

James T. Stewart

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLACK REVOLUTIONARY ARTIST

COSMOLOGY is that branch of physics that studies the universe. It then proceeds to make certain assumptions, and from these, construct "models." If the model corresponds to reality, and certain factors are predictable, then it can be presumed to substantiate the observable phenomena in the universe. This essay is an attempt to construct a model; a particular way of looking at the world. This is necessary because existing white paradigms or models do not correspond to the realities of black existence. It is imperative that we construct models with different basic assumptions.

The dilemma of the "negro" artist is that he makes assumptions based on the wrong models. He makes assumptions based on white models. These assumptions are not only wrong, they are even antithetical to his existence. The black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality. The models must be non-white. Our models must be consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles. In doing so, we will be merely following the natural demands of our culture. These demands are suppressed in the larger (white) culture, but, nonetheless, are found in our music and in our spiritual and moral philosophy. Particularly in music, which happens to be the purest expression of the black man in America.

In Jahn Janheinz's *Muntu*, he tells us about temples made of mud that vanish in the rainy seasons and are erected

elsewhere. They are never made of much sturdier material. The buildings and the statues in them are always made of mud. And when the rains come the buildings and the statues are washed away. Likewise, most of the great Japanese artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did their exquisite drawings on rice paper with black ink and spit. These were then reproduced by master engravers on fragile newsheets that were distributed to the people for next to nothing. These sheets were often used for wrapping fish. They were a people's newsheet. Very much like the sheets circulated in our bars today.

My point is this: that in both of the examples just given, there is little concept of fixity. The work is fragile, destructible; in other words, there is a total disregard for the perpetuation of the product, the picture, the statue, and the temple. Is this ignorance? According to Western culture evaluations, we are led to believe so. The white researcher, the white scholar, would have us believe that he "rescues" these "valuable" pieces. He "saves" them from their creators, those "ignorant" colored peoples who would merely destroy them. Those people who do not know their value. What an audacious presumption!

The fact is that *these* people did know their value. But the premises and values of their creation are of another order, of another cosmology, constructed in terms agreeing with their own particular models of existence. Perpetuation, as the white culture understands it, simply does not exist in the black culture. We know, all non-whites know, that man can not create *a* forever; but he can create forever. But he can only create if he creates as change. Creation is itself perpetuation and change is being.

In this dialectical apprehension of reality it is the act of creation of a work as it comes into existence that is its only being. The operation of art is dialectical. Art goes. Art is not fixed. Art can not be fixed. Art is change, like music, poetry

and writing are, when conceived. They must move (swing). Not necessarily as physical properties, as music and poetry do; but intrinsically, by their very nature. But they must go spiritually, noumenally. This is what makes those mud temples in Nigeria go. Those prints in Japan. This is what makes black culture go.

All white Western art forms, up to and including those of this century, were matrixed. They all had a womb, the generative idea out of which the work evolved, or as in the tactile forms (sculpture and painting, for instance), unifying factors that welded the work together, e.g. the plot of a play, the theme of a musical composition, and the figure. The trend in contemporary white forms is toward the elimination of the matrix, in the play "happenings," and in music, aleatory or random techniques. All of these are influenced by Eastern traditions. It is curious and sometimes amusing to see the directions that these forms take.

The music that black people in this country created was matrixed to some degree; but it was largely improvisational also, and that aspect of it was non-matrixed. And the most meaningful music being created today is non-matrixed. The music of Ornette Coleman.

The sense in which "revolutionary" is understood is that a revolutionary is against the established order, regime, or culture. The bourgeoisie calls him a revolutionary because he threatens the established way of life—things as they are. They can not accept change, though change is inevitable. The revolutionary understands change. Change is what it is all about. He is not a revolutionary to his people, to his compatriots, to his comrades. He is, instead, a brother. He is a son. She is a sister, a daughter.

