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## **Albert Murray vs. the Lachrymose Conception of Afro-American History**

by Warren Zev Harvey

In his 1973 classic study *The Hero and the Blues*, Albert Murray argues against a view popular among social scientists and cultural historians:

[W]hat makes a blues idiom musician is not the ability to express *raw* emotion with primitive directness...but rather the mastery of elements of esthetics peculiar to U.S. Negro music. Blues musicians do not derive directly from the personal, social, and political circumstances of their lives as black

people in the United States. They derive most directly from styles of other musicians who play the blues...

... U.S. Negro singers...are influenced far more...by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong...and by the sonorities of various down-home church rituals than by any actual personal experience of racial oppression, no matter how traumatic. Indeed, what is most characteristic of the black American life style is infinitely more closely related to...African-derived dance and work rhythms and to the rich variety of music which Afro-Americans have heard in the United States than to any collective reaction to the experiences of slavery and segregation as such (Murray 1973, 83-84).

The blues idiom, Murray insists, is not, as many think, the raw emotion of hapless victims, but it is the stylized music of bold creative artists who belong to an old and rich Afro-American tradition of song and dance. Following André Malraux, he explains that art is not "the raw material of human experience," but "style," which "involves an interaction with other works of art." And the blues idiom is art at its best (65).

### **Art is Heroic**

A main argument in Murray's *The Hero and the Blues* concerns the primordial connection between art and heroism. Art, Murray theorizes, begins with "the song and dance ritual or *molpê*," and both the plastic and the literary arts are in some sense creative extensions of that ritual. "The storyteller is...a maker of *molpês*," "a mythmaker," and "a value maker." Literature, more than science or philosophy, shapes values, defines the existential conflict, describes "the elements of destruction," and "identifies the hero," that is, the "good man," the "adequate man." The blues idiom is, like fiction, a storytelling art. Moreover, Murray continues, storytelling is itself heroic. The storyteller's "dedication to the art of fiction" constitutes a "commitment to human well-being and self-realization," and self-realization means heroism; and what is true of the fiction writers, like Shakespeare, Thomas Mann, or Hemingway, is also true of the blues artists, like Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, or Duke Ellington (11, 21, 25, 44, 95-96).

Murray's teaching about the heroic nature of art has a pedagogical dimension. "The writer who creates stories...which embody the essential nature of human existence...not only describes the circumstances...but also suggests commitments and endeavors which he assumes will contribute most to man's immediate welfare as well as to his ultimate fulfillment as a human being" (p. 10). This heroic commitment to the welfare and ultimate fulfillment of human beings is, according to Murray, characteristic of all art, and is especially true of the blues idiom.

Art is thus heroic and empowering. It is the opposite of victimization. The artist, Murray emphasizes, does not seek philanthropy or pity. He or she creates out of strength. When confronted with "the American-born dragon" of "anti-black racism,"

the artist aims to slay it with the sword, not tame it, appease it, or gain its sympathy. The artist is "a giant killer," not "a cause in need of benefactors" (p. 49). Murray controversially criticized black political writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Eldridge Cleaver for what he considered to be their naïve "Marxist-Freudian" belief that the dragon could be domesticated or "converted." Instead of heroically killing the dragon, they plead with him: "Shame on you, Sir Dragon... Be nice... Have mercy, Massa!" (45-46; cf. 93-97).

Murray denied that American culture is white. America, he preached, is *mulatto*. Blacks are no less American than whites, and the blues idiom is quintessential *American* art. It reflects the "rugged individual endurance" characteristic of "the old American frontier tradition" (106). Furthermore, it is not only quintessential American art, but also quintessential *human* art. "When [Duke] Ellington creates blues-extension concertos in which the solo instrument states, asserts, alleges, quests, requests, or...implies, while the trumpets...mock [or] concur, as the 'woodwinds' moan or groan in the agony and ecstasy of sensual ambivalence, and the trombones chant concurrence or signify misgivings [or] suspicions (bawdy [or] plaintive), with the rhythm section...affirming..., he is stylizing his sense of the actual texture of all human existence...in all places throughout the ages" (86). Murray concludes *The Hero and the Blues* with the following provocative paragraph: "[P]erhaps above all else the blues-oriented hero image represents the American embodiment of the man whose concept of being able to live happily ever afterwards is most consistent with the moral of all dragon encounters: *Improvisation is the ultimate human (i.e., heroic) endowment.*" The improvising storyteller or blues musician knows how "to perform with grace under pressure," that is, "to swing" -- and to turn the terrifying encounter with the evil dragon into "adventure and romance" and, yes, victory (107). The paradigm of such a blues artist is the biblical Joseph, "the riff-style improviser," who even when enslaved saw himself as a prince, and by virtue of his own skillful resourcefulness transferred himself, as it were, "from cotton patch to capital-city" (61-62).

