ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

The Relationship Between Personal and Cultural-Historical Memory in Life-Writing

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August 2023

"One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization . . . it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were"

(Baldwin, 18-19)

In this essay I will be considering the relationship between personal and cultural-historical memory in James Baldwin's collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son* and Toni Morrison's essay *The Site of Memory.* By personal memory I will be referring to an individual's recollection of their own life and what they have seen and understood. By cultural-historical memory I will be referring to collective memories held by a group of people due to a shared experience, possibly in their lifetime but mainly historically. While being interviewed by Maya Angelou, Baldwin spoke of a historical memory present in his interior daily life: "[I] trust my ancestors, when I'm in trouble I'm listening to something, when I'm writing I'm listening to something" (AfroMarxist 16:00). The broad definition of cultural memory in *Cultural Memory Studies* is "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (Erll 2). Therefore, I will be considering cultural-historical memory as the presence of the historical past in the cultural or collective memory of a group.

These two texts simultaneously agree and portray inverse understandings of the relationship between these two kinds of memory. *Notes of a Native Son* focusses heavily on culture, history, and politics; the topics Baldwin discusses range from film to press and from travel to protest novels. Each essay links back to the struggle against the constricting cultural-historical weight placed on the minds of all African Americans, yet Baldwin criticises protest novels for their insistence on the sociopolitical over the individual. Like Baldwin, Morrison describes her approach to life writing as concerned with interior life. Whereas, inversely to Baldwin - who largely withholds his interior life and allows the impersonal (cultural-historical) to imply his essence to the reader- this inclusion of the interior is achieved by Morrison through the projection of personal memory and imagination.

In *Everybody's Protest Novel* and *Notes of a Native Son* Baldwin criticises Richard Wright's *Native Son* and condemns its replacement of personal memory for cultural and historical memory. The negation of personhood for the sake of a political movement or in

order for a character to become a vessel for a cultural memory is a lie. "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin 23). From this condemnation Baldwin's conception of the believable self can be extrapolated; the self consists of beauty, dread, power, and the transcendence of category, essentially in the rejection of cultural-historical memory.

Baldwin writes of protest books that "they emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" (19). It is dishonest to present a human being as just a reflection of a collective cultural-historical sentiment, as incapable of struggling free of their historical fate, as Bigger is. "One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization . . . it argues an insuperable confusion, since literature and sociology are not one and the same; it is impossible to discuss them as if they were" (Baldwin 18-19). Baldwin places a barrier between literature and sociology; his criticism of protest novels is that while they claim to be literature, they ignore style and plot and instead focus on politics. Baldwin's own memoir has a heavier focus on politics rather than his personal life experience. In total, Baldwin provides five personal stories in *Notes*: going to the cinema, the waitress story, his father's funeral, the bedsheet incident in Paris, and his treatment in the mountain village. From this fact one can deduce that a considerable amount of what Baldwin believes to be an accurate conception of his self can be translated through societal and cultural mediums.

In *Notes of a Native Son,* Baldwin writes that the "artist is strangled who is forced to deal with human beings solely in social terms" (33). However, he also criticises the fact that "Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people-in this respect, perhaps, he is most American- and his force comes, not from his significance as a social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of

a myth" (35). Baldwin believes that both having sole focus on social dimension strangles the artist, and that by denying Bigger the power of the social unit, Wright denies him his selfhood.

Baldwin's failed intimacy with his father speaks to a failure of personal memory. Of his father's funeral, Baldwin writes that the minister presented his father as "a Christian inspiration to all who knew him, and a model for his children . . . This was not the man they had known, but they had scarcely expected to be confronted with *him*; this was, in a sense deeper than questions of fact, the man they had not known, and the man they had not known may have been the real one" (107). The truth of who his father was is a concept "deeper than the questions of fact". (107) Baldwin regretfully recollects what he believes was the only real conversation he ever had with his father which occurred when Baldwin was a teenager. (Baldwin 109) Baldwin's personal memory of his father is not enough; it falls short of offering any kind of understanding of his father. His whole childhood did not provide him with the person his father sincerely was.

Baldwin's father's death coincided with an important cultural moment. An argument between a black soldier and a white police officer ended with the soldier being shot. A fictionalised version of the event swiftly spread, "and Harlem exploded" (Baldwin 111). The mob instinct was to damage white businesses in Harlem. Baldwin emphasises the fact that the mob stopped there. The blood relation between black and white Americans makes the condition of black Americans such that "to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind- and the heart-that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting self-destructive pose." (113) This is the fatal cycle which Baldwin left America to be able to escape from. For the black American, to hate America is to hate oneself, and to live in bitterness. This cultural event gives Baldwin the ability to understand his father's nature. He recalls his father saying, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" and now comprehends in those words that

“this was his legacy: nothing is ever escaped . . . blackness and whiteness did not matter; to believe that they did was to acquiesce in one’s own destruction” (Baldwin 114). The realisation that Baldwin’s father’s fight to fend off bitterness and hatred was now his charge makes him yearn for the dead man whose life he now understands. With this conclusion Baldwin throws another wrench in the works of his own assertion about protest novels that to reduce a human being down to a social or political category is insincere and harmful, because it is only through cultural-historical memory that his father makes sense.

In her book *The Life Writing of Otherness,* in the chapter *The Personal Passion of Collective Selfhood,* Lauren Rusk compares Baldwin’s *Notes* to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own,* writing that “both life writers emphasize the collective self but wish they didn't need to” (31). Rusk claims that Baldwin’s presumed audience is implied, never overtly indicated. However, in *Many Thousands Gone* Baldwin assumes a somewhat ironic white voice and refers to a presumed white audience, for example “the ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves. We cannot ask: what do we *really* feel about him...” (25). Baldwin cancels his personal identity and assumes a broad cultural one.

