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Source: Black American Literature Forum, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter, 1977), pp. 146-149
Published by: St. Louis University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041650
Accessed: 16/10/2013 14:57

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“‘WE AIN’T GOING BACK THERE’”: THE IDEA OF PROGRESS IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

Escape from the closed world of the Southern plantation-ghetto has been a persistent theme in Afro-American writing from the early slave narratives to the experimental fiction of Ishmael Reed. The rural South has long been pictured as the last bastion of the slavery mentality, and while a few black writers have explored means by which to reform that mentality, more have followed the lead of Richard Wright, William Attaway, William Melvin Kelley, and Ronald Fair in suggesting that the black man’s only alternative to continuing subjection to racist Southern traditions is wholesale removal, even though opportunities elsewhere will be circumscribed too. In his first two novels, Catherine Carmier and Of Love and Dust, Ernest J. Gaines seems to subscribe to this view of the Southern scene as almost impervious to change. The post-World War II rural Louisiana setting into which the protagonists of both of these novels are thrust languishes in a kind of temporal vacuum which threatens to stifle Jackson Bradley and Marcus Payne unless they can get out. Both heroes challenge features of the old order, Payne by putting his foot in the door of slavery for the sake of Louise Bonbon, Bradley by attempting to lure Catherine Carmier out of the self-imposed cloister of her father’s house. But in their failure to free their captive ladies from the ties of tradition, Gaines expresses considerable skepticism, it seems to me, about a faith in individual fulfillment and social progress which is founded on the idea of escape from the South. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines reiterates this skepticism, but he goes farther to talk about the bases on which truly efficacious, non-escapist progress can take place—indeed, has taken place—in the most historically backward regions of the South.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman does not diverge markedly from Gaines’s earlier books or from the protest tradition of Afro-American fiction as a whole in its depiction of repeated injustices and stymied progress for Southern blacks. One reads in the novel of massacres, murders, and intimidation of many exponents of progress and liberation for black people. Nevertheless, less apparent than the forces of socio-political stasis and regression in the novel is a pattern of psychological and spiritual evolution in the consciousness of many blacks in Jane’s life. Within the novel’s dialectic between progress and regress, Jane and other sojourners in the South like herself must learn to choose wisely between various backward and forward directions of thought and action in order to prepare the way for manifest changes in black people’s social situation.

Like her predecessor protagonists in Gaines’s fiction, Jane Pittman as a newly emancipated slave starts out her quest for freedom from the oppressive past by joining a movement to escape the South. Sharing the restless urge of other young blacks to ‘‘get moving,’’ Jane naively assumes that freedom can be obtained in a place called Ohio, which is reachable simply by walking there. Freedom and its fulfillment are thus identified spatially, rather than psychologically and spiritually, in Jane’s childlike mind. Significantly, an almost destitute plantation mistress warns her of her error early in the novel by telling her, ‘‘There ain’t no Ohio.’’ But this woman’s offered alternative to Jane is, ‘‘Y’all come back with me. . . . I’ll treat you right’’ (p. 29). In other words, with the doors of escape to a half-illusory Northern ideal closing, Jane may choose to retreat into the plantation past, to a time and place of security, if not independence. This siren song, which will become at times a threatening command to ‘‘go back’’ to the past, to preserve the status quo, recurs throughout Jane’s autobiography. One sure mark of heroism among the characters in her story is a refusal to ‘‘go back’’ either willingly or by force. All of the admirable characters in the novel subscribe to Jane’s intuitive progressivism—‘‘I knowed I had to keep going,’’ she says as a child. But the manner and goal of the ‘‘going’’ determine whether true progress, individually and in terms of the larger mass, can be made to come about.

If she were not so young, Jane might realize the futility of her pursuit of a far-off freedom and fulfillment after hearing the story of the young black hunter whom she meets early in her travels. In search of his father for reasons which are his own, the young man admits that he has been ‘‘going and going,’’ and yet ‘‘. . . I ain’t nowhere yet, myself. Just searching and searching’’ (p. 45). This sobering testimonial to the ease with which the quest can become dispiriting and unending is lost on Jane. But
continuing skepticism from later advisors together with the need for food and the other necessities for herself and her informally adopted "son" Ned cause Jane to cease her quest. She is further disillusioned when her employer, Southern scalawag named Bone, is expelled from the region as an indirect result of the Compromise of 1877. Faced with the recrudescence of slavery once again, Jane shows the maturity of her added ten years in deciding not to be among those who "'get moving'" once again. Though the Democratic takeover bodes ill for black people, Jane decides things can be no better for those "'heading North'" than for those "'staying South.'" Displaying the self-possessed conservativism and practicality which are among her most noteworthy traits, Jane resolves on a new course in life. "'I would stay right here and do what I could for me and Ned'" (p. 70). She will move again only for a realistic prospect of better chances for herself and Ned. She will not be moved, literally or figuratively, by vain ideals of Northern freedom on the one hand or by despair of Southern change on the other.

