

Exotic Puppets

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Regarding the evocative power of certain words, the Creole who has spent time in France can readily testify. Should it come to be known or perceived that you are "exotic," you will arouse a lively interest, preposterous questions, the dreams and regrets of those who have never traveled: "Oh! The golden Islands! the marvelous lands! with their happy, naive, carefree natives!" In vain, you strive to destroy so many legends they hardly believe you: so much so that you reproach yourself for trying to destroy illusions profoundly anchored in the French mind and fallen from literature into the public domain.

As with Léon Werth, when he writes in *Danses, danseurs, et dancings*: "So it is that I perceived black woman. I am not sure that she wasn't already outfitted with a bookish poetry. Perhaps it is that she was first a literary Negress, a princess and sultana. The island novels and *A Thousand and One Nights*. But it is not my fault, if that flexible grace became a part of literature or rather if she became a kind of sexual poetry, innate in us."

Shall we have the courage to divest ourselves of the prestige the literature of exoticism confers upon us and, as modernists, to clash with the past, rococo decor of hammocks, palm trees, virgin forests, etc.

What a deception for him who evokes exotic princesses in your honor, if you were to tell him, just like a little French girl of the middle classes, that you are in Paris pursuing studies that you began over there, in the Tropics, in high school? No, the rights of the imagination cannot be prescribed, you resign yourself to usurping that role, to being someone who comes from those faraway lands where everything is vibrantly afire: air, hearts, bodies.

Nevertheless, it seems that the box full of exotic accessories has been overturned, or at least that someone else has succeeded that pontiff, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. It would be bad grace for us to complain about all the fuss made over Bernardin with his exotic and enchanting sites, full of idyllic creatures, the good savage, and the white man become innocent anew. Similarly, the great Romantic writers, Hugo, Lamartine, and Michelet, on the one hand; Mrs. Beecher Stowe, on the other, lay stress on the same point: for the needs of the humanitarian cause, the exotic character, in the occurrence the black slave, is adorned with every virtue—these writers engendered an abundant posterity.

Works like *L'Ulysse nègre* by Marius-Ary Leblond, a writer from Reunion Island; *The Nigger of the Narcissus* by Conrad; *Le Pot au noir* by Chadourne; [and] the tales of C. Farrère already seem to break with this tradition and claim to give a more truthful portrait of the colored man to sedentary and sentimental metropolitans.

But Josephine came, Josephine Baker you understand, and bored a hole through the painted backdrop associated with Bernardin. Here it is that a woman of color leaps onstage with her shellacked hair and sparkling smile. She is certainly still dressed in feathers and banana leaves, but she brings to Parisians the latest Broadway products (the Charleston, jazz, etc.). The transition between past and present, the soldering between virgin forest and modernism, is what American blacks have accomplished and rendered tangible.

And the blasé artists and snobs find in them what they seek: the savourous, spicy contrast of primitive beings in an ultramodern frame of African frenzy unfurled in the cubist decor of a nightclub. This explains the unprecedented vogue and the swell of enthusiasm generated by a little *capresse* who was begging on the sidewalks of St. Louis (Mississippi).¹

For she and her friends (Joe Alex, Douglas Johnny, Hudgins), in the course of entertaining the Parisian public, offer new and truculent images for the avant-garde writers. In hearing their sweet and raucous melodies in concert, in the music hall, on records, these writers reconstitute a strange atmosphere where one still hears something reminiscent of the wailing of poor slaves with an aftertaste of naïveté and now and then savagery. Thus, in modern, exotic literature, the poetic imagination loses none of its prerogatives, even when it no longer awards the prize for excellence to good "Uncle Toms."

So, after the grenadine syrup of Bernardin and Beecher Stowe, here

are the hard liquor and cocktails of Soupault, of Carl Van Vechten: Cover your face, Uncle Tom, up there; here is your grandson Edgar Manning, the hero of Soupault's novel, free and let loose in a civilization whose vices alone he has imitated; a jazz-band Negro, he leads an existence as nocturnal as it is sleazy, takes drugs, kills a woman. That's Soupault's Negro. These same character types and vices are found in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, but in the New York world of billionaire blacks. The femme fatale represented there has nothing to do with the Romantic portrait of the black woman in Michelet. These writers have led the way; no doubt the Morands and company will fall into step. . . .

But, you tell me, what does this existence, which, it is true, is colorful, bustling, and intoxicating, have in common with our own, with its tranquil grace and slow dances, except the decor? Let the black Creoles not be surprised, since a new pontiff there is, to be so devoured by reporters and writers in a rush to generalize. Wait a little longer, and maybe they will be genuflecting before Claude Farrère.

Shall we pronounce ourselves for one or the other of these two pontiffs? With which sauce do we want to be eaten: the idealist sauce or the realist one? Here is the right answer—the American novelists of color, dismissing their portrayals, have put themselves to the task. We will one day see whether they have fared better.

We shall no longer go to the woods; the laurel trees have been cut down, the beautiful lady there has picked them all up. And, just like in the song, Paul Morand, having destroyed all the false ideas and illusions of the French when it comes to the subject of blacks, presents them with the revised and corrected stereotype of the "New Negro," as it has been represented to them from 1930 to 19 [sic] . . .

