

# The Source of Self-Regard

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Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations

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## The Writer Before the Page

I ONCE KNEW a woman named Hannah Peace. I say “knew,” but nothing could be less accurate. I was perhaps four years old when she was in the town where I lived. I don’t know where (or even if) she is now or to whom she was related then. She was not even a visiting friend. And I couldn’t to this day describe her in a way that would make her known in a photograph, nor would I recognize her if she walked into this room. But I have a memory of her and it’s like this: the color of her skin—the matte quality of it. Something purple around her. Also eyes not completely open. There emanated from her an aloofness that seemed to me kindly disposed. But most of all I remember her name—or the way people pronounced it. Never Hannah or Miss Peace. Always Hannah Peace—and more. Something hidden—some awe perhaps, but certainly some forgiveness. When they pronounced her name, they (the women and the men) forgave her something.

That’s not much, I know: half-closed eyes, an absence of hostility, skin powdered in lilac dust. But it was more than enough to evoke a character—in fact any more detail would have prevented (for me) the emergence of a fictional character at all. What is useful—definitive—is the galaxy of emotion that accompanied the woman as I pursued my memory of her, not the woman herself.

In the example I have given of Hannah Peace it was the having-been-easily-forgiven that caught my attention, and that quality, that “easily forgiveness” that I believe I remembered in connection with a shadow of a woman my mother knew, is the theme of *Sula*. The women forgive each other—or learn to. Once that piece of the constellation became apparent, it dominated the other pieces. The next step was to discover what there is to be forgiven among women. Such things must now be raised and invented

because I am going to tell about feminine forgiveness in story form. The things to be forgiven are grave errors and violent misdemeanors, but the point was less the thing to be forgiven than the nature and quality of forgiveness among women—which is to say friendship among women. What one puts up with in a friendship is determined by the emotional value of the relationship. But *Sula* is not (simply) about friendship between women but between black women, a qualifying term the artistic responsibilities of which are what goes on before I ever approach the page. Before the act of writing, before the clean yellow legal pad or the white bond are the principles that inform the idea of writing. I will touch upon them in a moment.

What I want my fiction to do is to urge the reader into active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text. And to refuse him makes it difficult for him (the reader) to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data. When one looks at a very good painting, the experience of looking is deeper than the data accumulated in viewing it. The same, I think, is true in listening to good music. Just as the literary value of a painting or a musical composition is limited, so too is the literary value of literature limited. I sometimes think how glorious it must have been to have written drama in sixteenth-century England, or poetry in Greece before Christ, or religious narrative in 1000 AD, when literature was need and did not have a critical history to constrain or diminish the writer's imagination. How magnificent not to have to depend on the reader's literary associations—his literary experience—which can be as much an impoverishment of the reader's imagination as it is of a writer's. It is important that what I write not be merely literary. I am most self-conscious about in my work being overcareful in making sure that I don't strike literary postures. I avoid, too studiously perhaps, name-dropping, lists, literary references, unless oblique and based on written folklore. The choice of a tale or of folklore in my work is tailored to the character's thoughts or actions in a way that flags him or her and provides irony, sometimes humor.

Milkman, about to meet the oldest black woman in the world, the mother of mothers who has spent her life caring for helpless others, enters her house thinking of a European tale, "Hansel and Gretel," a story about parents who abandoned their own children to a forest and a witch who made

a diet of them. His confusion at that point, his racial and cultural ignorance and confusion, is flagged. Equally marked is Hagar's bed being described as Goldilocks's choice. Partly because of Hagar's preoccupation with hair, and partly because, like Goldilocks, a housebreaker if ever there was one, she is greedy for things, unmindful of property rights or other people's space, and Hagar is emotionally selfish as well as confused.

This deliberate avoidance of literary references has become a firm if boring habit with me, not only because it leads to poses, not only because I refuse the credentials it bestows, but also because it is inappropriate to the kind of literature I wish to write, the aims of that literature, and the discipline of the specific culture that interests me. (Emphasis on *me*.) Literary references in the hands of writers I love can be extremely revealing, but they can also supply a comfort I don't want the reader to have because I want him to respond on the same plane an illiterate or preliterate reader would have to. I want to subvert his traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination.

My beginnings as a novelist were very much focused on creating this discomfort and unease in order to insist that the reader rely on another body of knowledge. However weak those beginnings were in 1965, they nevertheless pointed me toward the process that engages me in 1982: trusting memory and culling from it theme and structure. In *The Bluest Eye* the recollection of what I felt and saw upon hearing a child my own age say she prayed for blue eyes provided the first piece. I then tried to distinguish between a piece and a part (in the way that a piece of a human body is different from a part of a human body).

As I began developing parts out of pieces, I found that I preferred them unconnected—to be related but not to touch—to circle, not line up, because the story of this prayer was the story of a shattered, fractured perception resulting from a shattered, splintered life. The novel turned out to be a composition of parts circling one another, like the galaxy accompanying memory. I fret the pieces and fragment aspect of memory because too often we want the whole thing. When we wake from a dream we want to remember all of it, although the fragment we are remembering may be—very probably is—the most important piece in the dream. Chapter and part

designations, as conventionally used in novels, were never very much help to me in writing. Nor are outlines. (I permit their use for the sake of the designer and for ease in talking about the book. They are usually identified at the last minute.)

There may be play and arbitrariness in the way memory surfaces but none in the way the composition is organized, especially when I hope to recreate play and arbitrariness in the way narrative events unfold. The form becomes the exact interpretation of the idea the story is meant to express. Nothing more traditional than that—but the sources of the images are not the traditional novelistic or readerly ones. The visual image of a splintered mirror, or the corridor of split mirrors in blue eyes, is the form as well as the context in *The Bluest Eye*.

Narrative is one of the ways in which knowledge is organized. I have always thought it was the most important way to transmit and receive knowledge. I am less certain of that now—but if the fact that the craving for narrative has never lessened it is any indication, the hunger for it is as keen as it was on Mount Sinai or Calvary or in the middle of the fens. (Even when novelists abandon or grow tired of it as an outmoded memetic form, historians, journalists, and performing artists take up the slack.) Still, narrative is not and never has been enough, just as the object drawn on a canvas or a cave wall is never simply mimetic.

My compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that he or she and I agree upon beforehand. I don't want to assume or exercise that kind of authority. I regard that as patronizing, although many people regard it as safe and reassuring. And because my *métier* is black, the artistic demands of black culture are such that I cannot patronize, control, or pontificate. In the third-world cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture. If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as “lore” or “gossip” or “magic” or “sentiment.”

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art

forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice that upholds tradition and communal values and that also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.

Working with those rules, the text, if it is to take improvisation and audience participation into account, cannot be the authority—it should be the map. It should make a way for the reader (audience) to participate in the tale. The language, if it is to permit criticism of both rebellion and tradition, must be both indicator and mask, and the tension between the two kinds of language is its release and its power. If my work is to be functional to the group (to the village, as it were) then it must bear witness and identify danger as well as possible havens from danger; it must identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out; and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them; it should not even attempt to solve social problems but it should certainly try to clarify them.

Before I try to illustrate some of these points by using *Tar Baby* as an example, let me hasten to say that there are eminent and powerful, intelligent, and gifted black writers who not only recognize Western literature as part of their own heritage but who have employed it to such an advantage that it illuminates both cultures. I neither object to nor am indifferent to their work or their views. I relish it, in precisely the way I relish a world of literature from other cultures. The question is not legitimacy or the “correctness” of a point of view, but the difference between my point of view and theirs. Nothing would be more hateful to me than a monolithic prescription for what black literature is or ought to be. I simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably black not because its characters were, or because I was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognized and verifiable principles of black art.

## TAR BABY

Recollecting the told story.

Refusing to read a modern or Westernized version of it.

Selecting out the pieces that were disturbing or simply memorable: fear, tar, the rabbit's outrage at a failing in traditional manners (the Tar Baby does not speak). Why the Tar Baby was formed, to what purpose, what was the farmer trying to protect, and why did he think the doll would be attractive to the rabbit (what did he know and what was his big mistake)? Why does the Tar Baby cooperate with the farmer, do the things the farmer wishes to protect, wish to be protected? What makes his job more important than the rabbit's, why does the farmer believe that a briar patch is sufficient punishment, what does the briar patch represent to the rabbit, to the Tar Baby, and to the farmer?

## CREATION

Putting the above pieces together in parts.

Concentrating on tar as a part. What is it and where does it come from; its holy uses and its profane uses, consideration of which leads to a guiding motif: ahistorical earth and historical earth. How that theme is translated into the structure.

1. Coming out of the sea (that which was there before earth) is both the beginning and the end of the book—in both of which Son emerges from the sea in a section that is not numbered as a chapter.
2. The earth that came out of the sea and its conquest by modern man; that conquest as viewed by fishermen and clouds. The pain it caused to the conquered life forms.
3. Movement from the earth into the household: its rooms, its quality of shelter. The activity for which the rooms were designed: eating, sleeping, bathing, leisure, etc.
4. The houses disrupted precisely as the earth was disrupted. The chaos of the earth duplicated in the house designed for order. The disruption is caused by the man born out of the womb of the sea accompanied by ammonia odors of birth.

5. The conflict that follows is between the ahistorical (the pristine) and the historical (or social) forces inherent in the uses of tar.
6. The conflict is, further, between two kinds of chaos: civilized chaos and natural chaos.
7. The revelation, then, is the revelation of secrets. Everybody with one or two exceptions has a secret: secrets of acts committed (as with Margaret and Son), and secrets of thoughts unspoken but driving nonetheless (as with Valerian and Jadine). And then the deepest and earliest secret of all: that just as we watch other life, other life watches us.

I apologize for using my own work as an illustration to those of you who may not be familiar with it. But had I chosen material from other writers, the possibility of its being unfamiliar would be equally as great.

My inability to consider the world in terms other than verbal means that I am not able to not think about writing. It is the “world coherent” for me. So I am perplexed by the dread and apprehension with which some writers regard the process. I am also bored by the type and space devoted to the death of fiction when the funeral is lasting longer than the life of the art itself; we can be safe in our assumption that the corpse is immortal. The “goodbye” is at least 110 years old.

What the fiction-obituary critics are responding to is the peril literature is in. Peril that can be categorized in three parts:

1. First is the suspicion (or fact—I am not sure which) that the best young minds are not being attracted to writing, that technology, postmodernist architecture, “new” music, film, etc., are much more demanding and exciting.
2. Second is the conviction (in the academy at any rate) that fiction as narrative is obsolete because it is dictatorial, bourgeois, and self-congratulatory in its attempt to maintain the status quo.
3. Third of the categories of peril is the growth requirement of publishers—the marketplace demands narrow the possibilities for new writers to find a publishing home.



There are, of course, some other perhaps more immediate perils (global stability, poverty, hunger, love, death), so it really is not a good time to write. To which observation one can only say: So what? When has it ever been a good time? Plague-ridden Britain for Chaucer? World War II for Eudora Welty? World War I for Virginia Woolf? South African brutality for Nadine Gordimer? The 94 percent slave population for Plato?

As writers, what we do is remember. And to remember this world is to create it. The writer's responsibility (whatever her or his time) is to change the world—improve his/her own time. Or, less ambitious, to help make sense of it. Simply in order to discover that it does make sense. Not *one* sense. What is the point of 2 billion people making *one* sense.

I am old enough to have seen the northern lights (1938?) and I remember that most shocking, most profound event in the sky over Lorain, Ohio. After that how could I be content with one simple color? Or a simple Hannah Peace?