Rusk explains that “African Americans did not constitute a large market . . . As James Weldon Johnson observes in his 1928 essay ‘The Dilemma of the Negro Author,’ ‘it is impossible for a sane American Negro to write with total disregard for nine-tenths of the people of the United States.’...” (31-32). This fact of writing to a mostly white readership invokes Baldwin’s argument that it is also impossible to live with ‘total disregard’ for white America. This adoption of the white voice, Rusk admits, is not purely out of necessity but also out of a desire to persuade the reader of his own humanity and that of African Americans

at large (32). The weight of the cultural-historical memory invoked by a black writer writing about race would stifle his argument. This invisible barrier falls when a white voice is assumed, and a different memory is invoked.

Rusk makes an interesting point about the omission of Baldwin's sexuality from *Notes*. Baldwin briefly mentions his partner in the introduction to the 1984 edition without mentioning their sex. Rusk concludes that "thus readers who would think that his gayness compromised his authority to speak for the black man can overlook Baldwin's sexuality" (Rusk 32). Rusk implies that readers' awareness of the personal fact of Baldwin's sexuality would have cancelled out his cultural-historical authority as an African American man. This implies that the weight of cultural historical memory has conditions.

Rusk moves on to consider *Notes* as a piece of life-writing. Baldwin is resistant to say that when he wrote *Notes,* he was attempting self-discovery; "there was, certainly, between that self and me, the accumulated rock of ages . . . The hope of salvation – identity – depended on whether or not one would be able to decipher and describe the rock" (xiii). This rock is an "inheritance" and a "birthright" ; part of describing the rock is the acceptance that "I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that" (Baldwin xiii-xiv). This acceptance but insistence on total sentience echoes his father's words; "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Baldwin 114). An acceptance of being made up of a cultural historical memory but an insistence on a personal one too.

In order to identify a self that one can discover or avoid, the cultural rock that blocks one's vision must be "deciphered" (Baldwin xiii). In this passage, Rusk points out "the movement from *I* to *one* [which] is telling; Baldwin is talking about himself in terms that reach out to include other African Americans as well" (34). The struggle which Baldwin

begins by describing as a personal one is turned into a generalised lesson by the use of “one” (xiii). This rock is a “historical burden” , the same burden Baldwin identified as the fatal flaw in protest novels, the rejection of life, when mistaken for the whole of a human self (Rusk 34).

Baldwin’s 'memoir' itself does not focus on personal memory. The majority of the text discusses media and culture (Native Son in *Everybody's Protest Novel* & *Many Thousands Gone*, Carmen Jones, the black press in *The Harlem Ghetto*). Cultural and historical memory as comprehended by Baldwin serves as our window to Baldwin personally. Rusk writes that “in particular, his assertions about the collective African-American *he* often seem fervently to reveal Baldwin the individual...” (38). This fact offers a connection to Morrison’s approach to life writing which she discusses in *The Site of Memory*. Baldwin’s writing blurs the boundary between cultural-historical and personal memory by using culture to reflect himself personally, by criticising the sacrifice of personal to cultural, and by consistently utilising history to decipher people, whereas Morrison transfers and translates personal memory into historical memory.

Morrison describes the life-writing of formerly enslaved people as her literary heritage. This assertion imbues the aforementioned life writing with a historical authority. Morrison emphasises that as well as holding cultural-historical weight in hindsight they also, in their own right, had a cultural and political purpose; to persuade the white reader of their humanity and of the inhumanity of slavery. This purpose is reminiscent of Baldwin’s adoption of a white voice in *Many Thousands Gone* which seems to in part have the same goal. Morrison explains that popular contemporary taste discouraged formerly enslaved people from focussing on violent or gruesome details. “Whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something "excessive," one finds the writer taking

refuge in the literary conventions of the day. ‘I was left in a state of distraction not to be described’. ‘But let us now leave the rough usage of the field . . . and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the house of my childhood’.” (Morrison 190) Their real memory is sacrificed at the altar of popular taste. Due to their goal, their content, and the reverence with which Morrison treats them, the narratives of formerly enslaved people are themselves records of cultural-historical memory, of the collective memory which continues to haunt Americans.

What Morrison finds more disturbing than the omission of important details from historical records because they were gruesome, is that “there was no mention of their interior life”, the existence of which those gruesome details may have indicated (237). Morrison’s dedication to interior life corroborates Baldwin’s belief that the omission of individual memory and reality leads to an absence of believable humanity in the depiction of a person. Morrison aims to lift the “veil” which was placed over “proceedings too terrible to relate” (237). Firstly, using her “own recollections” (238). Her own memories serve her in accessing “the unwritten interior life” to an extent, and beyond that “only the act of imagination can help” (238). She describes her genre as “literary archaeology” (238). “The crucial distinction for [Morrison] is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (Morrison 239). Morrison’s writing is not truth as opposed to fact, but truth as opposed to fiction. This truth which she believes the narratives themselves do not provide in full, is completed by the inclusion of personal memory. Cultural-historical memory without personal memory may be fact, but it is not truth.

This is where Morrison’s approach to writing literature diverges from Baldwin’s. Baldwin’s memoir consists of five personal stories in total, and the overwhelming focus of his memoir is media, politics, and culture; cultural historical memory implies and reflects the

personal. Morrison, however, discusses the inverse; personal memory turning into cultural historical memory to elucidate the whole of a person. The relationship between the two is so complicated it verges on incomprehensible. Certainly, one cannot be omitted without that depiction of humanity being accused of being dishonest.

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