

A. ROBERT LEE

Black South, Black Europe: William Demby

He took the mirror down from the hall and held it so that when he stood in front of the full length mirror in the hall he could see himself from the back view. Then he held the mirror directly in front of the larger mirror and looked at the infinite number of reflections, one inside the other. I am one of those reflections, he thought, inside each one of them there is me and I go back and back and back so that there must be billions and billions of me.

*Beetlecreek*¹

Am I dreaming inside a dream?

*The Catacombs*²

"You're a very gifted writer, you know. But, as with so many of our older Black writers, there is a certain self-conscious apology for being a writer. . ."

*Love Story Black*³

"William Demby Has Not Left The Building" (Biggers 2004). The title of Jeff Biggers's profile written in 2004 for Denver's *Bloomsbury Review* offers an apt tease. For to say of Demby's published fiction that it has met with mixed critical fortune heads towards understatement with a twist. To be sure he has not wanted for selective high praise, the occasional strong review, honorable but passing mention in most African American literary critique. But quite as often he looks to have gone missing in action, the absentee in a span more drawn to the Black Arts efflorescence of the 1960s and to offering the greater plaudits, however deserved, to a Ralph Ellison or Toni Morrison. This does genuine disservice to Demby's slim but formidable body of authorship, blackness, albeit as he makes clear but the one mode of being among others, a human filtering unique in its own cross-ply of history, and to be met with across geo-cultural sites as distinct the one from the other as the American South of hill-town West Virginia, post-war Rome, and 1970s Manhattan with a reference-back into a 'down-

home' Dixie of black family, the Klan and ubiquitous Jim Crow. As each of the heading quotations indicates, it is also to underestimate Demby's awareness of his own art, his sense of not being pinioned to any one category, racial or otherwise.

Beetlecreek (1957) customarily is given the nod as vintage realist-naturalist writ, its West Virginia cul-de-sac township the mirror of an Afro-America hexed by both Dixie color-line and its own inward provincialism. *The Catacombs* (1965), with Rome as fulcrum, for the most part wins only niche readerships, subject and fashioning a case of the black postmodern text *avant la lettre*. *Love Story Black* (1978) may well lower a sly satiric eye on schools and magazine fads within black writing but its offbeat love-affair, with a dip into Africa alongside New York, also elicits the charge of whimsy, too oblique a wit. Taken, however, with the as yet unpublished novel *King Comus* – its compass, reportedly, the Congress of Vienna in 1815 as the remaking of Europe through to the race-inflected remaking of the international order as First and Third World, these novels can truly be said to map Demby's own Black Atlantic, a variorum of America, Europe, and then America again, in which US and allied black history assumes quite inerascable consequence.

To this end Demby brings to bear a curriculum vitae as apposite as it is singular, and exactly both American and European. First has to be his birth in Pittsburgh in 1922, his middle-class family's move across the state line to Clarksburg, West Virginia in 1941, study at West Virginia State College (where a young Margaret Walker was teaching and whose verse-sequence *For My People* appeared in 1942) and from which he frequently absconded to play jazz trumpet in South Carolina nightspots, and after a two-year stint in the American cavalry spent mainly in Italy his transfer to Fisk in Nashville, Tennessee, from which he graduated in liberal arts in 1944. In college he had also begun the story-writing carried over into his reportage and feature contributions to the army's *Stars and Stripes*.

Italy, to which he returned in 1947, yields his other life, one of ready and longstanding expatriation. He studied painting and music in Rome, immersed himself in Italian *avant-garde* art circles and became a not inconsiderable collector, married the author and translator Lucia Druidi, and found work as variously English-language translator, scriptwriter and even a once-off assistant director within the orbit of Cinecittà films and prime names like Antonioni, Fellini and Visconti. Their break with Italian screen realism in favour of an alto-

gether more subjectivist image would long be a key influence, even as he earned income from *Holiday Magazine* and advertising copy. In the late 1960s, after his divorce, he took up a two-decade teaching post in Staten Island with subsequent bases both in Sag Harbor and Rome. He has also been responsible for a small archive of essay-work and opinion columns. Throughout, to immediate purposes, he has continued work on his fiction, three published novels, various manuscripts still in progress (one titled *Blueboy* – in various blurbs announced as actually being in print but not in fact so), in all a commitment to the sustained invention of storytelling across each trans-Atlantic shift of locale.

Beetlecreek, on most accounts, gives the South as racial *huis clos*, Demby's own *Book of The Dead*. Its West Virginia black world of the boy Johnny Johnson and his uncle David Diggs, together with Bill Trapp, the white ex-carnival loner who has fetched up in a shack between black and white small-town Beetlecreek, has been termed documentary, a portrait of given time-and-place actuality. Johnny's adolescence as 'The Pittsburgh Kid' sent to Beetlecreek in the wake of his mother's sickness, the descent of David's marriage with Mary into formula and his delusionary would-be escape to Detroit with the playgirl returnee Edith Jones – once the love of his life, and Trapp's intending but fatally destined cross-racial kindliness, all take on literal enough credibility, a seeming slice of the real-time South. But without pitching for something quite opposite, or perverse, this truly falls short on the novel's best working seams and imagery. From start to finish it manages quite the fuller resonance, to be sure the depiction of the black South of Tolley's barbershop and Telrico's tavern, Mary Johnson's church etiquette, the Nightrider boy gang, and Johnny's friendship and betrayal of Bill Trapp. But this also is a South whose very disequilibrium, racial and class-based, is equally given impetus, situating magnification, in Demby's narrative language.

