

Writing and Form in Charles Johnson's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*

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Charles Johnson's collection of eight short fictions, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice Tales and Cojurations*, is a book illustrating the cultural alienation of African Americans fatefully embedded in the mainstream of the white socio-economical milieu, and along the way, it explores the idea of the creative writing process. The black issues Johnson deals with are essentially psychological and organic, rather than the more typical socialist realism which tends to affirm social protest against the miserable condition of black folks. As Jonathan Penner aptly puts it, "though most of these stories have black protagonists, the author seems interested in black people no more than he is in people. Rather, he tends to treat blackness—often ingeniously—as a condition, a state of being, which is already halfway to a metaphor" (8). The characteristics of spontaneity and intuition of the blacks is the primal condition to Johnson's idea of creative activity, and his depicting the repetition of such characteristics is also imperative so as to originate a kind of form which virtually fortifies and sustains the former, the creative sensibility.¹ And the two, I believe, conflict and coalesce as a motif in this collection.

As some critics suggest, the pieces in the volume have consistency and development,² and Johnson's consistent objective stance, I think, is reflected in the development of the protagonists' awareness of what they really are. The levels of the protagonists' psychological growth vary, say, from the robber's blunt realization that once-purchased things lose their own value, to the postman attaining emancipation in the stoic design of Chinese martial arts. The protagonists, in any case, virtually suffer from, if not surrender to, Du Bois's integrationist sense of double consciousness characterized by seeing themselves through the eyes of the racial other (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 8-9), a condition which foreshadows an inevitable identity crisis. The ensuing recreation of identity will be necessary against an indifferent, deterministic universe. The protagonists' quests are the quests seeking knowledge of reconciling such a conflicting human condition of two-ness.

Half of the stories, "Education of Mingo," "Exchange Value," "Moving Pictures," and "Menagerie, A Child Fable," share a thematic similarity, dealing with a strong sense of abortive hope, a suspension between the antithesis of illusion and reality, freedom and bondage. In "Education of Mingo," Moses, a white property owner in antebellum Illinois, tries to create another Self out of a slave, Mingo, who is worth no more than an animal.

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Moses' Promethean enterprise, however, reveals the paradoxical fact that Moses himself turns out to be a victim of his experiment, a story invoking the Frankenstein myth. In "Exchange Value," two brothers, Loftis and Cooter, experience disillusionment from their fantasy that Elnora Bailey's bequest can assist their attaining emancipation from their poverty. The treasury has, however, been worth nothing since the bequeathed received its seemingly enormous benefit. "Moving Pictures" presents the narrator's (i.e., the reader's) dream of becoming a poet, a dream which ironically results in the ruthless reality compelling him to be a mediocre screenwriter of the movie that he is presently watching. "Menagerie" is set in a pet shop where the deserted pet animals (especially the watch dog, Berkeley) yearn for the owner to come back, so that they could continue to survive instead of starving to death in chaos.

The blindness of the characters, Cooter and Loftis especially, is symbolized by the state of disorder and chaos. Inside the timeworn apartment where Elnora has been dead and unlocated for a week is more than what is expected to be there. In a process of discovering her long-hidden wealth, Cooter and Loftis have to undergo the encounter of bits and pieces of messy, smelly stuff, the most detestable of which is her dead rotten body: "Miss Bailey be in her long-sleeved flannel nightgown, bloated, like she'd been blown up by a bicycle pump, her old face caved in with rot, flyblown, her fingers big and colored like spoiled bananas" (32). The juxtaposition of the wealth and the corpse shows that the "raw energy" of the treasury cannot be transformed into anything else that Cooter and Loftis want to obtain for their better lives. As Elnora is ignorant to the fact that she is "spellbound, possessed by the promise of life, panicky about depletion, and locked now in the past" (37-38), so are Cooter and Loftis incapable of taking advantage of what is otherwise a roomful of trash.