It is important to recognize, however, that this decision, while appropriate for Jane, is not established as a rigid standard for Ned to follow as he approaches his own restless years. Faced with mounting white resistance to his work as a guide for blacks making the exodus west, Ned argues that he must leave the South. Jane's agreement shows that she understands the essential psychological nature of his quest; she sees that he needs to break the ties of home, to become his own man, to leave the South rather than "'go back'" to a slave status or voluntarily stop black progress westward. But she also understands that such movement would not be progressive for her. "'People don't keep moving, Ned,'" she says (p. 75). At some point, she implies, one must stop moving not out of fear, but out of immovable determination to abide.

When Ned returns to Louisiana after his travels from riot-torn Kansas to war-torn Cuba, he carries with him the message of immovable determination which Jane first enunciates in the Autobiography. Having completed his own restless years, Ned returns south to preach the social gospel of his namesake Frederick Douglass. Immediately hostile whites hire a professional killer, who warns Jane that he has been hired to "'stop that nigger.'" "'They want him to go back,'" Albert Cluveau tells Jane, using the familiar language of resistance to progress which all defenders of stasis in the novel repeat. But Ned has come south expressly to warn his people about those false race prophets and patrons who would send them "'back.'" In his crucial sermon by the river Ned admits, "'I left here when I was a young man but most people thought that was the best thing to do then. But I say to you now, don't run and do fight.'" Alluding to the enemies of black progress, Ned reminds his hearers, "'You got black people here saying go back to Africa, some saying go to Canada, some saying go to France'" (p. 109). But in light of Ned's mature conservatism, the idea of "'going back'" to Africa seems a throw-back to a past phase of Afro-American consciousness, now best left behind.

Having repudiated the invalid equation of freedom with a place outside the South, Ned goes on to redefine progress toward freedom in intellectual and spiritual terms. Those who advise black people "'to stay in a corner want to keep your mind in a corner too,'" Ned proclaims. His mission as a black leader consequently is to build a school "'so you'll have a chance to get from out of that [mental] corner'" (p. 110). When black folk consciousness emerges from the restrictions of its own mental purview, Ned implies, true progress within the South will ensue.

When Albert Cluveau stops Ned Douglass with a bullet, the fact of repression on the socio-political level of events is reasserted in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. However the people's reaction to this apparent setback differs markedly from their reactions to previous reversals. When Bone, the fair-minded scalawag, was expelled from the South, many blacks had "'moved on'" in search of a far-off territory ahead where progress toward freedom might continue. But after Ned Douglass's instructions in black history and nation-building, Miss Jane and her compatriots build a monument to Ned's memory and finish the school he started. Thus they show that they have learned the necessity of conserving a useable past on which to build a viable future. To memorialize Ned's example is to begin the fundamentally progressive process of creating a black American heroic tradition. Instead of rejecting their past as something shameful from which to flee, the black folk preserve their martyred ideals and ground the roots of their growing folk consciousness in them, the better to hold fast to hope.

After Ned's death, Jane's understanding of progress becomes more personal and spiritual than ever before. In her mid-fifties she has a conversion experience which she recounts in travel imagery borrowed from the Bible. But the rhetoric of progress which appears throughout her account of her "'coming through'" testifies to Jane's absorption of some of Ned's socio-political ideals and her translation of them into fundamental spiritual values on which her individual development towards folk leadership depends.

After "'finding religion,'" Jane is obliged to give her church a kind of figurative reconstruction of her life built around the idea of her "'travels'" toward salvation. Like Mr. Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, she begins her spiritual journey with a burden on her back which she can cast off only by crossing a treacherous river which separates her from the Savior. As she moves forward through the brier- and snake-infested river, Jane is tempted by Satan who takes the form of Ned Douglass first and then Joe Pittman, her deceased husband. Each of these men offers, indeed demands, to relieve Jane of her burden, but in each case Jane refuses to be swerved from her path. "'...I
knowed I had to keep going,’” she asserts. Even when Albert Cluven threatens her with death and Joe and Ned beckon her in unison “to come back to them,” Jane’s resolution never falters. “... I would not turn back. I would go on, because the load I was carrying on my back was heavier than the weight of death” (p. 135). In the end, Jane’s determination prevails and she turns her burden over to Jesus. Thus concludes what Jane calls her “born again’’ experience.

