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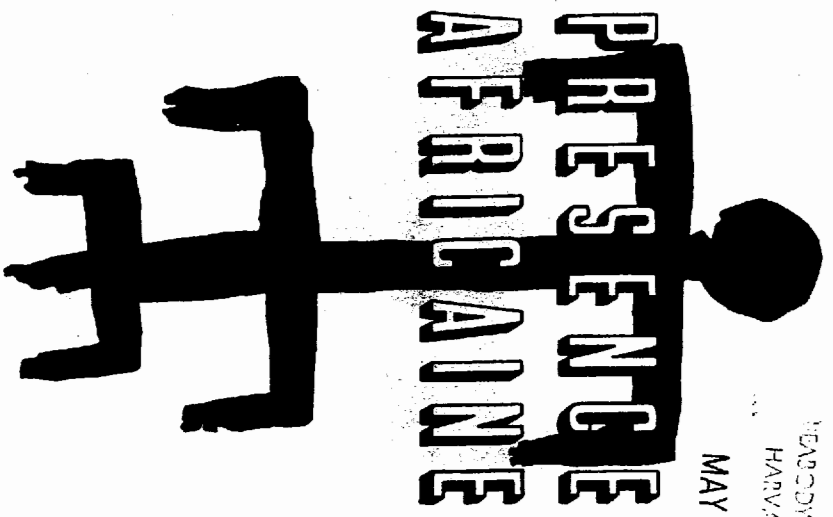
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**The 1st International Conference
of
Negro Writers and Artists**

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The Negro writer and his world

I was invited, originally, to speak on the subject of the Negro novel in English; but you will notice that I have chosen, with your permission, to consider a situation that is at once wider and more manageable: the Negro writer and his world. The difference in the two titles suggests immediately the difference of range and limitation in the two considerations; but what remains constant, however, is the fact that I'm still going to talk about the profession of man of letters, and more particularly, perhaps, about that species of writer who belongs, for various reasons, to a category of men called Negro.

The subject of the Negro novel in English could restrict us to an assessment of the importance and value of the Negro novelist in relation to the general and continuous tradition of English fiction. And by English fiction, I mean, very broadly speaking, fiction in the English language. This could be dealt with strictly as a matter for literary critical analysis.

But I have availed this undertaking for two reasons. In the first place, such an analysis would require much more exhaustive reference and quotation than I am at present disposed to offer. And also a consideration of such references would lead us inevitably into some discussion, considerable and, I believe, very exhausting, about the real and artificial differences between the customs which are the subject matter of the novels I would have mentioned.

For we shall find in the challenge of the word Negro a strange and conflicting set of factors. This word is used to contain an amalgam of men who, whatever the similarity of their origins, now share, through different accidents of history, fairly widely different heritages of habit and intellectual orientation. It would be very difficult to establish, from the premiss of literature, the clear connection between the matter and method of three such writers as Mr. Richard in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Mr. Amos Tutuola in the *Palm Wine Drinkard*, and the late Jamaican novelist, Roger Mais in *Brother Man*. America, Nigeria, and the British Caribbean have here met under the embracing function of an activity called writing; but the manifestations of that activity, in the work of these three, are

at once delightful and perplexing. The only thing which holds them together, apart from the belief that they are men, is the fact that they are black.

And if we moved from Jamaica a little North to Haiti and asked for a sample of life in the Haitian context, things might become even more exciting. We would be led still further to consider the peculiar accidents of cultural transfusion and permanence which that country contains. And Haiti, we must remember, is largely in fact and feeling black. I use black here as synonymous with originating in Africa.

My second reason for extending the first title, Negro novel in English, has to do with the concern of this Conference. I have the impression, from some of the briefs I have read, that you are concerned with matters which go far and fast beyond the strictness and delicacy of creative literature. It is not without reasons, other than dedication to your particular disciplines, that you should want to establish the validity of the African contribution to human civilization. I think there is, on the whole, a psychology at work, which prompts us here, when necessary, which is perhaps often, to remind me, either of something we know already, or, at worst, to prove something that the other tends to dismiss or deny. Our speculations, then, lean so heavily on the attention of the Other, that it is difficult to think at all without being constantly mindful of the sympathy and attitude of the Other. The Other being, of course, the equally wide category of men we must, for the purposes of such a conference, regard as Non-Negro.

