

## The Innocence Is the Crime

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I have outlined *Monologue and Dialogue* in particular not only because it illustrates how a broader representation rankles some people to the point of dismissing some of the acknowledged gems of English literature but also because it evokes a complex of reactions from such people that I want to explore. Although the one-sentence condemnation, "Cover to cover, *Trash*," does not of course fully itemize the objections, I think it's quite fair to infer them from the many other explicit judgments made on similar selections in other books. A surprisingly large number of *Interaction* books got off scot-free of objections, sometimes because their particular form happened to steer them naturally away from controversy, so that it is interesting to note which books came in for a heavy drubbing.

Usually the books that were branded "morbid," "depressing," "negative," "un-American," "anti-Christian," "racist," and so on were those which because of the nature of their form or topic tended to contain more material by minority writers or by majority writers in a critical or satirical vein. Black or Chicano authors do not gravitate toward science fiction and adventure or mystery stories, nor will you find these authors in collections containing a lot of writing from earlier periods of history. You will find them in contemporary fiction and poetry and in essays, reportage, memoirs, and it was books containing these that were most condemned.

In contemporary, realistic writing youngsters want to read about the lives of people whose trials they can identify with and whose triumphs they can aspire toward. They want to read about the world they know in a way that helps them to understand and master it. This does not at all mean that they don't enjoy and project themselves into reading matter set in other times and places or in make-believe worlds, but it does mean that where realism is involved readers want to be able to identify with what is familiar. Eventually, we would expect youngsters to grow to identify with people different from themselves, but the less experienced and developed they are the more they will for the moment have to identify with their own

kind. For minority children this means writers, material, styles, and viewpoints of their own kind, just as it does for other children.

The splendid advantage of mixing pluralistic reading material is that at the same time each youngster can find his or her own kind he or she can also discover other kinds. Such a mixture cannot be apparent from one book alone. Some of our books were loaded indeed: we knew that stories featuring minority athletes, entertainers, political leaders, or central fictional characters would interest minority children especially if told in a voice they could recognize as one of their own. So the *Interaction* books for secondary school called *Autobiography*, *Memoir*, *Biography*, *Chronicle*, and *Essays in Reflection* abound in minority writing. Our breakdown of books by types of form or popular genres naturally unbalanced some books, which was necessary to offset other books naturally unbalanced away from minorities.

Good teacher strategy, however, would consist in helping children to move on from one book or type of reading to another so that their range of acquaintance widens and they become consequently able to identify more and more broadly. A pluralistic reading curriculum exists not merely to sort each into his or her own kind but to familiarize each with the other kinds. There's no reason blacks shouldn't acquire a taste for science fiction and haiku and penetrate Greek and Norse mythology nor that Kanawha Valley children shouldn't learn what black history has been and how blacks live and feel today. But if you do not believe in a pluralistic or multicultural schooling, on principle, you can claim that it is biased against your values.

One of the *Interaction* books called *Biography*, for secondary school, contained the life story of "Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues" by Studs Terkel. The rest of the book comprised biographies of Crazy Horse, Archimedes, artist Marc Chagall, Langston Hughes, and Queen Elizabeth.

*Objection:* This biography rather matter-of-factly presents the life and career of a jazz singer and entertainer. This story lends approval to the honky-talk [*sic*] lifestyle of the jazz musical entertainer. It is not wholesome material for presentation to school youngsters. It is a discredit to the Negro race. There are many wholesome and respectable Black Americans, whose biographies would make much better reading and reflect considerably more favorably on Black Americans.

In one of the secondary books called *Autobiography* we included "We Weren't Bad, Just Mischievous," an excerpt from *I Always Wanted to be Somebody* by black tennis champion Althea Gibson. This is the readout on it:

Page 6: Damn bucket

Page 10, Line 25: "I beat the hell out of her."

Page 11, Line 27: "Pig-tailed bitch"

Page 11, Lines 30-31: "Honest to God" – God's name in vain

Page 13, Line 3: "What the hell"

Page 12, Lines 17-20: Gang type violence

Page 13, Line 18: "Damn you"

Page 13, Second paragraph: Description of stealing

*Objection:* This story includes unwarranted profanity and presents crude and uncouth behavior and attitudes in an ambivalent context. Likewise, gang violence and stealing are also presented in an ambivalent context with no allusion to the wrongness of such behavior. A matter-of-fact indifference to profanity and wrong doing – even an implicit approval of such behavior – appears to pervade the context of the story.

