

THE INHERITANCE OF NATURALISM IN JAMES BALDWIN'S SHORT FICTION

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Abstract. *The paper analyzes James Baldwin's short fiction in relation to the literary movement of naturalism. Its aim is to identify the elements of naturalistic poetics in Baldwin's short stories illustrating them with appropriate examples, as well as to determine the extent to which they influence and color the tone of Baldwin's fiction. Since naturalism has many different aspects, mainly depending on the period and the region of its development (it originated in Europe and then passed on to America, where it kept its vitality deep into the twentieth century), the essay discusses only the viewpoints which can be applied to the literature in question, using the observations by theorists and critics such as Louis J. Budd, Donald Pizer and Charles Child Walcutt. In addition, though it might, initially, seem rather disadvantageous to subject the writer's complex mode of expression to such inherited simplification, the paper will prove the opposite, that not only can Baldwin's literature be viewed in such constricted literary terms, but it can also contribute to the contemporary effort to further understand and appreciate this literary phase of American fiction which, although it emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, still plays a significant role in American literary history.*

Key words: *James Baldwin, short fiction, naturalism.*

THE INHERITED PAST

A writer inherits other writers. He inherits the whole world around him and its history. How can we trace these influences? Which signposts can tell us of the hidden paths of the writer's soul?

Although James Baldwin's literature was created upon the onset of the postmodern era (his first, semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published in 1953, the year when Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was first performed), it reflects many other influences, notably those of the naturalistic movement. Naturalism in America emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century and had already subsided by the time

James Baldwin and his literary colleagues were entering the postmodern era. However, postmodern poetics, with its tendency for pastiche and eclectic experimenting with previous genres, did not exclude the movement: it allowed, same as it allowed some other inherited styles, to join the versatile and embracing postmodern looseness. Within this atmosphere of playful tolerance, James Baldwin felt free to flirt with the literary inheritance. The essay will therefore try to trace and discuss these influences in relation to Baldwin's short fiction (published in 1965, in the collection *Going to Meet the Man*, containing eight stories), since it provides a richly diverse source suitable for a comparative analysis.

NATURALISTIC SIGNPOSTS

When naturalism first flourished on the European ground, it was initially described as a "critical searching-out of elements of the social environment which had hitherto and especially recently been excluded from literature" (Williams, 1983: 183). It was shortly followed by a commentary in the Daily News, in 1881, that naturalism represents an "unnecessarily faithful portrayal of offensive incidents for which M. Zola has found the new name of 'Naturalism'" (Ibid: 1983).

Charles Child Walcutt, in *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*, such defines the concept of naturalism:

The major themes and motives are *determinism, survival, violence, and taboo*. The theme of determinism, which is of course basic, carries the idea that natural law and socio-economic influences are more powerful than the human will. The theme of survival grows out of the application of determinism to biological competition; the notion that survival is the supreme motive in animal life provides a point of view from which all emotion, motivation, and conflict may be approached; it fastens man to his physical roots. The theme of violence grows with the transfer of emphasis from tradition to survival. Animal survival is a matter of violence, of force against force; and with this theme there emerge various motifs having to do with the expression of force and violence and with the exploration of man's capacities for such violence. 'The lower nature of man,' in short, is revealed, explored, emphasized. (...) The last link in this chain, dangling from survival and violence, comes as an assault on taboo: a host of topics that had been considered improper - sex, disease, bodily functions, obscenity, depravity - were found to be in the province of physical survivor. In that province, where the naturalists focused their attention, they could not be ignored. Nobody wanted to ignore them.

(Walcutt, 1956: 20-21)

In accordance with Walcutt's classification, determinism is the basic theme of Baldwin's short fiction. It is recognized in the notion that characters' heredity and social conditions predetermine their destiny: "[E]veryone's life is always shaped by races, churches, and armies; races, churches, armies menace, and have taken, many lives." (Baldwin, 1965: 56) Baldwin's characters are lower-class and badly educated, passive victims of omnipotent forces beyond their control: "These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities." (Ibid: 38) Their lives are predestined by their birth, and they can do nothing about it. In *Sonny's Blues* the narrator's brother, Sonny, leaves Harlem to get away from drugs, only to find out, when he comes back, that

"nothing had changed, I hadn't changed, I was just—older" (Ibid: 51). Characters are depicted in their relation to other people and their surroundings (another requirement of naturalistic poetics), subjected to various deprivations due to their socioeconomic environment and heredity: "If Harriet had been born in America, it would have taken her a long time, perhaps forever, to look on me as a man like other men; if I had met her in America, I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women. The habits of public rage and power would also have been our private compulsions, and would have blinded our eyes." (Ibid: 56) Parental efforts to prepare the youth for this preset battle are, as a rule, futile: "How can one be prepared for the spittle in the face, all the tireless ingenuity which goes into the spite and fear of small, unutterably miserable people, whose greatest terror is the singular identity, whose joy, whose safety, is entirely dependent on the humiliation and anguish of others?" (Ibid: 65)