In her story of her travels, Jane consciously celebrates her attainment of salvation in the face of the temptations of a guileful Satan. But unconsciously Jane’s travel narrative celebrates those psychological and spiritual qualities which are prerequisites to progress, to black people’s “coming through” their social as well as religious trials. In her own homely language Jane reiterates the difference Ned Douglass drew between ‘‘a nigger and a black American.’’ ‘‘A black American cares, and will always struggle’’ (p. 110), Ned says by way of definition, and Jane’s view of her spiritual travels shows that she qualifies for the “black American” appellation. She does not give up or go back as “the nigger” would. She does not seek escape from her burden but determines to carry it, independently, to the end of her course. This fortitude, this self-reliance and acceptance of life as a spiritual struggle from which there can be no escape, no vicarious victory, shows that Ned Douglass’s socio-psychological message has taken hold in the hearts and minds of the black folk, as symbolized by Jane. The development of the struggle ethic in place of the escape predilection in the individual black consciousness prepares the way for meaningful group socio-political progress, which Gaines describes in the last section of Jane’s Autobiography.

The interpolated story of Tee Bob Samson and Mary LeFabre follows the ecstatic moment of Jane’s spiritual birth with a sobering reminder of the deadly presence of Southern racist traditions. The scion of a family of slaveholders, Tee Bob finds “the rules” of his caste absolutely forbid his overwhelming love of Mary LeFabre, the Creole schoolteacher on his father’s plantation. He chooses flight as his recourse, believing that escape with Mary to a far-off city will give them the freedom to marry which is denied them locally. But, as the events of Jane’s life attest, freedom from the burden of the racist Southern past cannot be achieved by running away from it. Mary seems to know this and initially refuses to accompany him. She is one of the many black characters in the novel who refuse to “go back,” either when her father begs her to give up teaching and return to the anachronistic Creole sub-culture—“But she wasn’t going back,’ ’ Jane says—or when Tee Bob begs her to run away with him. To pass for white in order to marry Tee Bob would only repeat the cycle of clandestine miscegenation which created the Creole caste which Mary has forsaken.

Thus, Mary rejects Tee Bob’s proposal and, in a move foreshadowing the final climactic action of Jane Pittman, starts to walk past him toward the door. However, her action, symbolizing her determination to put Tee Bob’s futile escapism behind her, causes Tee Bob to assert impulsively his white prerogative. If one believes Jules Raynard’s unconfirmed explanation of what happens next, Tee Bob does not rape Mary, but he is shocked to see in her eyes an invitation to do so. Raynard hypothesizes the failure of Mary’s effort to escape her inherited sexual role as white man’s mistress. ‘‘That stiff proudness left. Making up for the past left. She was the past now,’’ Raynard maintains to Jane (p. 192). Faced with this moment of profound disillusionment, Tee Bob characteristically runs, only to discover the walls of the past closing in on him in the sanctuary of his family’s library. Surrounded by books on slavery, he chooses his final route of escape and dies by his own hand, a pathetic victim of the intransigent and seemingly inescapable “rules” of his own caste traditions.

The tragedy of Mary and Tee Bob, both young idealists who try to avoid “going back” but who are eventually claimed by the past anyway, re-echoes the spirit of skepticism about racial progress which recurs throughout the Autobiography. The death of Jimmy Aaron in the last part of Jane’s story repeats the tragedy of martyred black leadership first exhibited in the fate of Ned Douglass some fifty years before. However, despite this trend, clear evidence of progress emerges at the end of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, the evidence borne out by the political self-assertion of the black folk group for the first time.

Jimmy Aaron is the catalyst for this final black reaction to the steady state of the white Southern socio-political order. Tabbed from birth as “the One,” an unofficial religious leader and community ideal, Jimmy is reared in the bosom of the church under the adoring eyes of surrogate mothers like Jane. Their purpose is to steep Jimmy in piety and Christian purpose, but in the process of his folk education, Jimmy also learns the history of his people at Jane’s knee. Against the background of the events of Jane’s life he sees the continuing migration of young blacks from the homes of their childhood to places of supposedly greater promise, a migration whose futility Jane’s past experience underscores. Jimmy becomes a part of this pattern of restless searching after being educated in New Orleans. When he returns home, political conviction replaces his quondam religious convictions. On “‘Termination Sunday,’” when, according to Jane, “‘... you tell the church you still carrying the cross and you want to meet them ’cross the River Jordan when you die’’” (p. 221), Jimmy rises to urge his church to take up the civil rights struggle. The Aaron to Martin Luther King’s Moses, Jimmy understands as his mentor did the necessity of basing a black political movement on the enduring psychological and spiritual resources of the folk. Thus he chooses the day set aside for celebrating determination in one’s spiritual quest to redefine the context of the black man’s cross-bearing.
"'We have to fight.'" Jimmy implores the all-too-passive people of Robert Samson's plantation. He admits that he has lost faith in God and left the church, but he has not left his people. Though his political consciousness has advanced beyond theirs, he acknowledges his need for their help because, as he says to his disbelieving congregation, "'...you are strong.'" This combined strength of the black folk will, which has been toned and tempered through the adversity recounted in Jane's entire story, will force in Bayonne what has transpired in Georgia and Alabama. It will force time to move forward on the Southern socio-political front for the first time since Reconstruction.