In short, the blues idiom created by American Blacks is not primarily the result of enslavement and persecution. It is not the pitiful cry of the disadvantaged, the downtrodden, and the unprivileged. On the contrary, it is the result of a robust and glorious Afro-American artistic tradition that is both profoundly American and universal in which blues idiom musicians transmit and stylize a heroic sense of life.

### **The Lachrymose Conception**

When I read Albert Murray's *Hero and the Blues*, I immediately thought of Salo Wittmayer Baron's critique of "the lachrymose conception of Jewish history." The famed professor of Jewish History at Columbia University wrote in his groundbreaking 1928 essay, "Ghetto and Emancipation": "It is time to break with the lachrymose theory of [Jewish] woe, and to adopt a view more in accord with historic truth" (Baron 1928, 526). He forcefully rejected as untrue the dominant view among scholars which saw Jewish history as nothing but a bleak succession of miseries,

persecutions, and pogroms. "Suffering," admitted Baron, is certainly a "part of the destiny" of the Jews, but so is joy and creativity (Baron 1937, 40). Writing in 1963, two decades after the Holocaust, Baron reaffirmed his critique: "All my life I have been struggling against the hitherto dominant 'lachrymose conception of Jewish history'...because I have felt that...it distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution and, at the same time, served badly" present-day Jews (Baron 1963, 240). Baron makes clear that he has two different motivations in his critique of the lachrymose conception of Jewish history: first, it is historically untrue; but second, it "serves badly" present-day Jews, that is, it is pedagogically wrong. If I understand Baron's pedagogic motivation correctly, it is that a tradition that defines its members in terms of victimhood inculcates in them a victim mentality, while one that defines its members in terms of heroism inculcates in them a heroic mentality. With regard to the millions of Jews murdered in the Holocaust, Baron cited the heroism found in passive resistance and in religious martyrdom, but also pointed to the heroic armed resistance of Jewish fighters, for example, the rebels of the Warsaw Ghetto. These different forms of heroism, he held, have educational significance for Jews today (239-240). Baron, who developed his critique of the lachrymose conception of Jewish history in 1928, did not retract it after the Holocaust.

Jewish historians have keenly debated Baron's critique of the "lachrymose conception of Jewish history." Supporters say Jewish history is on the whole more joyful than tearful, while critics say it is more tearful than joyful. But how can a historian quantify tearfulness? What can the historian say, for example, about the Jewish experience in medieval Spain? Does one give more weight to the immortal poets, philosophers, jurists, and mystics who flourished in Iberia, or to the bloody riots of 1391 and the Expulsion of 1492? Historians are free to focus on what they see fit. However, the Jewish collective memory, as embodied in Jewish culture, scarcely recalls the riots and the Expulsion, but delights every day in the songs, thoughts, and visions of Solomon ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi, Abraham ibn Ezra, Moses Maimonides, and the authors of the *Zohar*.

### **The Pedagogical Challenge**

Baron was concerned with the question of memory. Individuals or peoples are what they are by virtue of what they remember. At the Passover *seder*, as in Afro-American spiritual hymns, the focus is not on remembering the enslavement in Egypt but on remembering the liberation from it. The Jew is commanded on Passover to "tell of the *going out* from Egypt," not of the sufferings there; and similarly the Afro-American poet sings: "Go down, Moses... / Tell old Pharaoh / *Let my people go!*"

Jewish educators are confronted with the difficult problem of how to teach the Holocaust to young Jews in schools. On the one hand, it must be taught thoroughly and forthrightly. On the other hand, an overemphasis on it could instill a victim mentality among young Jews. Preoccupation with one's victimhood disempowers and paralyzes. It has been observed that Holocaust survivors often maintained a

strict silence about their horrific experiences for many years, when they devoted themselves heroically to rebuilding their lives and rearing children. If you concentrate on your lachrymose past, you risk imposing upon yourself and your family a lachrymose present and future.

Afro-American educators are confronted with a similar problem concerning the question of how to teach young Blacks about American slavery. On the one hand it must be taught thoroughly and forthrightly. On the other hand, an overemphasis on it could instill a victim mentality among young Blacks, which has detrimental effects. Murray's brilliant analysis of "the Hero and the Blues" may be understood as a staunch rejection of the lachrymose theory of Afro-American history.

I have no doubt whatsoever that both Baron and Murray believed in the historical truth of their theses: Jewish history is in fact not predominantly lachrymose and the history of the blues idiom is in fact not directly the result of Afro-American enslavement and oppression. However, I suspect that both scholars were ultimately concerned more with the pedagogical question: what narratives about our history disempower our youth and which ones empower them? Do we seek to promote self-pity or self-reliance? Are we victims or heroes? Here Jewish and Afro-American educators face similar challenges.

Albert Murray's *The Hero and the Blues* is a hard-hitting and insightful little book about art and the blues idiom, but it is also a critique of lachrymosity and a guidebook for heroes.

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