The theme of survival, or biological competition, is also a source of much motivation and emotion in Baldwin's fiction, since the characters are often controlled and governed by their instincts and passions. Their behavior is often characterized by animal or irrational motivations manifested, sometimes, in connection with sexuality and violence, which leads to the theme of violence in Walcutt's definition. Baldwin reveals and explores the feelings of hatred "blacker than their hearts, blacker than their skins" (Ibid: 90) in Harlem boys "filled with rage" (Ibid: 38). Bestiary images highlight the feelings of randomness and helplessness: the boys' future is compared with a trap that some manage to escape, but most don't, in the world that "waited outside, as hungry as a tiger" (Ibid: 53). Even those who escape leave wounded, similar to animals: "Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap." (Ibid: 41) And the characters seem to come to this unfriendly, savage world with an almost inborn instinct to protect: "During all the years of my life, until that moment, I had carried the menacing, the hostile, killing world with me everywhere. No matter what I was doing or saying or feeling, one eye had always been on the world—that world which I had learned to distrust almost as soon as I learned my name, that world on which I knew one could never turn one's back, the white man's world." (Ibid: 59) What is more, not only are the instincts inherited and inborn, but also the shame and the guilt: "She was punishing herself for something, a crime she could not remember." (Ibid: 82)

And finally, taboo as a theme is reflected in the selection of topics that are generally considered improper - uncouth themes, such as depravity, drugs, disease, racism, sexual promiscuity: "You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while—your women! Here's what I got for all the black bitches in the world—!" (Ibid: 89) Baldwin's depictions of the impoverished and under-privileged Afro-American communities are accurate, vivid and unornamented, in the form of detailed realism as the naturalist poetics requires: "Most of them had no money. They lived three and four together in rooms with a single skylight, a single hard cot, or in buildings that seemed abandoned, with cardboard in the windows, with erratic plumbing in a wet, cobblestoned yard, in dark, dead-end alleys, or on the outer, chilling heights of Paris." (Ibid: 59) Scenes of death are harsh and unpolished: "The head was caved in, one eye was torn out, one ear was hanging. But one had to look carefully to realize this, for it was, now, merely, a black charred object on the black, charred ground." (Ibid: 94-95) Sexuality is also a common taboo theme that naturalism explores: "And slowly she surrendered, opening up before him like the dark continent, made mad and delirious and blind by the entry of a mortal as bright as the morning, as white as milk." (Ibid: 77) Bodily functions may also be regarded

as an uncouth, naturalistic topic: "Her throat ached with tears of fury and despair" (Ibid: 86), and Baldwin's characters suffer from loneliness "like a cancer" (Ibid: 86). Taboo homosexuality themes frame certain stories: "In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger's privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, much bigger than his father's, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. The white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them." (Ibid: 95)

At the level of style, "the naturalists' rhetoric turned back toward intensity of tone and metaphor" (Budd, 1995: 43). Parallel with realistic, objective representation of the depicted world, naturalists reintroduced subjectivity. In this vein the narrator in Baldwin's stories personifies the landscape - the streets "darken with dark people" (Baldwin, 1965: 41), light becomes "just as dangerous, just as killing, as the dark" (Ibid: 67), "trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky" (Ibid: 53), and nature seems detached and indifferent to human struggle: "So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood." (Ibid: 41)

Naturalistic movement also "brought pessimism instead of redemption" (Budd, 1995: 43). Pessimistic tones, feelings of tiredness and shame pervade Baldwin's fiction: "I'm tired, man, tired! Have you ever been sick to death of something? Well, I'm sick to death. And I'm scared. I've been fighting so god-damn long I'm not a person any more. (...) I'm not worried about that miserable little room. I'm worried about what's happening to me, to me, inside. I don't walk the streets, I crawl. I've never been like this before. Now when I go to a strange place I wonder what will happen, will I be accepted, if I'm accepted, can I accept?" (Baldwin, 1965: 33-34) Individuals acquire magnanimous proportions in this pessimistic distortion: "The Frenchman whom he begs for a job is not merely a Frenchman —he is the father who disowned and betrayed him and all the Frenchmen whom he hates." (Ibid: 65) Images related to pessimistic feelings, notably those of dark, black, dirt, despair, pain, are scattered throughout the story: the characters are "trapped in the darkness" (Ibid: 37), they shout "their innocence in a steadily blackening despair" (Ibid: 79), and their sleep is "black and dreadful" (Ibid: 86). These leitmotifs are also contrasted to the images of light and white in a persistent, binary pattern which serves to intensify the prevailing pessimistic tone: "And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk any more because if he knows too much about what's happened to them, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to him." (Ibid: 43)