The dialectical method is the best instrument we have for comprehending physical and spiritual phenomena. It is the essential nature of being, existence; it is the property of being and the "feel" of being; it is the implicit *sense* of it.

This sense, black people have. And the revolutionary artist must understand this sense of reality, this philosophy of reality which exists in all non-white cultures. We need our own conventions, a convention of procedural elements, a kind of stylization, a sort of insistency which leads inevitably to a certain kind of methodology—a methodology affirmed by the spirit.

That spirit is black.

That spirit is non-white.

That spirit is patois.

That spirit is Samba.

Voodoo.

The black Baptist church in the South.

We are, in essence, the ingredients that will create the future. For this reason, we are misfits, estranged from the white cultural present. This is our position as black artists in these times. Historically and sociologically we are the rejected. Therefore, we must know that we are the building stones for the New Era. In our movement toward the future, "ineptitude" and "unfitness" will be an aspect of what we do. These are the words of the established order—the middle-class value judgments. We must turn these values in on themselves. Turn them inside out and make ineptitude and unfitness desirable, even mandatory. We must even, ultimately, be estranged from the dominant culture. This estrangement must be nurtured in order to generate and energize our black artists. This means that he can not be "successful" in any sense that has meaning in white critical evaluations. Nor can his work ever be called "good" in any context or meaning that could make sense to that traditional critique.

Revolution is fluidity. What are the criteria in times of social change? Whose criteria are they, in the first place? Are they ours or the oppressors'? If being is change, and the sense of change is the time of change—and what is, is about to end, or is over—where are the criteria?

History qualifies us to have this view. Not as some philosophical concept acting out of matter and movement—but as being. So, though the word "dialectic" is used, the meaning and sense of it more than the word, or what the word means, stand as postulated experience. Nothing can be postulated without fixing it in time—standing it still, so to speak. It can not be done. The white Westerner was on his way toward understanding this when he rejected the postulated systems of his philosophies; when he discarded methodology in favor of what has come to be called existentialism. But inevitably, he postulated existence; or at least, it was attempted. Therefore, existentialism got hung up in just the same way as the philosophical systems from which it has extricated itself.

But we need not be bothered with that. We need merely to see how it fits; how the word dialectic fits; what change means; and what fluidity, movement and revolution mean. The purpose of writing is to enforce the sense we have of the future. The purpose of writing is to enforce the sense we have of responsibility—the responsibility of understanding our roles in the shaping of a new world. After all, experience is development; and development is destruction. The great Indian thinkers had this figured out centuries ago. That is why, in the Hindu religion, the god Siva appears—Siva, the god of destruction.

All history is "tailored" to fit the needs of the particular people who write it. Thus, one of our "negro" writers failed to understand the historicity of the Nation of Islam. He failed to understand. This was because his assumptions were based on white models and on a self-conscious "objectivity." This is the plight of the "negro" man of letters, the negro intellectual who needs to demonstrate a so-called academic impartiality to the white establishment.

Now, on the other hand, a dialectical interpretation of revolutionary black development rooted in the *Western* dia-

lectic also will not do. However, inherent in the Western dialectical approach is the idea of imperceptible and gradual quantitative change; changes which give rise to a new state. This approach has also illustrated that there are no immutable social systems or eternal principles; and that there is only the inherency in things of contradictions—of opposing tendencies. It has also illustrated that the role of the “science of history” is to help bring about a fruition of new aggregates. These were all good and canonical to the kind of dialectics that came out of Europe in the nineteenth century.

But contemporary art is rooted in a European convention. The standards whereby its products are judged are European. However, this is merely *one* convention. Black culture implies, indeed engenders, for the black artist another order, another way of looking at things. It is apparent in the music of Giuseppe Logan, for example, that the references are not white or European. But it is jazz and it is firmly rooted in the experiences of black individuals in this country. These references are found also in the work of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Grachan Moncur and Milford Graves.

