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NAMES AS "SYMBOLS" IN BLACK POETRY

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Names encompassing allusions are frequent in poetry. Wordsworth exclaims in "London, 1802," "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour," and Yeats writes of "The holy city of Byzantium." We are to call to mind the person Milton and what he stood for in his historical world to understand the kind of person and kind of action Wordsworth deems necessary to try to correct the lack of "manners, virtue, freedom, power" he observed in his historical world. And we are to envision the fabulous and mysterious world of the long-gone Byzantium to appreciate the world of eternity desired by Yeats, a world evincing some elements of the symbolic. Yet Milton remains a various person, one quite different in Blake's poem entitled "Milton" from the person called up by Wordsworth. And Byzantium is historically not Yeats' world, which is also not the world peopled by Wallace Stevens' Byzantines who attend Susanna in "Peter Quince at the Clavier." The names do not represent

unchanging and specific mental pictures to a general group of people. "Peter Quince" is another matter. While recalling the character in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, it evokes in Stevens' work the picture we have of Shakespeare's Peter Quince in any context: a bumbler, a person of pretensions, a bumpkin, and it will always do so. Allusion can become symbol and symbol can become a kind of "symbol" which has stereotypical proportions. When a specific mental picture is consistently called up, often with the deletion of other possible attending mental pictures and often therefore with distortion, a "symbol" merges. Hitler or Marilyn Monroe may be used as allusions, or they may become symbolic, or they may often as not nowadays become "symbols" in the stereotypical pictures which the names call up.

Poetry written by Blacks is not different from poetry written by non-Blacks. An individual author will reflect his individual milieu, and if he is a Black, the poetry may encompass a black experience in black language with black concerns, etc., and therefore in those regards be different from the poetry of the non-Black. We expect to find in Black poetry names as allusions and as symbols and as "symbols," and some of these names will be the same that we will find in non-Black poetry. Robert Hayden speaks of John Quincy Adams in "Middle Passage"; Jay Wright in "Death as History" notes that

Shawcross 3

Young poets sit in their rooms
like perverted Penelopes,
unraveling everything;
and Gwendolyn Brooks takes us
Down in the deep (but always beautiful) South
Where roses blush their blithest (it is said)
And sweet magnolias put Chanel to shame.

"Lanvin" would have sufficed in place of "Chanel," although
"My Sin" would not have. "Chanel" has been used as a "symbol"
(a kind of stereotype) of lovely and expensive perfume.

But it strikes me that there are three large and frequent
areas of name-use in Black poetry which are worthy of note for
an understanding of Black poetry. While the technique may be
observed in non-Black poetry, these specific uses, moving from
being allusion to symbol to "symbol," involve a loss of essential
meaning and an accrual of separate and special meanings. The
areas are geography, politics, and music (specifically jazz).
What comments Stephen Henderson makes about some of these matters
in his introduction to Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black
Speech and Black Music as Poetry References (New York: William
Morrow, 1973), do not engage this dimension of the poetry. The
areas are obvious enough: the Black's physical world, his
discriminatory world and the means to extricate himself from it,
and his most widespread achievement in the white world.

A well-known poem by Langston Hughes that has been set to music will illustrate an early and transitional example from allusion toward "symbol." The Negro Speaks of Rivers, which includes the lines:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

While the river names are arranged chronologically in importance (according to the Euphrates' being the site of singular generation of mankind), the juxtaposition of the Nile and the Mississippi emphasizes the enslavement of the Negro, and suggests that the Congo has a similar function: to indicate Negro world rather than essentially a river by which Negroes dwelt. These rivers are more than allusive and even more than symbolic, though they are not yet stereotypical.

Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham," of course, refers to the race riots in Birmingham, Alabama, a few years ago and the deaths of so many Blacks. But the poem does not remain on that level of meaning: Birmingham becomes any city or town in which the oppressed Black is killed out of racial prejudice. It "stands for" more importantly than it "is." What Randall's

reference is supposed to do and does is evoke a specific mental picture representing a concept generally accepted by Blacks, at least, and one which basically denies any other picture one might have had about Birmingham. To read the poem meaningfully we must go well beyond the historical Birmingham and even beyond that specific occasion: we must see Birmingham as any place fitting the "symbol;" and it is this that makes the ballad form and substance of the poem appropriate. The ballad is a folk form, popular, traditional, about the lives of ordinary people, focussing on a moment of climax or some deeply felt human involvement at the point of communal climax. If this were intended by Randall as a poem on Birmingham, the form would have been illogical.

Conrad Kent Rivers' little poem

Must I shoot the
White man dead
to free the nigger
in his head?

could be titled a number of places. Rivers calls it "Watts," indicating its inspiration and alluding to the place of an infamous riot. But it could have been Detroit or Philadelphia or Toledo, for any of these could stand for the main thought: one man must kill another to rally other men to respect their own integrity ("his" referring to "nigger") or others' integrity

Shawcross 6

("his" referring to "White man"). "Watts" has in the poem acquired a less specific reference than it might seem to have been, just as Harlem has in Claude McKay's earlier "Harlem Shadows":

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
 In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
 Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
 To bend and barter at desire's call.
 Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
 Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Or in Donald L. Graham's recent poem "soul", which points out for the honkie that

soul ain't nice it's daddy's backache
 the blues my mother felt when she
 bore me
 in a rat-infested-harlem u.s.a.

It is, we note, "a rat-infested-harlem" (not just "rat-infested harlem").

Henry Dumas's "Genesis on an Endless Mosaic" corroborates my point about the Congo:

starting down the Congo with tri-god sails
 i dream of three kings wearing crowns of ice
 they are eating my baby from her belly

Shawcross 7

the sharks grow legs and bark upon this ship
 the healing Mississippi has a new breed of shark
 on my eyeball i can write with my lashes
 starting down the Congo seven seasons hence.

But this same poems begins with another geographic allusion, one which should be read as a "symbol" evoking the Black man's "origin" in Africa: this is Kilimanjaro, the unattainable height of the magic mountain capped with snow, representing both the Black man's roots and his unconquerable spirit. Bob Kaufman (a Black poet) writes in "Blues Note,"

Ray Charles is the black wind of Kilimanjaro,
 Screaming up-and-down blues,
 Moaning happy on all the elevators of my time.
 Smiling into the camera, with an African symphony
 Hidden in his throne, and (I Got A Woman) wails, too.

Clearly Kilimanjaro has nothing to do with Ray Charles or music, but it has become in the Black mind a symbol of the Black man's original and former world. It is a symbol that so stresses one opinion, attitude, or judgment that it has become a stereotype. Kilimanjaro is simply Africa at times (as if Africa summarized the roots of all Blacks!), and at times it evokes a deeper symbol by suggesting the unconquerable height that the Black may attain as well as his unconquerable spirit.

Shawcross 8

Harlem may mean Harlem, and Watts, Watts. But they come to represent for those who have never even been there (both Blacks and non-Blacks) the ghettos of the world, the multifarious creative or destructive or political forces which concentrations of ethnic groups can produce. The fact that Harlem extends its usual designated boundaries and the fact that it includes non-creative and non-destructive and non-political and non-Black elements is overlooked. While symbol in terms of use, it has become "symbol" as well. While Kilimanjaro has not fully moved to this position yet, Africa, for which it basically stands, has. Countee Cullen in "Heritage," long before the back-to-Africa philosophy rose strong in the Black world, indicated this stereotyping and its inadequacies:

What is Africa to me:

Copper sun or scarlet sea,

Jungle star or jungle track,

Strong bronzed men, or regal black

Women from whose loins I sprang

When the birds of Eden sang?....

Africa? A book one thumbs

Listlessly, till slumber comes.

Unremembered are her bats

Circling through the night, her cats

Crouching in the river reeds,
 Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
 By the river brink . . .

In political allusion--symbol--"symbol" we might instance just Malcolm X, "the single most popular hero of contemporary Black poetry" as Henderson (p. 25) reminds us. Take James Emanuel's "For Malcolm, U.S.A." The title alone indicates symbolization; the poem indicates that Malcolm means any Black who rises up politically and ideationally to challenge the oppression of the Blacks:

Thin, black javelin

Flying low,

Heads up!

Hear Malcolm go!

Cheekless tiger

On the prowl.

Breathlessly:

Hear Malcolm growl.

Lightning, lightning

Shot the sky.

Silently:

Did Malcolm die?

Brother, brother,

Hold my hand.

Malcolm was

My native land.

Or look at Carolyn Rodgers' "Poems for Malcolm":

. . . No words, no lines, no poetic phrases,

I'm asking for Real poems for Malcolm

Black poems for Malcolm

Poems for the pimp who sold us ourselves

Poems for the hustler, who whipped the games on

the nigger psychoses in our minds, yeah,

I want a poem for that dope-pusher who

turned us on to the heaviest tuffest high, high truth

got us hooked on revolution, can't git enough

fixes till Liberation, yeah, (etc.).

The importance of the point that I hope I am making is that in a work like "A Poem for Black Hearts" Imamu Amiri Baraka (that is, Le Roi Jones) is using Malcolm not just as a symbol but as a "symbol" (or stereotype) of all Black men who have experienced his fate; we must read the poem without limiting our vision to Malcolm X:

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke

the face of some dumb white man, For

Malcolm's hands raised to bless us
 all black and strong in his image
 of ourselves. . . For all of him dead and
 gone and vanished from us, and all of him which
 clings to our speech black god of our time.

To move to music, read A.B. Spellman's "Did John's Music Kill Him?" the reference being to the jazz saxophonist John Coltrane (or Trane as he is often called). Spellman uses Trane's early death and the nature of his music--"trane's horn had words in it," he writes--to symbolize the Black man's thumbing his nose at the White and the Black man's destruction in the process; here is the last stanza:

so beat john's death words down
 on me in the darker part
 of evening, the black light issued
 from him in the pit he made
 around us. worms came clear
 to me where i thought i had been
 brilliant. o john death will
 not contain your death
 will not contain you

But the point, I think, is that the allusion becomes symbol and thence stereotype; we need to read only "john" and we have a world of meaning (not just allusion) before us, as in Sharon

Bourke's "Sopranosound, Memory of John." This would seem to be simply a poem on Coltrane at first; then a poem employing him and his music as a symbol for Blacks; but I think it becomes stereotypical for all Black men whose music "opens and closes the valves of the universe." It is not John Coltrane as person or as musician, but the "symbol" of revolt against Whitey and "symbol" of self-destruction because of Whitey.

The significance of allusion is specific recollection of a context for the reader; the significance of symbol is a more generalized relationship evoking an objectified response from the reader; and the significance of a "symbol" is what it tells the reader about the thinking of the author. If I am correct about the way in which for Black poets the allusion becomes "symbol," we can recognize more validly authorial intention and authorial attitude toward his subject. Larry Neal, for example, in a poem called "Don't Say Goodbye to the Pork-Pie Hat" and dedicated to Langston Hughes, who had written various poems on jazz and Paris bistros and "Shakespeare in Harlem," talks of the resurgence of jazz through nostalgic and current references. But is he really concerned with alluding to Bird (that is, Charlie Parker, a saxophonist)? Or with symbolizing Black America as sound drifting over the cities as Black musicians put on the pork-pie hat again? Is he not really concerned with his vision that as they pick up their instruments

they prepare "to blow away the white dream?" The ending recalls numerous Black musicians, but Neal is really talking about the way they illustrate that

spirit lives in sound

lives sound spirit

sound lives in spirit

spirit lives in sound. blow.

spirit lives

spirit lives

spirit lives

The author's intention is to rouse up his audience to join that chorus of "spirit lives."

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