

## Book Review. "Seldom in the Nick of Time"—Emil Sîrbulescu's *Literatura americană și provocarea etnicității: Romanul afro-american*

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### Abstract

In 2020, the distinguished professor and scholar from the University of Craiova, Emil Sîrbulescu published the above mentioned book with a view to consolidating the academic research in Romania pertaining to race and ethnicity in the context of American culture and literature. If in the title the readers are threatened with the perspective of a *magnum opus*—"the challenge of ethnicity"—in the subtitle items seem to be subdued and thus confined to the still complex and complicated space of the African-American novel. Following the introduction, "About cultural diversity," a first part of the book is dedicated to that particular challenge, as implying the "construction of a multicultural model." The second part details "the maturing of the African-American novel," whereas the third provides the readers with a case-study, i.e. Toni Morrison's works. And last, but not least, the section devoted to conclusions addresses a question that might prove emblematic—whether "the African-American literature still exists." Our purpose was to highlight both the issues discussed by the author and his solid contribution to the field.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, race, African-American novel, multiculturalism

The major debate in the introduction of the book focuses on clarifying the most significant differences between the concepts of *ethnicity* and *race*. Neither exists in a pure form, and nor are they less affected by social and political circumstances. The author is aware of the peculiar way Americans have treated the question of border closing and of the immigrants. The latter's psychology is analyzed through the process of collision between the maternal tongue and English, which highlights the fact that "ethnic literature" is a misleading notion, as it only partly covers American realities. Multiculturalism is seen as both

an accomplishment and a failure, and is contrasted with pluriculturalism and interculturalism. Marking diversity and difference, multiculturalism should be reconsidered by the Western society, as some of its leaders admitted the futility of their attempts. In what regards the adjectives describing the process, even the *sardonic* "multi-culti" can be a choice.

The first chapter aims at shaping the American ethnic landscape, and resorts to texts by Stephen Spencer, Robert J. Young, Kenan Malik, Pierre Van den Berghe, Stuart Hall, Charles Taylor and others. The author notices the preference for the term *ethnicity* in the contexts of the Western multicultural societies, as being more indicative of the constant negotiations of limits. *Americanness* (and assimilation) is seen not through the eyes of the dominant group, but in relation to the marginal ones. "Identity and representation" becomes the next hot issue to be approached via texts by Claude Dubar, Anne Crany Francis or Judit Butler, and the references go back as far as Carl Von Linné is concerned, as well as one of his American counterparts, Samuel Stanhope Smith.

Racial theories are mentioned, i.e those belonging to Samuel George Morton, Louis Agassiz, John Bachman, and Josiah Clark Nott, all of them supporting, more or less, the institution of slavery. Still, works such as Franz Boas's are brought to the front in order to point to the fracture in hierarchies meant to assert the superiority of the WASP culture. Names such as Hector John de Crevecoeur and Israel Zangwill are underlined when America's generous *melting pot* is counted for its processes of internalizing American values and establishing an American tradition.

"Slavery—the grotesque image in the mirror" is the chapter dealing with "Black Atlantic and slavery," "Colonialism, postcolonialism, grotesque," and "Racial and ethnic discrimination: literary and extraliterary answers." The so-called "Atlantic spaces," especially the English one, are held responsible, once created, for the development of slavery along the infamous *Middle Passage*. However, the author remarks the overlooking, in European schoolbooks, of racism as a major (unfortunately) force in modern history. Franz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Gilroy, Leonard Cassuto, Claude Levi-Strauss, Henri Bergson and Tzvetan Todorov are the theorists whose voices are claimed to have expressed valid statements on the human condition and its particular instances on the American continent. The propension to *grotesque* is thus something natural against the background of slavery. The works of 18<sup>th</sup> Century scientists and explorers, which served as bases for racist theories, are referred to together with contemporary reactions, like Anthony Appiah's, actually showing fact that "the body is just a trap, an empty space, a fictional space" that can be filled with projections of many kinds (Sirbulescu, 2020, p. 74). The range of references expands, going from Léopold-Sédar Senghor to Harlem Renaissance, or from Theodor Adorno to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

A very thorough analysis of the notions of race and racism is undertaken in the third chapter, which goes to the origins and lists a number of racisms: conscious and obvious, conscious yet hidden, unconscious and unintentional, external and internal, etc. The author pleads in favor of a more elaborate, i.e. critical theory of race. William Du Bois is considered with his emphasis on *the problem of the color line*. In this regard, the extreme has been reached by the American *one-drop rule* ideology of race. Other sections of the chapter engage the “ideology of modernity,” the “resistance to slavery,” the “enlightened racism” and the “autobiographical answer.” Names of philosophers, theorists and writers are employed—from John Locke to Alexis de Tocqueville, from David Hume or Immanuel Kant to Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Zora Neale Hurston—together with fragments from official documents or earlier manuscripts/texts.

“The historical and social roots of the black protest” are chronicled in the fourth chapter and not without ignoring the voodoo practices of African-American religions or the romantic vision of the “happy slave.” The section dedicated to “segregation and abolitionism” points to the contributions of Frederick Douglas and Harriet Beecher Stowe and their impact on American society before the Civil War. The spirit of the post-Civil War age is captured through featuring a series of events involving black activism and changes in legislation up to the 1960s. The detailed account may appear as fastidious at times; however, it proves a solid basis for any future scholarship. In fact, some of the author’s sources, and this is worth mentioning, are his former PhD students, we assume, whom he quotes—and at the same time promotes—via this rich study.