A revolutionary art is being expressed today. The anguish and aimlessness that attended our great artists of the 'forties and 'fifties and which drove most of them to early graves, to dissipation and dissolution, is over. Misguided by white cultural references (the models the culture set for its individuals), and the incongruity of these models with black reality, men like Bird were driven to willful self-destruction. There was no program. And the reality-model was incongruous. It was a white reality-model. If Bird had had a black reality-model, it might have been different. But though Parker knew of the new development in the black culture, even helped to ferment it, he was hung up in an incompatible situation. They were contradictions both monstrous and unbelievable. They were contradictions about the nature of black and white culture, and what that had to mean to

the black individual in this society. In Bird's case, there was a dichotomy between his genius and the society. But, that he couldn't find the adequate model of being was the tragic part of the whole thing. Otherwise, things could have been more meaningful and worthwhile.

The most persistent feature of all existence is change. In other words, it is this property which is a part of everything which exists in the world. As being, the world is change. And it is this very property that the white West denies. The West denies change, defies change . . . resists change. But change is the basic nature of everything that is. Society is. Culture is. Everything that is—in society—its people and their manner of being, and the way in which they make a living. But mainly the modes of what is material, and how the material is produced. What it looks like and what it means to those who produce it and those who accept it. And this is how philosophy, art, morality and certain other things are established. But all established things are temporary, and the nature of being is, like music, changing.

Art can not apologize out of existence the philosophical ethical position of the artist. After all, the artist is a man in society, and his social attitudes are just as relevant to his art as his aesthetic position. However, the white Western aesthetics is predicated on the idea of separating one from the other—a man's art from his actions. It is this duality that is the most distinguishable feature of Western values.

Music is a social activity. Jazz music, in particular, is a social activity, participated in by artists collectively. Within a formal context or procedure, jazz affords the participants a collective form for individual group development in a way white musical forms never did. The symphony, for instance, is a dictatorship. There is a rigidity of form and craft-practice—a virtual enslavement of the individual to the autocratic conductor. Music is a social activity in a sense that writing, painting and other arts can never be. Music is made with

another. It is indulged in with others. It is the most social of the art forms except, say, architecture. But music possesses, in its essence, a property none of the other forms possesses. This property of music is its ontological procedures—the nature of which is dialectical. In other words, music possesses properties of being that come closest to the condition of life, of existence. And, in that sense, I say its procedures are ontological—which doesn't mean a thing, but that music comes closest to being. This is why music teaches. This is what music teaches.

The point of the whole thing is that we must emancipate our minds from Western values and standards. We must rid our minds of these values. Saying so will not be enough. We must try to shape the thinking of our people. We must goad our people by every means, remembering as Ossie Davis stated: that the task of the Negro (*sic*, black) writer is revolutionary by definition. He must view his role *vis-à-vis* white Western civilization, and from this starting point in his estrangement begin to make new definitions founded on his own culture—on definite black values.

John Henrik Clarke

RECLAIMING THE LOST AFRICAN HERITAGE

THERE IS a school of thought supporting the thesis that the people of African descent in the Western World have no African heritage to reclaim. I am not of that school. The image of Africa was deliberately distorted by imperialists who needed moral justification for their rape, pillage and destruction of African cultural patterns and ways of life. It was they who said, in spite of voluminous documents in the libraries of Europe proving the contrary, that Africa was a savage and backward land with little history and no golden age.

However, many writers and scholars, both black and white, have pointed to a rich and ancient African heritage, which, in my opinion, must be reclaimed if American Negroes in general and Negro writers in particular are ever to be reconciled with their roots. Let us first note some of those people who have called attention to this inheritance, then consider a few of the more salient facts of African history and civilization, and finally ask how Negro writers can use this material in their historical and creative writing.

A number of white writers, keenly aware of the distorted image of Africa, have expressed amazement at what seems to be the indifference of the black man in the Western World to the glory of his ancient heritage. In the following excerpt from his book *Tom-Tom*, 1926, John W. Vandercook speaks unsparingly: