Black Literature Revisited: “Sonny’s Blues”

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BARBARA Dodds Stanford (English Journal, March 1969) calls black literature “a godsend to the teacher who wants his class to deal with genuine communication problems...” Citing among others, two Baldwin classics: Notes of a Native Son and Go Tell It on the Mountain, she mentions that in such works “it is a relief to recognize our own struggle to find ourselves,” and she further intimates that students can relate to “young people struggling to assert their own independence and identity. . . .” A work which she fails to list, a story which is often lost among Baldwin’s writings, is “Sonny’s Blues.” This work is particularly relevant, not only because it concerns itself with problems facing many in this era of disintegrating family bonds and uncertain norms, but also because it affords an opportunity to elicit the type of “affective” response which Mrs. Stanford justly considers important. In it Baldwin deals with the question of prejudice and stereotypes; with an attempt to bridge a modern cliché—the generation gap; with an ascent from drugs to something more real and more lasting; and with a search for self-identity that is every man’s. In lieu of such pertinent content, one needs to take a more careful look.

Close perusal of “Sonny’s Blues” reveals that while it is ostensibly about Sonny—his descent to the underworld through drugs and his resurrection through jazz—Baldwin’s deeper concern is with the narrator, the respectable schoolteacher, the “white” Negro, Sonny’s big brother. The author shows that the nameless “I” of his story, though older, is not wiser, and he uses both Sonny and his music as tools to help the narrator reconcile himself to his racial heritage.

Reading the newspaper account about his brother, the narrator says that he is “scared” for Sonny, but his next words belie his statement. “I couldn’t believe it. . . . I couldn’t find any room for it anywhere inside me.” It is not Sonny but he himself he fears for, for, if he re-establishes contact with Sonny, he is faced with a condition of dissonance: his carefully ordered middle class existence cannot acknowledge a drug addict brother, yet somehow he feels vaguely “responsible.” Baldwin mentions that this deliberation was carrying the narrator “someplace he didn’t want to go,” and he intimates that the “someplace” is a past which Sonny’s brother has rejected and tried to escape by leaving Harlem and accepting the bourgeois values of the
white community. But when Sonny returns and they ride together through the park, the past that the narrator has exiled to the periphery of his consciousness intrudes upon him in the person of the young boys that he sees playing, and he finds himself "seeking...that part of himself which had been left behind."

RETURNING to the house, he again senses the impending danger that self knowledge brings, and Baldwin has him reiterate his avowed purpose: "I was trying to find something out about my brother." What the author leaves unsaid is that he is also searching for a lost part of himself. When Sonny's brother loses himself in reminiscence, Baldwin, in a classic dialog of non-communication, reveals the true relationship that exists between the brothers.

Upon being questioned, Sonny admits that he wants to be a musician, but the narrator feels that it's not right for his brother; he feels that it is beneath him, perhaps because it is too close to the white stereotype of the Rhythm 'n Blues Blackman. He dismisses Sonny's ambition as a stage that "kids go through," and when things don't go exactly his way he gives up. But Sonny, although young, is mature enough to realize that "things take time," and he sees the distinction between a job done for money and a chosen vocation. He can make a living anywhere, but being a musician is "the only thing" he wants to do. And when his brother pleads for him to "be reasonable," Baldwin hints what he really means is: See things my way or not at all. Sonny justly accuses him, "I hear you. But you never hear anything I say," and his accusation holds, for the narrator, in closing himself to the sights and sounds of the ghetto, has even deafened himself to his brother's voice.

When Sonny returns from the army, his brother yet is "unwilling to see that he is a man," and, still clinging to his middle class standards, he treats Sonny's music as only "an excuse for the life he led." It is not until his own personal suffering that he can begin to understand his brother's anguish or experience. Baldwin uses suffering as a bond and as an impetus to communication. He has the narrator make his first honest attempt to listen when Sonny explains his use of drugs: "Something inside me told me that I should hold my tongue." The author shows that at last he is beginning to realize the proportions of the barrier that he has erected: "I had held silence—so long!—when he had needed human speech to help him." But he is still struggling; he finds it difficult to accept even suffering that is not done on his own terms. "You're just hung up on the way some people try—it's not your way!" Sonny calls his bluff as he had done as a teenager, and his brother reluctantly agrees to meet him on his own ground.

At the nightclub, in Sonny's world, the narrator states that the music "hit something in me." It evokes an image of his collective past, and he sees that the tale of a people's joys and sorrows "must always be heard," for "it's the only light we've got in all this darkness." If he rejects the past of his race, there is nothing to sustain him. He hears Sonny's blues and senses that freedom that comes in acknowledging one's origins: "I understood...he could help us free if we would listen." He does listen and the music evokes memories; it gives him back a personal history that no longer needs to be repressed, a history that now could "live forever."

Though he is realistic enough to see it as "only a moment," though the world outside is still threatening, nevertheless, the music has penetrated his cultural deafness. Through contact with Sonny and his music Baldwin has brought the narrator to a gradual enlightenment and shown that in accepting Sonny's blues he has made them, in part at least, his own.