“Crossing the color line” is the first section in the fifth chapter, “The cultural heritage of the South.” The author explores the problematic issue of *passing* and its implications regarding racial, class, gender or sexual identity. The ambiguous authority of autobiographical & slave narratives is approached, given their relation to models provided by the sentimental novel or the picaresque. As for other types of discourse, *passing* could be traced in poetry as well or even in the shows performed by Eddie Murphy and Ice Cube. Narrative texts belonging to both white and black authors—Carl Van Vechten, Gertrude Stein and Claude McKay—are discussed in order to show the vulnerability of their protagonists’ condition.

An entire chapter serves the interests of a single novel. In “Ralph Ellison and the visibility of invisibility” the author speaks about the romantic challenge of representing an invisible man. In the beginning, the novel rejects conventional strategies, only to resume the traditional form of autobiographical narrative. Also rejected is the naturalist aesthetics, the *high visibility* of the black person, and even the stereotype of the physical body. Dostoyevski and Richard Wright are quoted as having influenced the novelist;

however, in Ellison's case, "the ultimate source of perception" is "the body buried in a pocket of the urban texture." (2020, p. 157) In "Invisibility and the reign of ambivalence," the last section, the author underlines Ellison's placing into perspective the illusion of representation by creating the counter-illusion of presence.

The emergence of black feminism is discussed in the next chapter, in the context of the 1960s and their aftermath, when the process of restructuring black families followed a patriarchal model, culminating with the *Million Man March* organized in 1995 by the Nation of Islam. Emil Sîrbulescu accurately presents the choices black feminists had to make in order to either preserve their racial identity or assert their gender and specific problems. Official documents are again invoked, such as *The Moynihan Report*, together with opinions expressed in texts by Cynthia Washington, Barbara Smith, Frances Beal and others. African-American writers and their works/discourse is under scrutiny and Emil Sîrbulescu believes that the best way to approach them is a thematic one as it will lead to a better understanding of their message.

Another chapter serves the interests of a single author, this time. In "Alice Walker: resilience, becoming, sublimation" the author analyzes Walker's fiction and non-fiction as expressing, among other issues, the South as a Bakhtinian chronotope. Her novels are not only about the search for identity, they are "literary works partaking in a stylistic, narrative experiment" (Sîrbulescu, 2020, p. 189), and as a result art becomes therapy and survival. The novel *Meridian* is allotted a section, as it treats history as a series of successive layers to be dug up by the critic/archeologist. "Resistance to patriarchal order" presents the weakened position of the father figure and of the black men in *Color Purple*. Humour, understood like in Gates' *signifying monkey*, gives the protagonist the status of a subject, especially when her sufferings are read against classic narratives like *Clarissa* and *Jane Eyre*. Freudian analysis is engaged as a maternity complex is referred to, as well as the narration of the subliminal subject through fragmentation or *patchwork*. The last section, "Making sense in Walker's epistolary," deals with further controversies raised by the novel, while masterfully crafted analysis of some text fragments point to the *bird* symbol.

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The third part of the book, the case-study, opens with the chapter "Tony Morrison and the force of human nature," in which the author sheds light on the most significant aspects in the works of the first African-American writer awarded the Nobel Prize. "Beyond language" section presents the way Morrison understands race and gender as strong points in the process of building, both in form and content, a political literature. It underlines

the writer's delimitation from old masters, Faulkner included, and the propension to exploiting the jazz sound on page. Her "Thematic concerns" are not new, yet she rehabilitates African-American myths and folk-tales in order to prevent their erasure.

The tenth chapter, "Slavery narrative," begins with "Blue eyes and tar puppets," a section pointing to Morrison's assumed mission of "taking over the lost/loose threads of the complicated plot of the black adventure on American land" (Sîrbulescu, 2020, p. 228). "Fugitive slaves and *abiku*" takes us closer to the roots of the main character in *Beloved*, a novel in which the reader is "placed immediately (even on a subliminal level) in a twilight transitional territory" (p. 231), making room for the Freudian *Unheimlich*. "Beloved, she my daughter, she mine" furthers the analysis, with ample quotes from the novel, showing the contrast between the law of the state and the law of the maternal body. "Mourning and melancholy" are major features of the narratives, as racial order tends to be preserved even in times of war and confusion. The last three sections deal with *A Mercy* and *Beloved* as expressions of the "suffering of vulnerable layers" (p. 245).

"Narrative time and the voice(s) in *Beloved*" is a chapter entirely devoted to Morrison's masterpiece. The author speaks about the intermittent changes of perspective, the incredible range of vocabulary and that Morrison "wrote a terrifying novel" (p. 251). References are made to other novels: to *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* in relation to women and their survival without men; and to *Tar Baby* with regard to the fugitive from an unjust system. "Identity and memory" is a section about how "the space-time discontinuity, combined with the hegemony of the dominant culture" (p. 262) affects/alters memory. However, more dangerous seems to be what Morrison calls "national amnesia," therefore she refuses to have her writing compared with the dominant one.

The last chapter, "Narrative space and historic awareness," begins with "The solution of magical realism" and its particular implementation by Morrison, as time and space are difficult to handle by African-Americans. "Conquerors write history" is the second section, dealing with real vs. fictional locations, geographical as well as spiritual. "Memory as writing reservoir" emphasizes Morrison's re-reading of American origins as transcending contradictions. "The recurrent burden of the colour" rounds up this case-study and third part of the volume, which may be a booklet in itself.

A dense and complex book, *American Literature & the Challenge of Ethnicity: The African-American Novel* ends with a quasi-rhetorical question, to which the answer can be but positive. Indeed, an African-American literature will continue to exist, tracing its trajectory from *melting pot* to multiculturalism, from *slave narratives* to *neo-slave narratives*, from *pulp fiction* towards the age of post-multiculturalism.

## References

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