

Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist

Amiri Baraka

Dumas's power lay in his skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one. The stories are fables; a mythological presence pervades. They are morality tales, magical, resonating dream emotions and images; shifting ambiguous terror, mystery, implied revelation. But they are also stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear.

"Fon" is strange, exuding a fantastic aura of ancient mystery and a quality almost Biblical, yet the story moves around a kind of black liberation motif which sees would-be lynchers killed. "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" connects black art with anti-white black nationalism. A mysterious black musician will play the afro-horn. Whites are warned to leave, staying at their own risk. The solo is described in a brilliant poetic intensity; when it is finished, a white man slumps dead. The resistance motif in *Poetry for My People* exists in the dynamism of Dumas's imagery—plus an electric persona of black folklore, history, language, custom.

The strangeness of Dumas's world resembles Toni Morrison's wild, emotional "places." Both utilize high poetic description—language of exquisite metaphorical elegance, even as narrative precision. But language *tells* as well as decorates. Both signify as powerfully as they directly communicate. The symbols *sing*, are *cymbals* of deeper experience, not word games for academics.

The world of *Ark of Bones*, for instance, shares a black mythological lyricism, strange yet *ethnically* familiar! Africa, the southern U.S., black life and custom are motif, mood and light, rhythm, and implied history. Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Henry Dumas are the giants of this genre of African American literary Afro-Surreal Expressionism. Jacob Lawrence, Vincent Smith, and Romare Bearden are similar in painting; Duke,

Monk, Trane, Sun Ra in music. Dumas, despite his mythological elegance and deep signification, was part of the wave of African American writers at the forefront of the '60s Black Arts Movement.

The Black Arts Movement was a reflection and important element in the '50s-'70s social upsurge of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements. In each of the major upsurges of the African American freedom movement—the anti-slavery movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the '60s Black Liberation Movement—an accompanying artistic outreach shaped by and endowed with the energy of black rebellion would also emerge! (The whole nation is *inspired*.)

The most important and significant art uses the revelation of truth (fact, reality, etc.) as a *function* of its beauty! Pythagoras's *number* as essential symbol of reality means that *correct* is legitimate and provable, as is *incorrect*. If there is real and unreal, there is also wrong and right, scientific and unscientific.

The liberation of African American people and the ultimate destruction of Imperialism are *inherent* in nature itself, scientifically predictable. So the great African American artists *are* these people and their development. The artist carries real life's *number*. Art is science because it is a form of *knowing*.

The historical existence of Africa and her scattered children, the tragedy and transformation—these form the material, hence spiritual, essence of ourselves. The whole of our story retold and foretold. Modern tales and old! Art is the life of people, society, and nature. The theme is always our real lives in actual society, as unbelievably complex and dialectical as they are. Creativity is the basis of evolution.

The Afro-Surreal Expressionism of Dumas and the others mentioned unfolds the Black Aesthetic—form and content—in its actual contemporary and lived life. MUSIC (drum—polyrhythm, percussive—song as laughter or tears), preacher and congregation, call and response, the frenzy! The *color* is the polyrhythm, refracted light! But this beauty and revelation have always existed in an historically material world. The African masks are shattered and cubed. Things float and fly. Darkness defines more than light. Even in the flow of plot, there are excursions and multi-layered ambiguities. As with Bearden, Dumas's is a world in which the broken glide by in search of the healing element, or are tragically oblivious to it.

The very broken quality, almost to abstraction, is a function of change and transition. It is as though the whole world we inhabit

rests on the bottom of the ocean, harnessed by memory, language, image to that “railroad of human bones” at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

But in this genre the most violently antagonistic of contradictions, colors, shapes animates the personalities, settings, language of the work.

History and culture are expressed through detail and emotion. Real and unreal, it would seem, defining the disintegration and the “crossed Jordan” of wholeness or liberation, are contending themes and modes. At the same time, they are naturally twained, as fall and rise, tragedy and transcendence, slavery and freedom—parameters of the Black Aesthetic: Africa and African American, Death and Birth and Rebirth. And because so much of our collective feeling is invested, the “meanness” of the genre is literal!