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After the End of Man: John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am*

Among the books written by African American writers and addressing the expatriate experience, John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1965) takes a central place. It testifies to the radical shift in the way exile, modernity and identity are constructed in African American literature in the 1960s. It sums up the radical move of the generation of the 1960s from the concept of exile embodied by the immigration of Richard Wright towards the concept of nomadism enthusiastically endorsed by the younger "New Breed."¹ A new way of configuring exile was concomitant with and perhaps also triggered by a new way of conceptualizing Europe. Just as the United States of America was reappraised by revolutionary black leaders, Europe was probed, investigated and interrogated for its role on the world stage: even though it still attracted black writers with the promise of respite from the racism rampant in the streets of the United States, Europe underwent scrutiny for its legacy of slavery, racism and colonization. Turning their exile into a journey into the origin of Western racism, black writers challenged a number of concepts and ideological frameworks which, according to them, constituted the foundations of European modernity. A major concept that underwent a disfigurement and re-configuration was that of humanism.

That Williams's novel places "man" at the center is without doubt. The title turns the reader's attention to a man who asserts his existence in what looks like a desperate act of screaming. A skillful play on the Cartesian dictum "I think therefore I am" signals that for the man of the novel the foundational act of consciousness and being is not that of the free thought of a sovereign subject but an act of protest: the cry of the human voice that is otherwise silenced and erased from existence. Engaging in a dialogue with other immature or hidden forms of manhood presented in such antecedent novels as *Native Son* or *Invisible Man*, Williams's narrative foregrounds the man, who, no longer content with his marginalized position of invisibility, demands that his voice be heard.

¹ I address the topic of a more general shift in the exile fiction by African American writers of the 1960s in *How their Living Outside America Affected Five African American Authors: Toward a Theory of Expatriate Literature*.

As the title promises, the novel pays tribute to the life of one man—Max Reddick. Modeled on the writer Chester Himes, Max is a 49-year-old writer dying of anal cancer. He finds himself in Europe to pay his last respects to his best friend, Harry, disturbingly evocative of Richard Wright. Even though the action time of the novel is only two days, thanks to the technique of telescoping time, which Williams adopted from Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, the reader is exposed to Max's entire life: his poverty and struggles to survive as a young writer in the 1940s in the city of New York; the trauma of losing his beloved wife as a result of an unsuccessful abortion; his travels to Africa and Europe in the 1950s as a newspaper correspondent; his experience in the Korean War; his job as a writer of presidential speeches at a time that evokes the presidency of J. F. Kennedy; his involvement with Regina, a Holocaust survivor; and his marriage to a Dutch woman, whom he decides to leave when he finds out that his disease is terminal. The narrative, told by a third-person narrator and incorporating a free indirect discourse, with Max frequently being the focalizer, constitutes what looks like a tribute to the endurance and strength of the black intellectual in the postwar years. Yet, despite its humanist bent, the novel refuses to embrace humanism in a straightforward, classical manner. It veers away from the pompous assertions about man's dignity and endurance epitomized by Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech delivered in 1950. Suspicious of universalistic aspirations of humanism, the novel anticipates the wave of anti-humanist criticism which was to overflow the academy in the late 1960s and 1970s to challenge the validity of these aspirations for the black intellectual in the 1960s.

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s the Enlightenment concept of humanism was still approached with respect by numerous African American leaders and writers. Even if its shortcomings were exposed, they were treated as temporary aberrations that could be corrected by the prevailing good will aided by the intervention of the victims. Martin Luther King, Jr. permeated his speeches with religious humanism, and his famous "I Have a Dream Speech" was a tribute to the Enlightenment belief in the brotherhood of men and man's rational will to act toward humanity's common good, progress and perfectibility. African American writers such as S. E. Anderson argued that the new black art would not only "aid the liberation [of black people] but also help black art and humanistic art" (24).² When he contended that the black writer of the new generation was "creating a new man, a new humanism, unlike the pallid and self-centered old 'humanism' of the exploitative West" (24), he was voicing the conviction of those black intellectuals who trusted art's potential to reconfigure the old asphyxiating Western human-