I shall consider the term Negro, first of all, as a word which represents at one shot a fact and a fallacy, although I'm not at all sure that the fallacy I have in mind is not itself a fact, or the fact I shall try to define is not, after all, a fallacy.

Let us consider for a moment the attitude of the Other to the spectacle of a writer who is a Negro. This will vary, for much the same reasons that the three writers I mentioned are different, according to the customs of the particular writer's country. I shall take Mr. Tutuola, the Nigerian, as my first example.

Mr. Tutuola's work which I have seen belongs to the world of fantasy and it may seem here a little ironic to consider that the social situation of the Negro in some places belongs to the world of a fantastic and concrete brutality. It is, in a sense, a great relief to come upon the *Palm Wine Drinkard*. And it is not only the wine that helps us. Mr. Tutuola has magic.

This novel appears to have a certain continuity which satisfies a conventional and respectable requirement of the novel; but on closer inspection, it is made up of a series of episodes which seem to be part and even fragments of different legends. That is true. The effect of incantation on the reader is also true. But what I want to mention now, which has been passed on as a fact, is the writer's method. It has been said that these episodes were the man's recollection of his mother's or grandmother's stories, rear-

ranged and organised to suit his purpose. If this is true, there is something of the Homeric fable in the undertaking.

The English response to this has been one of surprise, a double surprise. On one level, it is a surprise at the material itself, and on another it is the surprise at Mr Tutuola's capacity for a certain sustained invention. This surprise may be described as the unasked question: Is it really true? And when one considers that Mr Tutuola has always been very near, for all I know at the very centre of what is almost wholly an oral tradition of story-telling, this surprise is understandable. And what is true of Mr Tutuola, from the point of view of the Other's attitude would, I believe, be equally true, of Mr Ekwensi, or any other African imaginative writer, although their methods and concerns might vary enormously.

The case of the British West Indian writer is, I think, somewhat different. He occasions surprise, too, I'm sure, but he also creates a certain confusion. He confuses because, for a variety of reasons, he seems so perilously near to the Other whose judgment begins with the unconscious premiss that he is, in fact, *different*. The novels which have come from these territories in the last few years seem to betray themes anxieties, desires, and illusions that appear identical with those of his English equivalent. His conception of what a novel is seems to be the same. His preoccupation with the use of the language would not seem to differ in any noticeable way. He does really *speak English*. It is not his second language. And even when it makes embarrassing demands on his tongue, or emerges in strangely hybrid forms, it does not seem to cause any surprise. It confuses because he looks like Mr. Tutuola, but seems to belong to a wholly different pattern of calculations and ambitions. He seems so much nearer to us than his equivalent in Nigeria, and yet we know, in a way we cannot explain, that he is much nearer to his Nigerian equivalent than he is to us. He is Negro, yes, but he is a Negro with a *difference*. He is a minor Other, a super Them. But, then, things become simpler if we remember that he is a colonial who has been in closer touch. This helps to an assurance about the nature and value of our historic care. He is a *product*.

There is a story of Sir Winston Churchill addressing the students at the University college of the West Indies, and reminding them that although no one could tell in this troubled world what the future might bring, what side these or those people might take, they should never, he hoped, forget the Old Country whose contribution to their lives was evident in the very presence of their university. That makes the point with reasonable and unobtrusive precision, and bluntness.

And I knew a young man who arrived from the British West Indies with explosive Communist sympathies, in love and in search of every son of man who was a victim of capitalist tyranny. He was standing on Battersea Bridge one afternoon, contemplating the silent splendour of the river. An old man came up and greeted him. Where was he from? Was he enjoying England? They agreed on the wicke-

ness of the rich and hoped the best for the poor who did not only inhabit the West Indies, but populated England as well. My friend had found his brother. Then the old man, honestly in search of information, asked with a devastating innocence: "Tell me, do you belong to us?"

But there is a fundamental sense in which the three writers I have mentioned are, in fact, together. And it is here that the word, Negro, has a definite universal clarity. For a science is the only universal language, I think it may be said that politics is the only ground for a universal Negro sympathy. This is a situation which, I believe, embarrasses many a writer who is a Negro. I believe that there is a sense in which the reality of politics also embarrasses many a writer who is non Negro. It embarrasses by its insistent demand of an individual choice in a situation that is immediate and dangerous.

