A Fantasia on Black Suffering

FLIGHT TO CANADA. By Ishmael Reed. Random House. 192 pp. $6.95.

EDMUND WHITE

Flight to Canada is, of all things, a comic exploration of slavery by the best black writer around. The novel is genuinely funny, for Reed has not rendered faithfully the horrors of servitude but rather created a grotesque Civil War America out of scraps and snippets of the past, the present and the mythic. In the process he has put together a brilliant montage of scenes, potent with feeling and thought, designed to flash on the mind's eye with the brilliance of stained-glass windows in a dark interior. The book is memorable, original and wonderfully entertaining.

The main character, Raven Quickskill, is a slave who runs away from his master, Arthur Swille, hides out in Emancipation City and finally, after the war has ended, makes it over the border into Canada. Until his former owner is dead and buried, Quickskill must remain a fugitive, since Swille has resolved to capture him come what may. Throughout the tale the narration alternates between scenes back at the plantation in Virginia and scenes of Quickskill's precarious freedom.

Reed blends the attitudes and trappings of the past century with those of today. Escaped slaves travel courtesy of Greyhound or Air Canada. Swille's bondmen loll on waterbeds and watch color television in the luxury of the Frederick Douglass Houses. When Lincoln is shot, the event is served up to viewers again and again through instant replay on television. Lincoln himself is a hypocritical and befuddled Nixon, a racist who thinks of emancipation as a ploy, and Swille is a power-mad Rockefeller whose son is killed by an alligator (or an avenging alligator deity) in Africa. This historical mélangé could easily have turned tediously allegorical, but Reed never allows the parallels between the past and the present to become complete, nor does he permit the contemporary references to sap the vitality of his story.

When the double perspective is used to look at slavery, the vision becomes rich and nuanced. In his earlier novel, the careless, sexist, didactic The Last Days of Louisiana Red, one character attributes the evils of modern black society to the ordeal of slavery. "I'm afraid it's going to be a long time before we get over that nightmare which left such scars in our soul—scars that no amount of band aids or sutures, no amount of stitches will heal." But in Flight to Canada the nightmare is plowed. Quickskill, invited to Lincoln's White House reception for artists and intellectuals after publishing a poem, becomes dizzy and rests in the Lincoln bedroom. There he perceives himself as truly a slave, as property, an inanimate thing: "It puts the glass back on the rosewood rococo-revival table. It is lying in the bed that matches the table. It feels better. . . . " At another point two of Swille's agents attempt to recapture Quickskill. The language Reed introduces is that of modern commerce ("Put a claim check on me just like I was somebody's will-call or something"). As one of the agents tells Raven, "Your lease on yourself has come to an end. You are overdue."

Later, when Quickskill has become an antislavery lecturer, he is heckled by other former slaves: "Slaves held each other in bondage; a hostile stare from one slave criticizing the behavior of another slave could be just as painful as a spiked collar—a gesture as fettering as a cage." The funniest and most ghastly updating of slavery occurs when servitude is paired with sadomasochism. Gladstone, a whip fetishist, comes out in Parliament in favor of the Confederacy because he considers Virginia to be the "Canada" of beleaguered sadomasochists; one escaped slave, Leechfield, makes his living in the North by running ads as a hustler: "I'll Be Your Slave For One Day. Humiliate Me. Scorn Me."

So dynamic is Reed's meditation on slavery that it extends even to Quickskill's musings about literature: "He was
so much against slavery that he had begun to include prose and poetry in the same book, so that there would be no arbitrary boundaries between them."