In a series of novellas, he presents in the following order (for he traveled over 50,000 kilometers and to 28 Negro countries): the Antillean black under the characteristics of the Haitian Occide, the black Czar who succeeds in delivering his country from the American yoke only to turn it into a soviet republic and bring back the Americans; the American Negro, represented by the dancing girl, Congo; a jazz musician; black leaders Octavius Bloom and Doctor Lincoln Vamp; and the mulatto multimillionaire Ms. Pamela Freedman; and finally, the African Negro into sorcery, fetishism, and cannibalism.

You will note that he is careful not to confuse these different stereo-

types; he uses them only to show, invariably, at the end of each of his novellas, the power of Negro atavism. Whatever he be, black or almost white, well-schooled or illiterate, French, American, or in a state of savagery, in short, civilized in appearance, the Negro, if the occasion permits, will return to his instincts of superstition and magic.

I'm proposing this stereotype for your reflections. I leave to others the task of getting indignant about these various caricatures of blacks. I will simply note that this latter stereotype of Negroes, for those who have lived in France the last few years, was already latent in certain minds, in a certain milieu. Paul Morand did not invent it out of the blue—a few sharp observations bear this out. If the sociological works of Lévy-Bruhl, as he himself indicates, were his sources for the American Negro; if as I believe, he made extensive use of the *The New Negro* by Alain Locke (a man of color) to represent the American black, who gave him the stereotype for the black Antillean? Undoubtedly the Blomet Ball, analogous to our casinos, or worse—his stopovers of a few hours in the Antilles—perhaps some “quimboiseurs”—and literary stereotypes, like that of the dangerous mulatto. But above all—and I'm finally lighting my lantern—all the trouble comes from the fact that the vogue for Negroes these last few years has led to their being considered as folk destined to serve as amusement, to see to the pleasure, artistic or sensual, of whites (and in this regard Paul Morand gives just praise of Negro plasticity); but when it is a question of intellectual, or moral, qualities, when it is a question of no longer being their clown but their equal, that disturbs nature's plan and the viewpoints of providence. Thus, for aesthetic pleasure, Paul Morand and his consorts rely on or return to the state of nature, like Ms. Pamela Freedman. She has had enough of being a phony white woman? Why take pride in a borrowed progress? Having thought about this, she returns to the state of savagery.

Such is, then, the psychology of the Negro as depicted by the white, but what interests Paul Morand he himself tells us in an issue of *Candide*—July 12, 1928 (“The Age of the Negro,” by P. Morand). “The Negro is our shadow,” he writes again in his novel (page 206). This time I hope you will let out a sigh of relief. We have here not the portrait of the Negro, but that of the postwar European assimilated to the Negro, for which he feels shame: “Our era is a Negro era. Just think of the general slackness, the distaste of young people for hard work, the nudity,

equality, fraternity, clay houses that last three years, public lovemaking, divorces, publicity, etc.” (page 206).

Having made this clarification, may we not allow ourselves to praise the expository qualities and the clarity of P. Morand's style, a style that contains, moreover, such modern, original and fresh images, the backbones of the palm trees docile before the breeze smeared with moonlight—"Eighteen-carat stars" (p. 20). We even smile upon reading certain sentences where we see, indeed: "French, born sly." He notes the frequency of imperfect subjunctives, the absence of *a*'s from our speech—the coffee-and-cream anarchists of Chicago—or, again, "a face the color of stout foam," etc., and other gracious expressions: "Before-hand, Pamela was in the habit of saying like the others: 'Those awful blacks.'" He also notes how certain men of color can pass for being South American.

In short, after these amenities, we need to look really close to see, as if with regrets—it's no longer in fashion to be humanitarian, is it?—[that] a vague sympathy for blacks peeks through in sentences like the following: "the exploited, enslaved, beaten, martyred race who did not deserve its fate and who can hope for happiness only in the afterlife" (page 102). Or, again, despite its impassive tone, the following parenthetical utterance: "(Paris, the friend of Negroes, is not the Paris in Texas)," or this one: "[T]he aunt . . . recalled the South (United States) and its lynching trees" (page 158). Or the first chapters of the novella "Goodbye New York" (pages 209 and 211), where he strips bare the hypocrisy of Americans struggling with their racial prejudices. These pages must be kept in mind, stamped as they are with a very Latin frankness and humanity, if we are not to conclude, too quickly perhaps upon reading the novellas "Excelsior" and "Charleston," that everything gets Americanized. Paul Morand takes a real pleasure in being the door-to-door salesman in France of American prejudices.

"Before 1914," writes Paul Morand, "a black person was something laughable and exotic." Now, from the point of view of plasticity, he has made us come out ahead. The European admires him in the same way as a beautiful animal, with which he shares, like Congo the dancer (alias Josephine Baker), its suppleness, joy, and "immediately transmitted vital energy" (page 81). The conquest of the artist thus complete, it now remains for the European to do the same to the middle class, to the intellectuals. For that, we await some European to attribute certain, more

inner qualities to the "literary" Negro, unless somewhere there already exists a painting of the Negro "seen from within," which would allow him to enter into the human community.

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