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Julius Lester

THE BLACK WRITER

IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE OF THE *New England Journal of Black Studies*, an essay was published by Prof. Priscilla Ramsey on my autobiography, *All Is Well*.

The author is to be complimented for the thoughtfulness with which she approached the work. Too often *All Is Well* has been the whipping post for various ideologies and few scholars and critics have attempted to understand the book as I wrote it. Such is not true of Prof. Ramsey, and though I disagree with her assessment of the work, I recognize and am deeply grateful for the respect she showed it.

In responding to her essay, I will not write a point-by-point refutation, because it would be naive and foolish of me to expect others to agree with or like every sentence I write. My comments will focus on more general questions regarding the black writer and the black autobiographer.

First, however, Prof. Ramsey made two small errors of fact. Five times in her essay she mentions that I attended Pomona College and once that I spent "an exchange year at Pomona College." (p. 51) In actuality I visited Pomona College once for a few hours and spent one semester at San Diego State College. The other error is that my father was not a Baptist minister as Prof. Ramsey writes (p. 49), but Methodist.

I mention these not to be picayune, but to state that it is always incumbent on any critic to be scrupulously accurate about the small facts. Carelessness about the easily verifiable details can call into question a critic's credibility in the matters of substance.

Prof. Ramsey opens her essay with a discussion of the question, what is autobiography? I have been disappointed that reviewers and critics are unable to consider that there might be another approach to autobiography other than the one enunciated by Theodore Pascal, whom Prof. Ramsey paraphrases approvingly as writing that "autobiographers should be old rather than young men." This is one form of autobiography, one which is becoming increasingly passé.

In the seventies young writers, who generally make the first book an autobiographical novel, abandoned this form to write non-fiction autobiographies. One reason was that many of us felt that, having lived

through the sixties, we had lived a lifetime and needed to sum up that life. The second reason was a very real fear that we might not live to be old men with the time and leisure to reflect "wisely" on our lives. Not only was there the omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation, but we had seen all too many of our contemporaries either killed, maimed psychically beyond recall, or victims of suicide. The 18th and 19th century man of letters could live with an unquestioned assurance that he would have an old age. We have no such assurance.

Thus a new form of autobiography began appearing, and I have been disappointed at the inability of critics to recognize the enormous risks one takes in writing an autobiography while still in one's thirties, to write autobiographically when only a limited summing up is possible, to make oneself vulnerable as one does not when writing an autobiography in old age. To write an autobiography in one's thirties is certainly audacious. However, I can't help wondering if such work is not also threatening to many readers, threatening because such an autobiography has to reveal a vulnerability and acceptance of one's self (without trying to justify or rationalize) which many readers may be trying to evade in themselves. Perhaps this is why this new form of autobiography is considered self-indulgent rather than the legitimate literary form it is.

More white writers than black have written such autobiographies. Pater Marin's *In a Man's Time* is an especially moving and courageous book. Among black writers, Leslie Lacey's *The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro* is extraordinarily fine, but it was ignored by white critics and attacked by black.

The reaction by black critics to Lacey's book and *All Is Well* is distressing because I would like to hope that black critics would make an extra effort to understand the black writers who are trying to expand black literature, who are trying to create new possibilities for expression. During the five years of work on *All Is Well*, I was aware of attempting something new in the genre of black autobiography. It was something I began in *Search for the New Land*, which might be considered the first volume of my autobiography. In both books I was attempting to speak, not in the voice of the black collective which typifies black autobiographies, but to speak also in a distinctly personal voice.

This leads to the second matter, namely, the role of the black writer. Prof. Ramsey is very clear when she writes about me that "because he is black he is by virtue of these political and social conditions, a member of a racial collective. He does not have the freedom of defining himself completely outside the boundaries of race and its ramifications." (p.53) It is here that Prof. Ramsey failed herself as a critic and scholar.

Her essay is willfully misleading in its failure to mention that the author of *All Is Well* is the same person who authored *To Be a Slave*, *Black Folktales*, a two-volume anthology of the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, *Long Journey Home: Stories from Black History*, *The Knee-High Man*, and *Look Out! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*. The collective voice is not missing from my work, only from Prof. Ramsey's essay.

However, Prof. Ramsey goes so far as to overlook the presence of that collective black voice in *All Is Well*. She writes: "The unified form evidenced by the narrative of the autobiography up to the marriage's dissolution begins to disintegrate into a series of tenuously connected previously published letters and articles." (p. 49) The point at which she considers my autobiography to "disintegrate" is precisely the point at which the collective black voice speaks. Prof. Ramsey ignores, therefore, essays reprinted in *All Is Well* on Jimi Hendrix, Lorraine Hansberry, Martin Luther King, Stokeley Carmichael, Jewish racism, the black liberation movement, Robert Hayden, and Malcolm X. Prof. Ramsey writes as if these essays are not also a part of my autobiography. But they are, which is why I fought my publisher to include them in the book. By refusing to acknowledge these essays as an integral part of the book, Prof. Ramsey can then conclude safely that I am "acutely individualistic."

Any serious attempt to analyze and discuss my life and work cannot dismiss a significant portion of that work as if it were not there, as if my work has not had an impact on black consciousness and thought for almost two decades. Prof. Ramsey can only reach her conclusion that I am "acutely individualistic" by excluding much of what I have written.

Perhaps the real difficulty many readers including Prof. Ramsey have with *All Is Well* is that I am not only "acutely individualistic," but passionately and ecstatically so. How, then, is this to be reconciled with the fact that I have also written in the black collective voice, whether it be in the tones of the story tellers of old, of our slave foreparents, the revolutionary, or the lyric poet?

The challenge *All Is Well* makes to the reader is that the reader is asked to confront the many facets of identity as they exist in one person. I am black, but blackness is not the totality of my identity. It is not even the core of my identity. And while Prof. Ramsey can maintain that I do "not have the freedom of defining" myself "completely outside the boundaries of race and its ramifications," I am here to say that I rejected such assaults on my soul as a child growing up in the South when I heard them from the KKK mentality and I reject such assaults from blacks

who may not realize what they're saying. I have the freedom to define myself as I think best (and after all, who's living my life?) and if I have to fight white *and* black America to retain that freedom, so be it. Blackness is not my identity but an aspect only, which I do not denigrate in racial self-hatred, or elevate in panegyrics of narcissistic racial self-love. To do either would be childish.

All Is Well is certainly the first autobiographical statement by a black mystic and this statement is the core of the book. That Prof. Ramsey can't accept this, perhaps, is of no concern. The mystical experience is as incomprehensible to the non-mystic as the black experience is to non-blacks. Prof. Ramsey writes that "the highly individual nature of his quest ignores his surrounding substantive reality—that of a black man living in Twentieth-century America." (p. 53) Quite the contrary. *All Is Well* is the story of a black man living with and mediating the tension between the racial reality and the mystic reality where always and forever, all is, indeed, quite well.

My struggle to live and write the truth of *my* life, and not the truth that my race would seek to have me live, will make it easier for black writers of future generations to create with integrity. To ask a black writer to do anything else is a disservice to black people.

To expect a black writer to do anything else is to be ignorant of what a writer's function is.