² Such were the views expressed by Anderson in a survey conducted by *Negro Digest* in January 1968 and inquiring into the trends of development in African American literature.

ism. Anderson's assertions, for example, echo the type of humanism which was endorsed by the Pan Africanist movement in the late 1950s. The Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, held in Rome in 1958, took a decidedly humanist bent. One of the prominent speakers at the Congress and a co-founder of the concept of *Négritude*, Léopold Sédar Senghor, while discussing "Constructive Elements of a Civilization of African Negro Inspiration," offered a language that was a blend of Marxism, the religious philosophy of Father Teilhard de Chardin, ethnological essentialism and humanism. He described his method of investigating African culture as "the socialist method" that had the virtue of being "humanistic," i.e. it "explain[ed] the *man by man*" (263). Drawing attention to what he believed were the major characteristics of the African, such as emotionality, spirituality, respect for elders, collectivity and a strong link between man and nature, Senghor expressed a hope that these features would have the potential to "inspire[] this world, *here and now* with the values of our past" (291). According to Senghor, the new humanist values would still cling to the conviction of the priority of man's life on the earth. When Senghor concluded his speech with the assertion that "*Man* must be the focal point of all our preoccupations" (294), he expressed his unwavering allegiance to the tradition of secular humanism, which he attempted to wrench away from the provenance of Western thinkers.

The powerful discourse of the new Pan African humanism clashed with its emerging critique. Franz Fanon was probably one of the most astute critics of the Enlightenment concept of man. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he bluntly expressed his misgivings about what he believed to be European ideological schizophrenia. His assertion that "[in] Europe... they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them" (251) signified his rejection of the Enlightenment belief in the human being. His bellicose rhetoric captured the imagination of the more radically oriented fraction of the "New Breed" and became the staple of black critical thought regularly expressed in such periodicals as *The Negro Digest* or the more revolutionarily inclined *Freedomways*. In his essays, Larry Neal proclaimed the death of Western civilization and his tenor of uncompromising criticism of the tradition of Western philosophical thought mirrored the intellectual zeal of Amiri Baraka or Calvin C. Hernton. Williams joined them when he expressed his reservations about Martin Luther King, which later found their way into his nonfictional book *The King God Didn't Save* (1970). Williams's critique of Martin Luther King's strategy of racial compromise and reconciliation testified to Williams's awareness of the limitations of the belief in classical humanism.

When seen through the prism of Williams's political skepticism, *The Man* reads like an artistic transcript of a debate around the relevance or adequacy of humanism for the black intellectual in the 1960s. While engaging in the process of deconstructing the legacy

of European liberal thought, the narrative places at its center two historical events: European colonization and the Holocaust. That Williams would address the history of European colonial imperialism seems to be a highly predictable gesture in the wake of the rise of anti-colonial movements in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. The novel's empathy with those whose personal stories have been dwarfed by the forces of colonial history is more than obvious. The protagonist sadly records the vestiges of colonial psychology among the African population in the newly liberated countries; and in the streets of Paris he is moved by the low position of African Arabs living off the material and ideological crumbs of the former colonial empire. He quickly identifies with the marginalized and the subaltern and sees parallels between slavery and the imperialist European logic of colonization. Right at the novel's opening, he stresses the link between himself and millions of nameless victims of the Middle Passage. While sitting at a café in Amsterdam and appraising a Dutch crowd of people moving in front of him, he muses: "*Ah yes, ... you Dutch motherfuckers. I've returned. 'A Dutch man o'warre that sold us twenty negars,' John Rolfe wrote, Well, you-all, I bring myself. Free! Three hundred and forty-five years after Jamestown. Now. . . how's that for the circle come full?*" (4). Max is not just a black American tourist revived by Dutch racial tolerance, but a descendant of slaves dehumanized by the Europeans. Proudly affirming the survival of those who were sacrificed on the altar of the European ideas of a "better" human society, Max challenges the white-washed version of European history. It tends to juxtapose European history, motivated by the belief in humanism and human brotherhood, with the history of the United States, fuelled by the tradition of racism and racial segregation. Such bipolar historical thinking, which downplays the European role in the development of the worldwide system of servitude and racism, even if it conveniently simplifies the historical picture, is in Max's eyes, reductive and historically dangerous. The rift between Europe and the United States is not as wide as some, especially European intellectuals, would want it to appear. Rather than being Abel and Cain, Europe and the United States are identical twins motivated by a similar greed and drive for power.

Max's historical musings in Europe are amplified by his awareness of the traces of WWII and the Holocaust. Max is attuned to the presence of the traumatic memory of Nazism in Europe; while visiting Amsterdam, he is "sad... and angry" (30) when he comes across the house in the basement of which Anne Frank sought shelter during the war. While driving to Leiden, the Netherlands, he registers the irony behind the signs reading "welcome" in German. However, it is through his personal involvement with Regina, a Holocaust survivor who makes her life in the United States, that Max is exposed to the magnitude of the Nazis' crime and its power to thwart people's lives years after the war. Regina Galbraith (formerly Goldberg), at the time of the war a little child,

managed to survive, despite her family being “gassed and cooked, most likely” (161). Taken to Scotland, Australia and later brought to the U.S., she joins hundreds of Holocaust survivors who suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. Unable to establish a stable relationship, she suffers from a series of nervous breakdowns, which, in an ironic twist laden with significance, occur usually at the time of Christmas. She has no illusion about Europe’s propensity for violence and can see through what she perceives to be European hypocrisy. Therefore, observing Max’s compulsive returns to the old continent, she considers it “foolish to go back to the slaughterhouse just because slaughtering had stopped for a season or two” (231). Her story alerts Max both to the consequences of the use of the rhetoric of the science of eugenics and to the danger of uncritical acceptance of the discourse of universalism. Regina’s family is described as “nice people, willing to please everyone, more German than Jewish,” and speaking *Hoch Deutsch* (161). Their desire to assimilate and to wipe off the vestiges of their ethnicity not only did not spare them but rendered them more vulnerable to the operations of the machine of racial hatred. This conclusion echoes Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s argument in the *Logic of Enlightenment* (1947), where they deflate the Jewish trust in the strategy of assimilation in the prewar period as a buffer against anti-Semitism. Critics bewail Jewish attempts at integration and the abandoning of the “older mythic (irrational) identity [which] deprived them of a protection against the Enlightened Society” (138). Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Max believes that the Enlightenment and Western humanism are premised on an ideological deception: they posit a universal acceptance of the discourse of the Enlightenment, but, at the same time, they reserve equal treatment and human rights to the gentleman’s club of the few. In the formulation of Adorno and Horkheimer, they “promise liberation to the bourgeois individual but give him cruelty” (138).

Max’s skepticism about the tradition of the Western Enlightenment and humanism reaches its nadir during his last trip to Europe. While driving a rented Volkswagen, he conducts an extended interior monologue. His bitterness, cynicism and lashing criticism of the Western civilization finds an outlet in a series of rhetorical questions that he poses:

Question: How many men can I kill if I dig out the Suez Canal?

Question: How many men can I kill if I build myself a Great Pyramid?

Question: How many men, women and children can we kill if we retake the Holy Land from the heathens? (We’ll call it a Crusade)

Question: How many men, women and children can we kill if we establish a slave trade between Africa and the New World?

Question: How many men can we kill to make the world safe for democracy?

Question: How many men can we kill to make the world safe for communism?

Answer: Hundreds, thousands, millions, billions.

And then we will start all over again. (68)

Seeking some kind of historical synthesis, Max notes the cycle of oppression by the Western world endlessly repeating itself from the inception of the Western civilization. Europe is the incubator of a refined armature of murder, and its rhetoric of progress only shades or sublimates the more primitive drive for power. New religious and scientific discourses have the virtue of replacing the stale rhetoric of used-up languages but have not really offered a radical departure from the obsessive Western desire to rule the world. In this scheme of things, the project of the Enlightenment is tainted from its beginning: it carries with it a hidden potential for violence which animates the Western civilization.

The feeling of encroaching violence, aggravated by Max's travels, observations and personal misfortunes rooted in widespread racism, initially results in his growing desire to respond with the same violence. Recording Max's psychological condition, the narrator concedes: "Max Reddick was in a state of evil. He wanted to punch every white face he saw. Evil was beyond anger; it was a constant state, the state of destruction, someone else's" (106). Acknowledging the fact of being caught up in a deceitful system, Max, just like Franz Fanon, trusts in the dialectical violence of the oppressed under colonialism. He enacts what looks like Fanon's pattern of colonial oppression: the colonized cannot but lash out against the colonizer in a fit of despair but also to end the chain of colonized violence.

After many years of struggles with the system in the United States and with racial hypocrisy in Europe, however, Max resigns himself to the existing situation. When the reader encounters him two days before his death, he is described as a man

bored with all of it, the predictability of wars, the behavior of statesmen, cabdrivers, most men, most women. Bored because writing books had become, finally, unexciting; bored because *The Magazine* too, and all the people connected with it, did their work and lived by formulae. He was bored with New Deals and Square Deals and New Frontiers and Great Societies; suspicious of the future, untrusting of the past. (17-18)

Max posits himself as a tourist of the world, exiled from his geographical and intellectual home. His intellectual doubts about the validity of political systems and actions an-

anticipate the skepticism of the post-foundationalist anti-humanists such as Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault. Foucault's assertion that, as a result of the findings in psychoanalysis and linguistics, man as a subject has been "decentred" and therefore can no longer "account for his sexuality and his unconscious, the systematic forms of his language, or the regularities of his fiction" (13) resonates with the anti-humanist pose Max assumes by the end of his life. His freedom to act, think and speak is limited since, regardless of his liberal, leftist or rightist sympathies, he is trapped in the discourses from which he cannot escape. He is no longer seen as an independent subject, capable of meaningful actions, but as an entity shaped by political and linguistic forces beyond his control. Max is facing his own personal "end of man" whose demise coincides with his dying.

Despite his anti-humanist insight, Max is still not prepared to face the full consequences of anti-humanist determinism. When confronted with a voice from his unconscious which challenges the assumption of the power of reason, another feature of classical liberal humanism, Max rebels. Despite the deluge of questions welling up from his unconscious, he stubbornly clings to his "humanness." His chant-like repetition "I am" is indeed the cry of a desperate man who, despite his skepticism, refuses to give up on his trust in man's power to mold the world:

You am whut, Max Reddick, you piece of crap? Turd. Lost a small hunk of asshole.
 Big deal. You am what?
 The end of line, as far as it's come.
 What fuckin' line?
 Man.
 Man? You tougher than rats, bedbugs, roaches; angleworms, bluebottles, houseflies?
 Yes, I kill them all.
 Tee, hee, yeah, but you don't breed as fast, and what you breed, man, sometimes, I just don't know.
 This is not the same and you know it; an insect or a rodent can never be a king. I am .
 I am a man. I am a king.
 A whut?!
 A king.
 You am a fool. Look around you. You ain't related to these other fools?
 Yes, we are kings.
 O, Max, whut a king look like with maggots crawling out his eye sockets?
 I don't mean then. I mean now. Nobody counts then. It's all over.

It's all over now. It was over when you were born. Youse a fool. . . You ain't no king. Know whut youse is? Wanna know? Yuse a stone blackass nigger. Hee, hee, hee. Say sumping'. I'm right, ain't I? Tongue fell off, nigger?

...

I am. I am a king.

You an ass. This ain't nuthing'; this ain't shit and needer is you.