I think "ambivalent context" simply means that the author made no effort to denounce the routine fighting, snitching, and skipping school that everyone growing up in Harlem got involved in. Althea Gibson assumes, I believe, that no one thinks this is a great way to live, and it is clear that through tennis she worked her way out of it. She does distinguish between serious crime and these street habits that all the kids fell into amid the destitution.

Like I said, we never got in any real trouble. We were just mischievous. I think one good thing was that I never joined any of those so-called social clubs that they've always had in Harlem. None of my girl friends did, either. We didn't care for that stuff, all the drinking and the narcotics and sex that they went for in those clubs – and we didn't care for the stickups that they turned to sooner or later in order to get the money for the things they were doing.<sup>1</sup>

She also tells how she learned responsibility from losing a job she very much liked merely in order to take the day off with girl friends. (They went to see *their* idol, singer Sarah Vaughan, at the Paramount.) Youngsters growing up in an environment of despair and desperation need very much to read how others just like themselves learned to take charge of their lives and rise above the futile street life Gibson recalls.

In the same book we included an excerpt from entertainer Dick Gregory's *Nigger: An Autobiography*, "Not Poor, Just Broke." It is significant that in this title and "We Weren't Bad, Just Mischievous" the authors make an effort to offset the hard circumstances of their youth by rather humorously substituting a word of greater self-respect for the word that might be used to describe their early days. Gregory's piece got this response.

Page 29, Line 35: "I pissed in my pants" – how crude!

Page 30-31, last paragraph on p. 30: Violence

Page 32, Line 19: "Get your ass over here."

Page 33, Line 18: "Get your ass over here."

Page 34, Paragraph 7: crude, ugly talk

*Objection:* The foregoing passages specifically cited, and indeed this entire story, present cynical, blatant accounts of the crude, uncouth, vulgar, and violent. It is written in such a way as would seem to intentionally offend the sense of decency and good taste of many persons for whom the writer has repeatedly expressed a cynical disdain.

The objection typically ignores the main point of this selection – to show what it was like to grow up black – and focuses on the language, which for the ghetto is considerably toned down.

The violence referred to (on page 30) occurred during one of numerous Tarzan movies Gregory saw as a boy:

Used to sit there and laugh at those dumb Hollywood Africans grunting and jumping around and trying to fight the white men, spears against high-powered rifles. Once we had a riot in the movies when Tarzan jumped down from a tree and grabbed about a hundred Africans. We didn't mind when Tarzan beat up five or ten, but this was just too many, a whole tribe, and we took that movie house apart, ran up on the stage and kicked the screen and fought the guys who still dug Tarzan.<sup>2</sup>

For upper elementary, one equivalent in *Interaction* for memoirs and biographies was *True Stories*, in which we put a mixture of various non-fiction accounts. In one book of this title we included "True Stories by Slaves," transcriptions of actual slave recollections that we had drawn from B. A. Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down*. Dissenters objected: "Admittedly whites should not forget the cruelties of slavery, but there seems little point in including these recollections in a book entitled 'true stories.'" What lies behind the inconsistency of this sentence, which starts out apparently objecting to including slave accounts at all but then shifts the basis of the objection, in mid-sentence, by implying that the stories are not true? The memoirs constitute as legitimate a part of history as any other documents, all of which are ultimately founded on personal testimonials of what happened, some firsthand accounts by participants or observers. But I doubt that the objector questioned the truth of the stories. Rather, the incoherence expresses, I believe, the emotional and irrational aspect of the objection, which contains two half-points thrown together as the objector cast about for some reason to give for the feeling of recoiling that these stories aroused.

Not all ethnic objections occurred in the nonfiction books. Among the few good selections we found to go in *Adventure Stories* for upper elementary black children was John Steptoe's "Train Ride," about some

small black boys from a New York borough who dare to take a subway trip into Manhattan and have a great adventure worth the price of the punishment they receive on finding their way home late. The story is told in black urban dialect but without any profanity, as the opening sentences illustrate.

You know how it be in the summer time, all hot. Everybody be sittin' around on the stoop. We be playin' out in the street. Me and my friends. I gotta lot of friends.<sup>3</sup>

Upper elementary is the time when children either really master reading or become so overwhelmed by the failure to that they soon drop out or endure school in misery. We included a few stories in black dialects to give less academically developed blacks every chance to find reading matter they could readily relate to because both subject and language would be familiar. The narration of "Train Ride" more or less sounds as if a peer is telling the story. The objection:

Exceptionally poor grammar used in this story. Dialects make for difficult reading and to include this as reading for poor students shows faulty thinking.