Although Loftis comes to realize the tricky power of money and resumes the penniless life of a pauper, Cooter sticks to the attitude of craftiness, still brooding with a futile hope: "I wanted to tell Loftis how Miss Bailey looked four days ago, that maybe it didn't have to be like that for us—did it?—because we could change" (40). This simple-hearted belief is culturally preceded by that of Moses. But Moses's case is much more dramatic in effect. As Cooter overestimates his capacity as that of a "wizard," Moses too behaves more than like a father to baby-like Mingo (newly purchased, he needs to be nurtured to cope with the language and mannerisms of the new world): Moses, as the name implies, behaves consciously and unconsciously like a Maker, "fingering something fine and noble from a rude chump of foreign clay. It was like aiming a shotgun at the whole world through the African, blasting away all that Moses, according to his lights, tagged evil, and cultivating the good" (5). Moses as well as Cooter is depicted as abusing too much the aerial facet of imagination, incapable of effecting it properly because of his arrogant innocence.

Johnson's treatment of the overwhelming caricature of the ignorant white, however, does not evoke a critical attitude that instigates the historical hardships which Afro-Americans have experienced. The concept of Negritude, a philosophy overtly affirming

the blacks just because they are black, "reversing the negative meaning of the black body" (*Being and Race*, 28), is what Johnson regards as being away from aesthetic quality due to its characteristic of anti-racist racism. Johnson instead evokes the feeling of peacefulness and lull even after Mingo, now becoming a monster embodying Moses's free will, committed the crime of massacre, chopping up his neighbors, an ending which foreshadows the reconciliation between the master's spiritual sin and the slave's naiveté: Moses admits, "Mingo, you more me than I am myself" (22). One aspect of Moses' notion of education is at this point revealed. The one-sidedness of Moses' projecting his egotistical will onto Mingo is reversed; it turns out to be the master who is educated.

Then, what is the meaning of education which might cultivate unsophisticated, innate resourcefulness? "Popper's Disease" suggests that the excessive desire for knowledge fails in the existential plight of nothingness. The story tells of Popper, the black physician, exploring the fundamental meaning of his existence, and coming to know that the sense of being separate within a racist society is unavoidable so far as he is in such a society. This particular tension within the psychology of the Afro-American is aptly embodied in the pathetic image of Popper's entrapment in the claustrophobic spaceship. The only way that the physician can be released from the flying saucer is by identifying and treating the strange, fatal disease afflicting the alien creature, being bound to be extinct at the last stage of his life.

The extraterrestrial and Popper are in a sense identical. They are outsiders: the homelands where they once lived, or still live lose their dynamic prospects, showing no interest in the on-going process of growth. The planet the alien is exiled from has established the ultimate stage of what culture should ideally be, a stage which allows no more revolution, no more differentiation between ego and things, the spiritual and the material. Everything is self-fulfilling, as even the computer Popper operates is self-educating; it is a world of oneness and omnipresence, God and the primitive:

Their cities with fragile buildings like works of glass, where bridges seemed to flow as fluidly as the water beneath them, were full of shocks and mysteries, a glimpse into the ineffable Yonder—cities of such beauty and antiquity that centuries before Pithecanthropus (Peking Man) these creatures founded their metaphysic foursquare on what we would call, roughly, a theory of quantum electrodynamics. (143-44)

This is analogous to one aspect of Western culture. Citing Hegel, James A. Snead focuses on the difference between the absolute yet indifferent and saturated European culture and the resilient African masses who are absolutely Other to the European: "The African, radical in his effect upon the European, is a 'strange form of self-consciousness' unfixed in orientation towards transcendent goals and terrifyingly close to the cycles and rhythms of nature" (63). Similar to the experience of the Africans in shaping their own culture, Popper's act of searching the cause of the disease, i.e., seeking an individual self in orientation toward a dialectical quest, is an antithesis of the stasis of completion. And this Faustian act culminates in the state destined to death as illustrated in the short, mis-

erable life of the alien creature: "Dualism is Death" (144). The story gradually discloses that the mystery of the disease of the alien is virtually that of Popper. As the creature is quarantined on the planet of Earth, so is Popper in the cultural limitation of the flying saucer: the diagnosis the computer reaches is that "it's the Self and there is no cure" (145).

If there is any way to escape from the saucer, the embodiment of the dilemma of "the primordial feeling of twoness" (134), it is to acquiesce in abandoning the constant and desperate problem-solving attitude as carried on by Popper. Allan Jackson in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," however fascinated with such a rational solution, eventually follows this ultimate learning process not only with himself alone, but with his father. Allan, like almost all characters, conveys the conscious desire to be released from the ever-lasting oppression of inexplicable poverty and misfortune: his father lost his thumb smashed by a wagon; his mother poisoned herself due to the repentance she deplored when she was robbed of the money her husband saved to buy the land. Allan's feeling responsible to his father, family, and race is deep-rooted to the extent that he has to pay a debt through achieving sorcery which he takes as accomplishable by way of study and education. Exercising such quasi-magic with the dying baby, an act which blasphemes against a sanction of the terrifying soul, Allan ends up invoking the demons, the embodiment of his false desire, the misinterpretation of the act of conjuration.

Magic only fulfills from within. The absurdity of the cyclical chores, such as cleaning dishes and washing clothes, which Rubin Bailey imposed on Allan, paradoxically tells the way to immerse oneself into the unconscious stream of sorcery. Falling in the vortex of despair and lying at the verge of revelation, Allan comes to realize that "it had to seize you, use you...because it needed a womb, shake you down, speak through you until the pain pearled into a beautiful spell that snapped the world back together" (165). It is at this bitter moment when Allan assumes a kind of umbilical tie by which he is embraced in the reminiscent past; his squeezing of his father's ruined fingers is the unconscious act of empathizing with the pain his father felt in "an old slave reflex" and of ensuring his identity linked to the African slaves.

The process of Johnson's protagonists finding self-knowledge seems to be completed in Rudolph Jackson, the mailman, in "China" and the old anonymous professor of philosophy in "Alethia." Rudolph and the professor are both undergoing the self-discovering journeys which are complementary to each other: Rudolph from the stereotypical life of a black Christian to the ascetic and spiritual life of a Kung-Fu master; the professor from the cloistered world of academia to the sensuous freedom of love. It is also interesting to note that both protagonists complete their journey with the aid of the folks of their own kind suffering from being relatively low in the social ladder. Rudolf gears himself into initiating a cross-cultural relationship with a Vietnamese, a Puerto Rican, a Chinese and some more from his kwoon class: "They were separated by money, background, religion, but something ...made them seem...like a single body" (82). Similarly, the anonymous professor finally concedes to be abducted by Wendy Barnes, the sexy student of the Equal

Opportunity Program, because he cannot cope with her blackmail: unless he gives her at least a B, she would sue him on a charge of sexual harassment so she could stay at the college.

This tour of abduction bears a mythic design. As an anima or a muse, Wendy Barns guides the professor to the cave of the marijuana joint, symbolic of a source of knowledge, which the professor has kept declining because of the strong shield of the metaphysical ideal to which he has clung. Wendy's spontaneous rendition of the fundamental approach to the understanding of Being transcends the professor's lecture conveyed through the hollowness of metaphysical language: Wendy says through her bitter experience, "Civil rights is high comedy. The old values are dead. Our money is plastic. Our art is murder. Our philosophy is a cackle, obscene and touching, from the tower" (108). Thus stunned and submerged in the darkness of chaos, "the chaos no more, or less, than the I" (111), the professor comes to terms with the vital rhythm of the physical, a rhythm which penetrates through Wendy as well as through the professor. He realizes the sensual dance Wendy dances is not only the vehicle of rendering art but the manifestation of the universal center of the self: "Seer and seen were intertwined—if you took the long view—in perpetuity. As it was, and apparently shall ever be, being sang being sang being in a cycle that was endless" (111). The metaphor that the spiritual dance appears to maintain its imaginary power with the aid of the performer is effective in understanding the importance of creating form.

Throughout "China," Rudolf's acculturation appears in a conflicting theme between one institutionalized Afro-Americans' attitude originated from South Carolina and the intuitive attitude of the individual stemmed from the mysterious facet of China. Representing the former view, Rudolf's wife, Evelyn, satisfied with the long-termed, monotonous yet secure marriage, has a sense of assurance only through the occasional reminiscence of her courting with young, naive, physically weak Rudolf, when customarily sitting at a sermon in a black church. Evelyn tends to analyze Rudolf's retreat from carnal satisfaction merely because of the middle-age crisis. True, the insinuation of senility that Rudolf feels with tremendous fear takes him away from the excessive intake of high-calorie food and sex due to the potential danger to the heart.

Compared to Evelyn's surrendering posture to the human tendency to decay, Rudolf's sudden and necessary inclination to the Chinese martial arts denies a kind of built-in inability of man. Physically, of course, using the unused part of his body, Rudolf sacrifices himself in the masochistic, recurrent practice to the pitiful extent that "he'd lost touch with everything ...normal in people: weakness, fear, guilt, self-doubt, the very things that gave the world thickness and make people do things" (89). The certain monastic beauty he attains is so inhuman that Evelyn would even feel faintly obscene. Psychologically, Rudolf is capable of suspending the innate inability of humans, a tendency which is liable to make judgments: without being disillusioned by the third-rate movie in which an actor leaped "twenty feet through the air in perfect defiance of gravity" (65), however with the mechanical aid of a trampoline (the trick which Evelyn no doubt

pointed out), Rudolf is rather encouraged with enlightenment, his mouth hanging wide open. Thus withholding what the surface of the reality portrays, he becomes capable of creating the spiritual basis for being himself, i.e., being no more, or no less than a postman is an immediate evidence that he is at the same time able to communicate with the mystery of the darkness of the soul. At the Kingdom of the kwoon rink, the miraculous jump that the postman jumps— “twenty feet off the ground in the perfect flying kick that floored his opponent” (95)—is symbolic of such spiritual reinforcement. As opposed to the utilitarian jump of the actor, the jump Rudolf actuated is transcendental as is the mythic dance Windy effected. The strength of form linked with the spiritual thus assumes the imaginative power to transform the impossible to the possible, the static into the continuation of movement.

Portraying the experiences of the alienated blacks who have to deal with the naturalistic universe, Johnson consistently expresses his confidence in the necessity of shaping an individual identity, a process which parallels the author's concept of writing. Delineating this objective effectively, Johnson states that “language fixes the meaning of objects, nails it down, despoils and expands meaning, allows you to have several levels virtually at any point in a story, and so fiction is a philosophical enterprise for me: hermeneutics” (“Reflections on Film” 123). This metaphor of language's enterprise acknowledging the multidimensional aspect of objects has been visible through the psychic dramas in which the symbolic figures of writer, that is, conjuror, e.g., Loftis, Allan, Popper, the professor, Rudolf, attempt to find the way of executing conjuration. This involves terrifying activities which demand the need of a spiritual journey to confront the respective shadowy companions themselves: the dead body of Elnora Bailey, the demons, the alien creature, Wendy, and Evelyn. Coming to terms with such doubles of themselves, these journeys require the total acquiescence of the Self, not demanding any reasons or strategies whatsoever. And the subsequent emergence, the absolute work of conjuration, is a light emanating a new facet of the lives of the blacks along with bridging a spiritual tie with their long-forgotten ancestors, the soul tribe of “the Allmuseri.” Again, the power of sorcery is the power of transforming object into form with the demand of an inner, instinctive drive; at another level, it is an essential experiment of becoming a writer.

Notes

- 1 In *Being and Race*, Johnson investigates the origin of creativity which is twofold. Paraphrasing Kant, he states, “imagination without education is blind; education without imagination, empty” (51).
- 2 Michael Ventura, for example, writes, the volume has “the feel of a good short novel rather than a collection of stories...and each of the eight fictions not only stands on its own but seems to support and invoke its companions” (7). Fred Pfeil likewise points out, “thinking is in fact the main activity in most of these tales” (226).

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