I think these examples may help to explain why the image of the Other is always present in our conception of ourselves. Why, in other words, the speculations that you may make during the next few days, will always lean very heavily on the very fact that Other exists. It is this aspect of the word Negro which I want you to consider as fallacy. And whether or not it is fallacy, is a question which, I hope, will entertain you some time after we have dispersed.

There is a great deal to be said about this aspect of the word which produces very disconcerting results in practice. If we are going to be honest with ourselves, it is necessary to consider, too, and even express, with some indignation some of the ways a Negro may, use to cash in on this fallacy, and in our concern with the afflictions and the possible prosperity of one group of men, we must take care not to construct props for a man who may not differ in any way from his enemy in the quality of their bad faith. Colour prejudice is a subject which we cannot afford to dismiss; but Colour prejudice is also a subject which we must be prepared to say something about. I think it may be one of the vital tests of new Negro governments. Rumour has it, and rumour may be right, that many a Negro is doing extremely well in the *skin trade*; cashing in, that is, on the extraordinary and perverse privilege of being a quite fascinating Black in a world of wellmeaning and unthinking Whites.

The enemy is not only on the outside, he is on the inside as well.

This aspect of the word leads straight to the other, which, I am suggesting, represents a fact of the man's existence as a Negro. This is not now the case of the Other defying the Negro, but rather of the Negro becoming conscious of his presence, as a result of the regard of the Other.

The Negro writer is a writer who, through a process of social and historical accidents, encounters himself, so to speak, in a category of men called Negro. He carries this definition like a limb. It travels with him as a necessary guide for the Other's regard. It has settled upon him with an almost natural finality, until he has become

it. He is a reluctant part of conspiracy which identifies him with that condition which the Other has created for them both. He does not emerge as an existence which must be confronted as an unknown dimension; for he is not simply *there*. He is there in a certain way. The eye which catches and cages him, has seen him as a man, but a man *in spite of*... As a result he encounters himself in a state of surprise and embarrassment. He is a little ashamed, not in the crude sense of not wanting to be this or that, but in the more resonant sense of shame, the shame that touches every consciousness which feels that it has been *seen*.

The Negro is a man whom the Other regards as a Negro; and the dichotomy, the split, as it were, which may exist at the very centre of this consciousness, shall have been created by that old, and it would seem, eternal conflict between the naming of a thing and a knowledge of it. For it is one the mischievous powers of language, and particularly that aspect of language which relates to manes, that it enables us to rob things of their power to embarrass us. Language in this respect is intentional, and the intention seems clearly part of the human will to power. A name is an infinite source of control.

We attribute to any class of objects (stones, leaves, birds, insects) these names, and we have immediately found a way of avoiding the mystery which clothed these objects in their original state of silence and anonymity.

A good example turns up in *Hard Times*. Dickens calls that chapter, *Murdering the Innocents*, and although it is a savage comment on the crudeness of educational method of the time, it suggests much more. Let us, for a moment, follow Dickens situating his character, Sissy Jupe.

"— Let me see. What is your father?"

— He belongs to the horse-riding if you please, Sir", says Sissy. Mr. G. frowned and wared off the objectionable calling with his hand.

"— We don't want to know anything about that here. You mustn't tell us about that here. Your father breaks horses, don't he?"

— If you please, Sir, when they can get any to break.

— Very well then, he is a veterinary surgeon... Give me your definition of a horse."

(Sissy Jupe is thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand.)

"— Girl number 22, unable to define a horse", says Mr. G. He passes on to the next: Bitter. And Bitter replies: "Quadruped, graminivorous, forty teeth... sheds coat in the Spring."

This is a sad knowledge, but it is appropriate; for having found our references we can all, with the exception of Sissy Jupe, move forward.

Following such an example, we can see a kind of contradictory intention at the heart of words. They may equip us through their power of symbolisation for an investigation into what is not

known to us, and they may also be an unconscious mechanism for our fear of the unknown.

This situation confronts us today with larger and much more frightening manifestations. The word, "bourgeois", can call forth in the mind, the mind of the communist such an obscene parade of deceits, disloyalties, cowardice and oppression, that the latter is convinced that what stands before him is a monstrous enemy whose immediate future must be liquidated; and similarly the word communist is charged with such an enormous power of explosiveness, that the other feels an immediate and almost unbearably direct experience of evil itself. It is the end of the world for all God's children.

To speak of the situation of the Negro writer is to speak, therefore, of a problem of Man, and, more precisely, of a contemporary situation which surrounds us with an urgency that is probably unprecedented. It is to speak, in a sense, of the universal sense of separation and abandonment, frustration and loss, and, above else, of some direct inner experience of something missing.

