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21W.730

Autobiographical Comparison

While reading through James Baldwin's *Autobiographical Notes*, I was struck with a sudden flash of inspiration. I already knew that I enjoyed Baldwin's works more than any others we have read in class so far: Rodriguez's writing I found to be dull and victimized; Jacobs's was precisely an explanation of how bad slaves lives were and nothing more; and although Virginia Woolf's writings were not painful to read the overall style left me feeling dreamy and disconcerted (after a while all those semicolons got to me). Baldwin's writing had not only content, but a reflection upon it that I found interesting to read. He offered a fresh perspective, analyzing the social history of America and its causes. It is very interesting to read the sections discussing the concept of fighting poison by using poison, and the section discussing the choice of amputation or gangrene. Rather than throw up his hands in despair and say, "Life's not fair that I must choose between amputation and gangrene," he analyzes the benefits and trade-offs. All this I knew before reading his *Autobiographical Notes*, but while I read them I was suddenly struck with a very powerful revelation. I realized that I liked his writings because I found in him the same philosophy I have adopted. I immediately wondered if there was a connection between our philosophies and the fact that we were both minorities. I'm curious as to how much of the similarities in our philosophies can be attributed to being minorities, and how many differences can be explained by the fact that

we are from two different minorities and those that can be explained by the fact that he wrote and lived generations removed from myself.

There are three main similarities between our philosophies that I would like to discuss, although the three are likely closely related. The first is that even bad situations contain their associated good. Baldwin writes that the things which hurt and the things which help cannot be divorced from each other. I am not sure how widely spread this idea is, but I certainly believe it. Since around the time I was in 3rd grade, I have believed that good can not exist without bad. Furthermore, I believe that the sum of one's life that he considers good and that which he considers bad will in the end come out equal. I also think that this belief leads into the second similarity I see in Baldwin and myself. Since life, all life, must have its share of highs and lows there is no point in complaining about it; that only leads to bothering other people. I see this in Baldwin when he qualifies the statement that might appear as if he were complaining: "One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer (and this is not special pleading, since I don't mean to suggest that he has it worse than anybody else) is that the Negro problem is written about so widely" (p. 5). Also, Baldwin refers to Hemingway in his penultimate paragraph of his *Autobiographical Notes*, when describing that Baldwin has no greater responsibility than to last and get his work done. I personally would refer to William Ernest Henley's *Invictus* ("My head is bloody, but unbowed"), but the overall sentiment is the same. It is possible that Baldwin's thoughts arise from the prejudice he has experienced first-hand. Perhaps he was forced to become stoic and to see the good parts in the bad because there were so many bad events. I do not believe that applies to me, but since I cannot evaluate my life objectively, I cannot fully determine whether or not it does.

The differences between our philosophies have not exhibited themselves through the short *Notes* that Baldwin writes. He writes that he hated and feared white people, he even writes that all American Negroes share these feelings towards white people. I, however, do not fear or hate white people as a whole. I believe that I am more open and less willing to ascribe to prejudices. Even though I may have some preconceived notions about different groups of people I feel as though I judge each individual more on who he is than on any group to which he belongs (whether it is willingly, or as Baldwin puts it accidentally). Another difference is that Baldwin feels that he is inherently separate from Western Civilization. He writes that the most crucial time in his own development came when he was forced to recognize that he was a “kind of bastard of the West.” He writes that when he followed the line of his past he did not find himself in Europe but in Africa, which meant in some subtle way, in a really profound way, he brought something different to the great works of European history, that he might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of himself. I’ve never really felt this way, and upon being introduced to this notion I do not believe it applies to myself. I suppose I have the “benefit” of tracing my ancestry back to France, although really that’s a single line, and just because my great-great-great-great-great grandfather came and settled in America doesn’t mean that my heritage is that of Europeans. Another possible difference is that I suppose my true ancestry can be traced back to Spain, which is more closely connected with European culture than Africa, but I’ve never really thought about my heritage, or ancestors. Instead, I’ve always just looked at the present; at the time when I was born, and at my ancestors whom I have actually known which were all centralized in the

American Southwest. It is possible that Baldwin, in being an African American, was forced to look back upon his history in a way that I have never had to.

I believe that our philosophies cannot have originated in our shared trait of being minorities. Hemingway, whom Baldwin quotes when discussing his philosophy, was definitely a product of American, and prior to that European, culture. I also believe that many of my beliefs have come about because of books I have read and the education I have received, both of which are undoubtedly more Western than unique to me or my ethnicity.

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