The most vivacious scenes in the book take place on "Massa" Swille's plantation. Reed's wit rises to dazzling heights and outrageous depths as he shows the confrontation between Swille and Abraham Lincoln. The President has come, hat in hand, to beg Swille for money with which to finance the Civil War. And in a fit of pique with Lee, Swille gives it to him, preserving as he does so his notion that his plantation is an independent duchy, not a part of either the Union or the Confederacy. But Swille does not oblige Lincoln until after he takes him to task for his shabby clothes and hickish personal style ("Go to the theatre. Get some culture"). Rising in defense of the Sable Genius of the South, Swille defends Jefferson Davis: "Davis' slaves are the only ones I know of who take mineral baths, and when hooded skirts became popular he gave some to the slave women, and when this made it awkward for them to move through the rows of cotton, he widened the rows." Swille gets in a few licks against Mrs. Lincoln as well: "She looks like a laundromat attendant. Old dowdy dough-faced thing. Queens accent. And why does she send those midnight telegrams to the Herald Tribune after drinking God knows what?"

The finest character Reed has ever created is the hair-raising Mammy Barracuda. She has so thoroughly identified herself with the oppressors of her race that after the war she entertains reunions of Confederate soldiers with rousing renditions of Dixie. By catering to the depraved tastes of Massa Swille for drugs and violence, the Mammy has won herself a cabinet full of jewels from Cartier's. She is not above laying it on thick with Lincoln and grabbing him by the waist, Waltzing him about and singing, "Hello, Abbbbbbe. Well, hello Abbbbbbe. It's so nice to have you here where you belong."

Barracuda becomes as intimidating a brute as Balzac's Asia when she takes Ms. Swille in hand (once again Reed has cleverly conflated periods by discovering "Ms."—the modern feminist's word and a perfect phonetic rendering of the deferential Southern pronunciation of "Mrs."). The mistress of the plantation, after attending Radcliffe and immersing herself in Harriet Beecher Stowe's writings, goes on a hunger strike against her husband's tyranny; Barracuda insults and terrorizes the poor woman back into being a Southern belle. Barracuda's tirade is a masterpiece of inventive: "Look like shit. On strike. I got your strike, you underbelly of a fifteen-pound gopher rat run ober by a car. Sleep with a dog, he let you. You goat-smelling virago, you gnawing piranha, worrying that man like that."

Reed is not caricaturing the South as it ever was but as it exists in the imagination of some Southern intellectuals and most Northern intellectuals—a land infatuated with death, sadism, Tennison and feudalism. In this home of putrescent flowers, languishing belles and blood-curdling screams, Reed's Barracuda and Uncle Robin (a supposed prototype of Uncle Tom) prevail. They end up inheriting most of the master's estate; as Uncle Robin observes in the closing pages: "Yeah, they get down on me an Tom. But who's the fool? Nat Turner or us? Nat said he was going to do this. Was going to do that. Said he had a mission. Said his destiny was a divine one. . . . Now Nat's dead and gone for these many years, and here I am master of a dead man's house. Which one is the fool?"

Mammy Barracuda and Uncle Robin have run away from Reed if not from Massa Swille. In his earlier works Reed has preached that American blacks should reject Christianity and rationalism and return to African hoodoo and intuition. He finds women's liberation disrespectful of the patriarchal dignity of African society. And he treats the antisocial behavior of some modern blacks as a remnant of slavery or as parasitism, "Moochism," as he calls it. This odd collection of ideas fortunately finds little expression in Flight to Canada save in the exchanges between Quickskill and her Indian lover, Princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, which are the weakest moments in the book.

The attention and affection Reed lavishes on the unregenerate Massa Swille and the reactionary Mammy and Uncle must have alarmed the author as much as they confound and disquiet the reader. The virtuous Raven pales beside the plantation grotesques. Clever as his dialogue is, it cannot match the verbal energy of Uncle Robin's testimonial to Virginia: "I loves it here. Good something to eat when you wants it. Color TV. Milk fulla toddy. Some whiskey and a little nookie from time to time. We gets whipped with a velvet whip, and there's free dental care and always a fiddler case your feet get restless."