The case of the Negro writer on the contemporary world of letters provides us with an isolated, but very concrete example, of what we have come to call the human situation. That situation contains, among other things, a desire for totality, a desire to deal effectively with that gap, that distance which may separate one man from another, and in the case of an acutely reflective self-consciousness, may separate a man from himself. In the particular case of the Negro, it is the desire not only to rebel against the consequences of a certain social classification, but also the desire to redefine himself for the comprehension of the Other, and in the hope that the stage shall have been set for some kind of meaningful communication.

The Negro writer joins hands, therefore, not so much with a Negro audience, as with every other writer whose work is a form of self enquiry, a clarification of his relations with other men, and a report of his own very highly subjective conception of the possible meaning of man's life.

To speak of his situation is to speak of a general need to find a centre as well as a circumference which embraces some reality whose meaning satisfies his intellect and may prove pleasing to his senses. But a man's life assumes meaning first in relation with other men, and his experience which is what the writer is trying always to share with the reader, is made up not only of the things which happen to him, in his encounter with others, but also of the different meanings and values which he chooses to place on what has happened. What happens to him depends to a great extent on the particular world he happens to be living in, and the way he chooses to deal with his own experience is determined by the kind of person he considers himself to be. In other words, he is continually being shaped by the particular world which accommodates him, or refuses to do so; and at the same time he is shaping, through his own desires, needs and idiosyncrasies, a world of his own. And since a writer's work is

meant for public consideration and, through the wonderful devices of printing, translation and distribution, is continually extending to places and people, with whom he may have no direct experience, another world is being created about him.

What then, we may ask, is really meant by the term world in the particular context of these remarks? There are, I would suggest, three kinds of worlds to which the writer bears in some way a responsibility, worlds which are distinct, and yet very deeply related. There is first of all the world of the private and hidden self, a world which turns quietly, sometimes turbulently, within one man, and which might be only known by others after that man has spoken. Each man who becomes aware of himself as a separate existence shares this solitude, each man has had an experience, momentary or prolonged, of the meaning of being alone. I do not mean loneliness or any similar illness of certain self-important natures. I am speaking of the experience proceeding from the depths of one's being, of *existing*.

It is a moment marked by silence. It is a moment when a man's utterance cannot catch and convey the shape and shade of his thought and his feeling. Language, it would seem, has actually surrendered just when his need is greatest. It is then he requires this weapon of words to enter that hidden area of his consciousness, and bring back with it, so to speak, the kind of picture which another's eye cannot conceive. In ordinary circumstances this effort is never carried through. A verdict of guilty may be directed against others who have been betrayed not by their guilt, but by that appalling and impotent failure to communicate their innocence. And when there is no condemnation the matter is easily forgotten. The ordinary person is, time and again, seized by an experience, a meaning perhaps, and quickly abandons the attempt to grasp it completely, because the exercise, from the start, seems too much of a burden; and after all, he will say it does not really matter. Or even if the desire to struggle is real, the urgencies of living make it very difficult to sustain his interest; because there is something to be done, something which requires his immediate attention if life is to be liveable. Day-to-day living keeps intruding on that private and solitary world of concerns. It may take the form of the bad-tempered husband who makes trouble when he cannot find something more dramatic to occupy his energy. Or the rent is overdue. All these things make for a great nuisance. They are what the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard calls, "the immediate neighbourhood", one's family, sometimes one's enemies, and one's friends always.

But for the writer this private world is his one priceless possession. It is precisely from this point that everything else will proceed. And in these circumstances it cannot be sacrificed to his immediate neighbourhood (even when that neighbourhood means a group defined by an artificial misfortune which includes him). Nothing can take its place. It is his initial capital. He may gain by it, or

lose by it, but without it he cannot function. Why he should be possessed in this way is a matter we do not wholly understand. We must accept it as a fact of his experience. But it is this possession which is responsible for his relation to words. He has failed until he has caught some part of that world and given it form in language. Words are his anchor and his spear; he has got to keep them in preparation and in order, and when they begin to wear under their work, he must find new ones, or new combinations of the old ones, for the work must go on. A writer does not only use language. He helps to make language. To any decent man who is anxious to feed his children and comfort his wife and be amiable to his neighbours, this personal rage with words must seem a kind of lunacy. Perhaps, it is. The occasional triumph is the form of its control.