I AM, I told you, damn it, I AM. (187)

Max's dialogue with his skeptical alter ego is framed within racial discourse. Even though as a black man he has been denied access to the fruits of Western humanism, he still, just like Ellison's invisible protagonist from *Invisible Man*, wants to observe "the principle." The principle is based on the trust in the power of human language and actions to change the world into a better place for other men. Exposing historical abuses of the humanist rhetoric, yet refusing to renounce trust in its fundamental principles, *The Man* anticipates the arguments of those who, when the wave of anti-foundational euphoria and anti-humanist rhetoric subsided, decided to risk a debate on a new pluralistic humanism devoid of its earlier imperialist, homogenous and coercive aspirations. The pronouncements of Edward Said expressed forty years after the publication of *The Man* in his lectures on *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* read like a commentary on *The Man*'s ideological skirmishes. "[I]n my opinion, it has been the abuse of humanism that discredits some of humanism's practitioner's without discrediting humanism itself"(13), asserted Said in his discussion of what he saw as a new face of humanism being birthed with every day practice in a multiracial and multiethnic United States.

Williams's novel skillfully traces the nuances of a black intellectual's journey from humanism towards anti-humanism and back. Nearly giving in to the utmost skepticism concomitant with the rejection of what Said labels "the worldliness" and withdrawal into apolitical nomadism, the novel includes an element of defiance. Although it concludes with Max's death at the hands of two undercover black agents, as if confirming the insignificance of his existence, simultaneously it creates a narrative space which challenges the book's surface message of anti-humanism. Before his death, Max finds himself in the possession of secret documents which reveal the plan of controlling the black population world-wide and, if the need arises, of setting up concentration camps for the black population of the United States. The King Alfred Plan terrifies Max and the man decides to take action. Aware of the danger he finds himself in, in a phone conversation he entrusts the content of the document to Minister X, a play on Malcolm X. In the face of the magnitude of the encroaching violence, and despite the fear of political consequences, Max makes a conscious choice, which is his moment of affirmation of control over his life.

The novel's turn towards the language of choice and responsibility cannot but evoke Jean Paul Sartre's insistence on the power of human action in his 1945 lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism." At the time when Williams was working on *The Man*, Sartre's philosophy of existentialism continued to appeal to African American writers. The younger generation of African Americans respected the French philosopher, who in *What Is Literature?* had the courage to acknowledge the genius of Richard Wright, but also viewed existentialism as a potent tool to describe their condition of entrapment and absurdity. Repudiating one of the precepts of the humanism of the Enlightenment, that of human nature, Sartre claimed that "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (22). Man's actions and responsibility for himself and "for all men" constitute his humanity and thus, according to Sartre, man has the capability of being free. It is through his actions that "he is free, he is freedom" (23). While toying with the Sartrean argument, *The Man* refuses, just like Max, to surrender to the overwhelming and convincing language of anti-humanism and ironically anticipates the major clash between Sartre's existential humanism and Derrida's anti-humanist philosophy that is to come by the end of the 1960s. According to the novel's logic, anti-humanists and skeptics may generally be correct in their arguments and their rejection of man on the basis of his entrapment in Western metaphysics. When confronted with the physical world, however, in which bodies, not ideas, matter and where people's lives and dignity are at stake, they have to revise their position. There are moments in the lives of nations, groups or individuals when old-fashioned trust in the will of the human being can be the only buffer against the power of violence. The 1960s, especially after the death of Malcolm X, constituted such a moment for African American writers, and Williams, despite his initial repudiation of humanism and affinity with anti-foundational skepticism, celebrates the value of the action of the black man. Facing what may be a Pyrrhic victory, he celebrates the moment of injecting his voice of protest in the middle of the dominant Western discourse of deception: *I AM, I told you, damn it, I AM*.

Read today, *The Man* offers a rich insight into the complex history of the black intellectual's attraction to and repudiation of the precepts of humanism in the 1960s. Steering away from the reductionism which tainted African American nonfictional writing of that period, the novel invites the reader into a complex debate. In a Socratic manner, it poses questions and provokes with answers, suspending political allegiances and the correctness of tone. Moving through the minefield of Western humanism, anti-foundationalist rhetoric and what looks like new existential humanism, the novel engages the reader in a dialogue. It trusts the reader's ability to understand the word and to make the right choices. And probably this belief in the power of human communication is the most humanist gesture of the whole novel.

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