Recall that Alice Moore's original reason for asking the School Board to delay a vote on the books concerned "relativity" in language usage, dialects. Then later she and followers brought out the full charges based on their notions of "civilized Christians." Because our speech identifies and sorts us, if it varies much from a majority standard, language usage always holds the stage in school confrontations over curriculum. The real issue of course is tolerance of differences. Correctness poses as the issue, but since this mainly comes down to dialectical differences—people rarely make *personal* mistakes in grammar—the real issue is the fear that white children will be influenced to talk like blacks (and black children like whites) and so break an important identity definition, one of the chief fears of segregationists.

*Interaction* contained few selections in nonstandard dialect, because we knew that every child has to focus on standard speech, as virtually every parent, white or black, agrees. But part of the richness of English literature is its dialectical variation in both white and black communities—Irish, Scottish, and Australian, or African, American ghetto, or West Indian. Some inclusion of dialects, then, aimed at literary diversity, not at literacy.

But it is always precisely this *comprehensive* approach that so embittered the dissenters. Since they could hardly put forth racism as an objection, they had to give other reasons like corruption of the language,

obscenity, morbidity, immorality, sacrilege, and subversion—all of which truly represented their values but did not often apply to the minority selections in question. In other words, the objections to ethnic pluralism had to be cast into the form of the other objections they were making about nonethnic selections. This is why the remarks they make on minority writing seem much more trumped up than in some other areas of dispute.

One of the more frequently used accusations was racism itself. Black poet Al Young's "A Dance for Ma Rainey" (the blues singer of the twenties) was branded "more racist maso-sadistic [*sic*] ideology," which was the sole comment. After addressing Ma Rainey, Young expresses what she hid but sang from,

that pain that blues  
gives the world with  
aching to be heard

then closes the poem with this extended phrase:

our beautiful brave black people  
who no longer need to jazz  
or sing to themselves in murderous vibrations  
or play the veins of their strong tender arms  
with needles  
to prove that we're still here.<sup>4</sup>

All black writing that alludes to the oppression of its people is of course called racism in reverse by the censors. This focus on suffering, and the references to the wounds blacks have sometimes inflicted on themselves in their frustration, no doubt accounts for the idea of "maso-sadistic."

I think that the objectors really don't understand what blacks have been through and also don't understand how literature can function to deal in a nondestructive way with otherwise overwhelming pain, not the least of which has been the loss of so many of their brothers to drugs, crime, and hatred. While paying tribute to Ma Rainey, who made blues a way to transform her pain, Al Young is telling himself and other blacks that if they gather their spirits together as a self-respecting people, they don't need these awful alternatives.

In the same book, *Lyric Poetry*, which ran a very broad gamut indeed of types and tones of poetry, appeared "Black Warrior" by Norman Jordan. The objection said, "This poem advocates racist violence and justi-

fies secretive, vengeful, cowardly destruction of 'Whitey's' property. Advocates law breaking." Here is the entire poem.

At night while  
Whitey sleeps  
the heat of a  
thousand African fires  
burns across my chest

I hear the beat  
of a war drum  
dancing from a distant  
land  
dancing across a mighty  
water  
telling me to strike

Enchanted by this  
wild call  
I hurl a brick through  
a store front window  
and disappear.<sup>5</sup>

To the extent that the poem may be partly addressed to Whitey, I think it aims to explain why some blacks have hurled bricks through windows, so futile a gesture. Coming after the evocation of proud ancestry, the act is made to appear paltry, a far cry indeed from the vision of his once powerful people. The title "Black Warrior" has to be ironical. To anyone who can listen, this poem says that this "secretive, vengeful, cowardly destruction" is not what blacks want. They want to restore the unity and identity and power they had before stolen into slavery in a foreign land. Actually, these are the same things, I'm sure, that their attackers want.

One of the most perceptive writers about black-white relations has been James Baldwin, whose works were represented a number of times in *Interaction* because we felt he is not only an exceptionally good writer of any race but also a person uncommonly able to suspend himself between the two races. No Uncle Tom, he can spell out, chapter and verse, the chronicle of white scourging of blacks, but he also doesn't stop there; he goes right on to call on his brothers to feel compassion for whites. He pulls off an extraordinary interweaving of denunciation and reconciliation so exquisitely and deliberately double-edged that I think our dissenters couldn't believe what he was saying. It is typical of rigidity that when two channels are beamed to it at once it can receive only one, the one of

course that it expects and fears. Baldwin's unified double-attitude comes across never more movingly perhaps than in "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew," which appeared in *Interaction's Letters* for advanced high school.

*Objection:* This man's letters and articles appear throughout this series of books, he obviously is a mentally scared individual who believes in no one or nothing but himself. He appears to be anti-everything and reading this letter seems to prove the point. Enough of this type of thinking could bring about racial uprisings everywhere.

Here are some excerpts, in order. It is typical of Baldwin that he calls whites his "countrymen." He is addressing his brother's son.

. . . You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don't you forget it. . . . I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: *most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

Now, my dear namesake, the innocent and well-meaning people have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, "No! This is not true! How bitter you are!"—but. . . . I *know* the conditions under which you were born, for I was there. . . .

There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history that they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. . . . In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you



woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. . . . But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. . . .

We cannot be free until they are free. God bless you, James, and Godspeed.<sup>6</sup>

Now please look back at the objection. I have quoted Baldwin at length here because I think the extravagantly negative reaction to this piece—more hysterical than unfair—may signal that it hit very close to home indeed.

A Chicano in another selection makes a point remarkably similar to Baldwin's extension of sympathy to whites.

"It is hard on Anglo, too. His own history made him what he is. He's caught in a web of tradition, prejudice, and misinformation. He must get out of that web. So must we."<sup>7</sup>

The speaker here is a drugstore owner quoted by Bill Moyers in "Mathis, Texas," a section of his *Listening to America* excerpted for one of four *Interaction* books called *Reportage and Research*, aimed at college-bound senior high students. The objection to this selection was a single word—"Racism."

The subject is indeed racism but is treated with remarkable impartiality. Moyers, an Anglo reporter, mostly just pieced together official reports, eyewitness accounts, and interviews, narrating a continuity but very scrupulously not taking sides. Several clashes and the long-standing conflict are told and described by people of both sides. It is a model of objective reportage, and one can see friendliness and progress in the relationships as well as ugly trouble. Unelaborated, the objection is ambiguous. Racism which way? It would be impossible to make a charge of bias stick. It could also cover the possible meaning that focusing on racism is bad. I think ambiguity was a convenient dodge; objecting to racism looks like a virtuous—liberal—way of dispensing with a selection aimed at illuminating racism. The real problem is that the selection *does* present both sides.

Similarly condemned, at the elementary school level, was an excerpt

from Ruth Franchere's biography of Cesar Chavez for juveniles, which we had included in another book of *True Stories*.

*Objection:* This story projects Mr. Chavez as a kindly man working solely for a noble cause. Many farm owners may take exception to this being entitled a "true" story.

Franchere tells her story in a pretty innocuous way, emphasizing its political aspects only as much as necessary for a "leader of the people." It clearly aims to give young Chicanos a figure they can identify with, admire, and be inspired by. In fact, it does for Chicanos what all those stories of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln have done for Anglos. Hero stories don't dwell on the moles and warts, a fact that cuts across ethnic lines. But this account is quite straightforward enough and not at all designed to incite anything more than ethnic pride. Again, it is the sheer fact of equal representation that seems to earn the rejection.

I am not trying to prove hypocrisy. The phenomenon is more subtle than that, usually at least. But I must point out what we can certainly call an inconsistency and let the reader make of it what he or she will. It occurs in the same book of *Reportage and Research* referred to shortly ago. From the renowned cultural psychologist Erik Erikson we had drawn a selection, "Hunters Across the Prairie," a portion of his monumental *Childhood and Society*. While describing the Indian attitude toward birthing in white hospitals, he writes, "Older Indian women expecting the birth of a grandchild would quietly wail like the Jews before their sacred Wall, decrying the destruction of their nation." The response to this was, "Belittles Jewish beliefs."

Forty or so pages farther on in this book appears Mel Ziegler's "Biography of an Unwanted Building," a factual account from *New York* magazine of the typical financial problems of a large declining Manhattan apartment house. All that the objectors said about this selection was, "Say the names in *Bold Type* together." The names, those of the chain of owners of the building, are Morel J. Fuchs, Max Steinberg, Anthony Miano, George Hahn, and Les Evens.