This world is private. It contains the range of his ambitions, his deceits, his perplexity, his pride, his shame, his guilt, his honour, his need. All these qualities are there, hidden in the castle of his skin.

But that private world of the writer is modified, even made possible, by the world in which he moves among other men. Much as he may wish that through, the presence of the others that one's own presence is given meaning. What, then, is the relation of a writer to a society in which, for reasons which have nothing to do with his work, he is regarded as different? When that difference carries consequences of injustice, his relation is not different from that of any other who shares a similar misfortune. An identical suffering holds them together in attack or defence with those who are part of his misfortune; and since this misfortune of difference enters his private world, one expects his work as a writer to be, in part, a witness to that misfortune. Not because there is a moral law which demands that he address himself to his social world, but rather because there is a fundamental need to present his private world in all its facts, and one of its vivid experiences will of necessity be the impact of that social world, with all its reservations and distinctions, has made on his consciousness. This is the sense in which it is true to say that a writer has a real and primary responsibility to himself.

From the point of view of imaginative literature, this social classification which manifests itself most violently through race is a peculiar torment, and a peculiar challenge for the writer who suffers its disadvantage. But this situation can, in certain circumstances, be so overwhelming in its impact, that the attitude of a challenge is immediately obliterated. The reason is simple. If you are continually and ruthlessly bombarded by floods, you can easily forget how precious a gentle shower of rain can be. And the floods which may spring from rain, soon lose that identification with rain in their common source of water. It seems, after a while that there is no real connection between water and water, the gentle shower and the opposing flood. For the abundance of one has severed it from its real connection with the other. Similarly, if through the character and fate of a certain country,

a writer's senses have been consistently assaulted by the vast pressure of a single issue, it is not difficult for him to lose sight, for a time, of the connection between the disaster which threatens to reduce him, and the wider context and condition of which that disaster is but the clearest example. The Negro in the United States, for example, symbolises an essential condition of Man, not only in his urgent need to correct a social injustice through powers of law, but also in his need to embark upon a definition of himself as man in the world of men.

For the third of his worlds, the world to which he is condemned by the fact of his spirit, is the world of men. He shares in their community. What he cannot escape is the essential need to find meaning for his destiny, and every utterance he makes in this direction is an utterance made on behalf of all men. And his responsibility to that other world, his third world, will be judged not only by the authenticity and power with which his own private world is presented, but also by the honesty with which he interprets the world of his social relations, his country, that is, for those who have no direct experience of it, but are moved by the power of his speech, his judgment and his good faith.

G. LAMMING

Father Gerard Bissanhe.

Christianity in face of the cultural aspirations of the Negro peoples (*)

Judging from the way in which a number of Missionaries (1) have acted in the past one might be tempted to think that there is no Christian attitude of respect for native cultures whatever they may be. And yet I can very easily quote you two illuminating texts defining the thought of the Catholic Church on this subject. The first has nothing new about it, since it dates from 1659; the least one can say of it is that it ran entirely counter to the spirit of the times; "No kind of effort must be made and no pretext employed to persuade these peoples to change their rites, customs or ways of action, except such as are openly opposed to religion and morals. What could be more absurd than transport France, Spain, Italy or any other European country, let us say into China? What you are taking to the peoples is not your ways of life, but your Faith, a Faith which does not reject or injure the habits and customs of any nation unless they are evil, but rather desires that they should be preserved in their full and perfect integrity" (2).

(*) Before presenting the work *Des peuples noirs s'interrogent* (Editions du Cerf, oct. 1956) which he had prepared in collaboration with Mr. A. D'rop, Father Bissanhe gave a brief summary of the attitude of the Catholic Church towards native cultures. He has gladly agreed to return in this Paper to the ideas developed before the Congress in his intervention, which was unprepared.

(1) In saying that, I should also emphasize that those men who gave up the joy of founding a home, and left their families and countries in order to bear to strangers what they conceived to be the Light, are entitled, as I believe, to our indulgence for their errors and mistakes. So much for the past. For the present it goes without saying, that we should be all the more exacting for the Missionaries of to-day.

(2) Instruction of Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, 1659, re-issued on 14th. July 1938 to His Eminence Mgr. Delle Piane, then Apostolic Delegate for the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi and also previously to the Apostolic Delegate for Japan on 26th. May 1936. See Sylloge 201.