Pessimism is also emphasized through the technique of repeating the sentences or phrases with pessimistic, sometimes even ironic connotation: "God save the American republic. (...) God save the American republic. (...) God pity us, the terrified republic." (Ibid: 36-37) Sometimes it blends with

the stream of consciousness technique: "Each day, each night, he felt worn out, aching, with their smell in his nostrils and filling his lungs, as though he were drowning—drowning in niggers; and it was all to be done again when he awoke. It would never end. It would never end." (Ibid: 90) The first person narration also employs this narrative mode: "And for the first time in my life I was free of it; it had not existed for me (...). For the first time in my life I had not been afraid of the patriotism of the mindless, in uniform or out, who would beat me up and treat the woman who was with me as though she were the lowest of untouchables. For the first time in my life I felt that no force jeopardized my right, my power, to possess and to protect a woman; for the first time, the first time, felt that the woman was not, in her own eyes or in the eyes of the world, degraded by my presence." (Ibid: 59)

Detachment from the story is another characteristic of the naturalistic prose. Although the realistic, objective tone is often disrupted with subjective, sometimes metaphoric intrusions, the author tries to maintain a detached, nonjudgmental position. There are no explicit commentaries, no morals, no assertions of favored values.

Another common characteristic of naturalism, at the level of form, is a surprising twist at the end of the story. In *The Man Child* the friendship between thirty-four-year-old Jamie and eight-year-old Eric ends at the closure of an eventful and joyful day in an act of violent death, in Jamie's strangling Eric: "Then terror and agony and darkness overtook him, and his breath went violently out of him. He dropped on his face in the straw in the barn, his yellow head useless on his broken neck." (Ibid: 28)

At the linguistic level, naturalism is manifested as "reproducing everyday speech as exactly as possible" (Cuddon & Preston, 1998: 539), offering an illusion of real, undecorated life: "He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever." (Ibid: 40)

A SLICE OF LIFE

Speaking of the forms that naturalistic prose assumes Charles Walcutt includes the "slice-of-life" (Walcutt, 1956: 21) form: indeed, Baldwin's stories most often depict only tiny segments of protagonists' lives, turning sometimes, however, with their power to dive into the abyss of human tragedy, into "chronicles of despair" (Ibid: 21).

Given the complexity of the performed analysis, naturalism appears to be a much more intriguing narrative mode than the current use of the word suggests. Its variety of themes, styles and techniques in the work of this twentieth century author testifies of

its enduring presence in twentieth-century American fiction. While realism, as defined and practiced by Howells, has been confined in modern American fiction to a relatively minor role, naturalism, in its various interests and strategies, has continued to flourish. This is not to say that naturalism has been the principle force in American fiction since the turn of the century. (...) Nor has American naturalism been static or monolithic in theme and form since its origin in the 1890s. Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the movement has been its adaptability to fresh currents of idea and

expression in each generation while maintaining a core of naturalistic preoccupations.
(...) Naturalism thus truly 'refuses to die' in America.

(Pizer 1995, 13-14)

James Baldwin's short fiction thus seems to be highly indebted to this literary movement which, with its relentless tendency to portray human tragedies, will never cease to exist.

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NASLEĐE NATURALIZMA U KRATKIM PRIČAMA DŽEJMSA BOLDVINA

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Ovaj rad razmatra kratku prozu Džejmsa Boldvina u odnosu na književni pravac naturalizma. Cilj je da se identifikuju elementi naturalističke poetike kod Boldvina i da se ilustruju sa pogodnim primerima, kao i da se odredi stepen do koga njegova kratka proza utiče i daje ton celokupnom Boldvinovom stvaralaštvu. Budući da naturalizam poseduje više različitih dimenzija koje zavise od perioda stvaranja i regije u kojoj se razvijao (započeo je u Evropi, prešao u Ameriku i tamo sačuvao svoju vitalnost sve do poznog dvadesetog veka), u ovom ogledu govoriće se jedino o pozicijama koje se mogu primeniti na literaturu tog tipa i koristiće se saznanja teoretičara i kritičara kao što su Luj Bad, Donald Pilcer i Čarls Čajld Volkot. Pored pomenutog, iako se može činiti u početku neprikladnim, ovaj rad će pokušati da pokaže i suprotno, t.j. da ne samo da se Boldvinovo stvaralaštvo može videti u tako omeđenom prostoru, već i da ono doprinosi savremenim pokušajima da se bolje razume takav period u američkoj literaturi se pojavio na početku dvadesetog veka još uvek igra značajnu ulogu u američkoj književnoj istoriji.

Ključne reči: *Džejms Boldvin, kratka proza, naturalizam*