she did not experience any form of oppression from white people because they were hardly there. Throughout the book she stresses the fact that her life was harsh, first of all, due to poverty, and thus she treasures her achievements more. At the end of the book she expresses hope for integration in a way that sounds surprising in a 1940s autobiography: *Let us be kissing friends. Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so* (Hurston 1992:286). Despite the fact that the phrase *a few hundred generations* does not suggest any overwhelming optimism, such passages in the book are referred to by some critics as representing Hurston's *simplistic, dangerously naive viewpoint* (Martin 1992:xv). Robert Hemenway defends Hurston explaining that:

> *[...] her hard won success grew from the self-reliance, independence, and self-confidence inspired by familial and communal origins. These qualities helped her compete and brought her*

fame. To describe the discrimination she encountered might suggest that such self-reliance was a defensive reaction to white oppression; it might imply that racial discrimination worked, that it created compensatory black behavior (Martin 1992:xv).

Hurston also writes about one more aspect of slave trade. After interviewing an ex-slave, who had actually been brought directly from Africa, Hurston realised that though it is true that white people bought Africans and slave trade flourished thanks to them, it was actually Africans who in a lot of cases sold their kinsmen, driven by greed for "civilised money" (Hurston 1992:200). It is striking that Hurston does not hesitate to write about Africans not as victims but rather as co-beneficiaries of the slave trade.

Hurston stresses her strong links with the American South – her home region and the place where she carried out research in Black American folklore after she had graduated from Barnard College. The research becomes, in a way, an excuse for her return to the South, to the stories of her childhood, to the folk culture she absorbed and loved. As Hemenway notices:

When Hurston became fascinated with anthropology, she acquired the relatively rare opportunity to confront her culture both emotionally and analytically, both as subject and as object. She lived Afro-American folklore before she knew that such a thing existed as a scientific concept (Martin 1992:xi).

In many ways all her own stories, novels and folklore collections grow out of the African-American cultural tradition, that of the South Hurston was brought up in. Her background helped her in her literary career, becoming the source of inspiration.

Butterfield states that black autobiographers do not feel the urge to invent a nightmare to make their accounts more credible (Stone 1981:175). Such a nightmare is simply there, in the past, waiting to be rediscovered. The question that remains is to what extent the problem of that pain from the past becomes the main focus of a black author's account. Hurston's nightmare is presented as resulting more from poverty and her mother's death than from the racial prejudice encountered. Hemenway (1977:283) states that *the paradoxes of "Dust Tracks" grow from [Hurston's] deliberate refusal to interpret [her] later career in any context other than that of individual achievement.* She seems to manipulate her experience in the book to present an integrationist position, overemphasising the few whites who were around Eatonville so that her all-black upbringing will not appear segregated, showing that black people can hate one another. Wright concentrates on the presentation of a developed "self" that has managed to emerge out of the oppressive traditions of the communities they where brought up in. He, like Hurston, stresses his individualism, but he does accuse the oppressive system of leading to most of the catastrophes he faced. The nightmarish past presented by Malcolm X becomes not just his past, but also the past of his people.

For African Americans to come back to their roots in the search of the self, to analyse the past, might mean coming back to the very pain of slavery, oppression, segregation and discrimination. Hurston treats the problem selectively, choosing folk culture but trying to forget the pain. For Wright and Malcolm X, reference to the past meant just the opposite – rejecting the folk and remembering the pain.

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