Ranged against Jimmy's effort to awaken the sleeping giant of the black folk is a false conservatism born of fear and misconceptions about the nature of progress and opportunity. One black family on Samson's plantation has already been evicted and alienated from their folk roots for demonstrating. Elder Banks refuses to urge the people to go forward with Jimmy because, in the older man's words, "'You don't have a place for them...!'" once they have quit the plantation. Banks's criticism of Jimmy's program reveals the persistence of the idea among less progressive blacks that freedom and opportunity must reside in a place "'out there'" or else it is unobtainable. But Jimmy knows, as Ned Douglass articulated it and Jane realized it, that freedom and opportunity must be conceived in the folk mind and actualized there before it can be effected in the immediate social situation. Thus Banks is wrong when he says that Jimmy doesn't have a place for the progressive, struggling blacks to go. "'The place where you live, that's what I want,'" says Jimmy (p. 222), for only in reaching the folk where they live can Jimmy promote the evolution of their consciousness necessary to make them resist the white man's effort to dispossess them.

Jimmy's failure to move the more conservative elements of the folk frustrates him. As leader of the young, he asserts, "'...we must go on...!'" But as "'the One'" he cannot desert the rest of his people without depriving the fledgling socio-political struggle of the milk of the folk's accumulated spiritual tradition. As Jane's story has shown, the folk has assumed over the years an identity based on progressive struggle, not socio-political struggle, but the struggle to recognize and conserve its spiritual resources and heroic folk traditions. This consciousness, exemplified in the character of Jane Pittman, can foster the fight which Jimmy wishes to prosecute, but only if the concept of the fight coheres with its understanding of progress as a conserving process. Thus Jimmy couches his final message to the congregation in conservative spiritual terms. He will go on to Bayonne, but, like a folk messiah he prophesies, "'...I'm coming back.'" He chooses "'Termination Sunday'" perhaps to foreshadow the termination of his own life, but more importantly to incorporate into his political message the tradition of telling the church "'you want to meet them' cross the River Jordan when you die.'" Sensing his own impending death Jimmy promises a "'second coming'" within the feeble political consciousness of the folk after he crosses his own River Jordan in Bayonne. By casting his socio-political mission in the accoutrements of the folk spiritual and heroic traditions, Jimmy raises and expands the consciousness of his people and prepares them for their final triumph in the novel.

In the last scene of the Autobiography, Jane Pittman leads an unlikely army out of Robert Samson's plantation and on to Bayonne where the spirit of the martyred Jimmy Aaron awaits them. Like Albert Cluveau, Samson stands in her path and demands, "'Go back home'" (p. 243). But Jane's socio-political progress can no more be held back by this embodiment of white repression than her spiritual progress could be blocked by the likes of Cluveau in her travels account. Thus she literally walks past this hollow Samson and leaves him behind powerless to stop her. Samson, after all, carries only the news of Jimmy's death, while to the folk the significant fact is that Jimmy lives on, to be memorialized not only in their consciousness, like Ned, but also for the first time through their action. Ned had planted and tilled the grounds of progressive consciousness. Jimmy reaps the active harvest of this consciousness by inspiring the march of Jane and her people on Bayonne. The black folk do not pursue Jimmy as yet another distant ideal, for spiritually he never leaves them. Even in death he "'comes back'" so that they might not go back. He is reborn in their spiritual consciousness in "'the place where they live,'" and he awaits the arrival of their political consciousness in Bayonne, the symbolic seat of the white Southern political order. The climactic synthesis of Gaines's dialectic of progress in the Autobiography emerges through Miss Jane's assumption of leadership in the march on Bayonne. Her psychological development through the book has prepared her for this ultimate act of self-assertion, the unprecedented yoking of the faraway and evanescent ideal of socio-political progress with the accrued folk traditions of spiritual progress. Having anchored future aspirations in a sustaining, not restraining past, there will be no more going back for Jane Pittman again.

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