The acid merriment that boils under the Southern scenes thrills and disturbs us. How can we like these monsters? What moral sense can we make of a novel in which a fugitive slave ends up a whore and an Uncle Tom inherits a fortune (even if he has to forge his master's will to do so)? Reed's fantasia on the classic themes of black suffering is a virtuoso performance. His endless list of names for blacks (cocos, sables, kinks, mahoganies, spooks, shiners, sbleezers, smokes, picka) is as funny and intolerable as a minstrel show. What troubles me is that Flight to Canada, the best work of black fiction since Invisible Man, both invites and outrages moral interpretation.

I'm not saying that Reed is endorsing
An Epiphany for Middle-Class Blacks

THE JUNIOR BACHELOR SOCIETY.

GIL MULLER

John A. Williams has been exploring the myths and realities of the black experience for more than two decades, and at the age of 50 he deserves a re-evaluation. Over the years he has served as the major chronicler in fiction of the black American middle class, and specifically of individuals who, because of their mobility, are invariably at pains to discover their true country. In The Junior Bachelor Society, Williams offers us a contemporary Vanity Fair, a novel ostensibly without a hero, a panorama of black America today. The novel is nothing short of epic, and its strengths suggest Williams’s deserved stature as a major American writer.

Williams is essentially the only novelist who has attempted to investigate how all of black America fits into the national jigsaw puzzle. He covers a broad spectrum in his fiction (for example, Captain Blackman moves kaleidoscopically from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam), and he has tended increasingly in recent years to concentrate on black professionals—on people who have made it into the mainstream. The characters in Williams’s novels refuse to be ghettoized. This is not to say that they escape their troubles in their odysseys toward social respectability. In fact, because of their quest for professional acceptance, they frequently submit to cataclysmic events that destroy them.

But recently Williams has been withholding the hecatomb that readers have come to expect of his endings, although the violence, or potential for it, is still there. In The Junior Bachelor Society, nine men in their early 50s (they are obviously very close to Williams, perhaps even avatars of him) attend a reunion honoring their high school coach, Charles “Chappie” Davis. Some—like Bubbles Wiggins, who works in a foundry, and Kenneth “Saake” Dumpson, who has become a housing commissioner—have never left Central City, an upstate New York locale patterned on Syracuse. Others have crossed the continent and the globe, ascending professional scales as academicians, playwrights, journalists, concert singers. No one has met with unadulterated success. Only one, Walter “Moon” Porter, a Los Angeles pimp, has retained the moves, the old survival skills, and seems capable of forging a new life for himself. Moon, the most thoroughly professional of these varied and exquisitely wrought men, knows how to manipulate America’s deep-seated penchant for violence. Uninvited to the reunion, he arrives offering the Bachelors an epiphany, and something they had forgotten.

These men and their wives, converging on Central City for the reunion after having been separated for more than thirty years, are survivors. Williams persistently equates the men with the famous black athletes of an earlier generation who, like them, had sought deliverance through success in sports. It is significant that a small nucleus of the JBS still continues to scrimp on weekends, searching now for deliverance from the absurdities of age, from the reality of bodies and lives winding down. Disciplined by sport, they are still professionals—a fact that Williams telegraphs to the reader in a remarkable first chapter describing the pride with which Bubbles Wiggins handles his foundry job.

Williams is a realist at heart, much in the vein of the 19th-century artist Millet, whose “The Sower” served as a major motif in the author’s last novel, Mother-Sill and the Foxes (1973). He also shares with the great 19th-century realists an ability to handle large, complex structures with deceptive ease. Starting with Bubbles, he introduces the other

PILE OF FEATHERS

This time there was no beak,
no little bloody head, no bony
claw, no loose wing—only a small
pile of feathers without substance or center.

Our cats dig through the leaves, they
stare at each other in surprise,
they look carefully over their shoulders,
they touch the same feathers over and over.

They have been totally cheated of the body.
The body with its veins and its fat
and its red bones has escaped them.
Like weak giants
they try to turn elsewhere.
Like Americans on the Ganges,
their long legs twisted in embarrassment,
their knees scraping the stones,
they begin crawling after the spirit.

Gerald Stern
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