Demby, initially, was said to resemble Richard Wright on the assumption that both belonged in the standard protest-realist literary stable. But so ready a view, to a serious extent, was to mis-read Wright as much as Demby. Rather the resemblance, if such it be, lies in the kinds of "inside narrative" (Lee 1985) on offer in story-collections like Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Eight Men* (1961). This is symbolist Wright, canny, often close to the surreal, a maker of iconic as much as literal landscape or city. Rarely can it be said to have been more marked than in "Big Boy Leaves Home," with its image-pattern

of blues and the dozens, its dystopian snakes and mastiffs, and its purposive contrasts of black boyhood life and white soldier death, bucolic swimming hole and hell-like kiln. "The Man Who Lived Underground," likewise, Fred Daniels's sewer-eyed and citted view of an America walled against itself in hallucinatory whiteness and blackness. Wright's vista, as it were, becomes one of Afro-Bartlebyism, divided self. The Beetlecreek of Demby's novel has much of the same refractive quality, the township and its drama summoned as though off-tilt, fissured, a distortion.

First, in this respect, has to be Beetlecreek as a sense of place. The town's own name just about hints of Kafka, insectoid, suspended, Dixie as the historic stasis of black and white and imagined as though existential ground-zero. Demby's imagery everywhere implies life whose energies have lost larger purpose. The creek itself is initially said to be subject to "a brisk, cold wind," to be beset with "candy wrappers," and to be presided over by "frantic," "screaming" birds (25). A "fat tomcat" (25), not unlike the sun-drenched and portentous cat "asleep and peaceful" at Dawson's Landing in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, hovers complacently on the barbershop steps. Death is actualized in the passing of Mrs. Johnson, Edith Johnson's unloved foster-mother, and in its wake the dense run of allusion to hearses, wakes, and the very rustle of the churchwomen's black-silk funeral garb. The gathering effect is stygian, a Gothic less of extravagant scene or act than ordinariness, the familiar as alien.

Johnny takes into himself this shadow, the passed-along boy at the threshold of life yet brought close to death-in-life:

Now there was the slanted light of sunset that made the street brilliant copper, and swarms of birds swooped screeching on every perch, restless, unsatisfied, tearing apart the space between roof and sky. And Black Enamelled Death that he had seen represented everything of Beetlecreek and was like the restlessness and dissatisfaction of the birds only inside him, filling him with vague fear and shame, preparing him for something, telling him, warning him, separating him from things that were happening around him apart from him, pulling him along towards things he could not see or know. (79)

A shared intensity of shadow extends into the whole ecology of place, Beetlecreek as much existential as geographic axis. Johnny sees "boxes, tin cans, bottles" float down the creek, get caught in a whirlpool, and end up in "the deadly mud backwater in the reeds" (94). David Diggs is said to sit "in the corner against the white wall of the church . . . trapped in the village, arrested, closed in" (93), black against white,

self against shadow. He envisages himself as “trapped,” “unable to move again,” literally a “rusty can” (94). A sign-writer by profession, his working life less than his college-educated mind warrants, the signs about him bespeak not vitality but its opposite. Beetlecreek he thinks “suffocation” (94), “death-grip” (96), just as Johnny believes himself “entirely alone” (116). Bill Trapp, true to his name, a gargoyle at the margins, is initially said to be caught in “clammy silence” (8).

Not the least part of Demby’s achievement is to make this stasis dynamic, a staging of the will to human connection against a South of historic borders of consciousness as much as skin and class. Each main figure in turn so undergoes a respective rite-of-passage, intense, inward, paradoxically animated by the very deadness that prevails. The upshot in *Beetlecreek* is an enactive fable, the capturing of the will-to-life even as the town reduces and encloses life. Demby can thereby be thought to have managed a considerable balancing-act: a narrative full of vitality, serious momentum, in the very process of depicting the latitude and longitude of severance or loss.

Quite another part of Demby’s achievement is to play his black figures – Johnny, David, Edith, Tolley’s barber’s shop regulars and Bill his shoeshine boy, Mary Diggs and the churchwomen, the boy Nightrider gang – against Bill Trapp, pariah white man. If another ‘peckerwood’ in off-duty black township speech, he is also to become Diggs’s drinking and talking companion, be-friender of Johnny and the children, the wrongly dubbed molester and finally the likely burned-to-death scapegoat. As Johnny’s price of entry into the Nightriders, in all its Lord of the Flies syndrome, requires the burning of Trapp’s house, so Trapp himself is last to be seen as almost Christly and at once “sad” and “resigned” (202). This closing vista, Trapp in silhouette, Demby offers with the same delicate touch of fantasticalism as in fact from the start, ‘symbolist’ in a manner indeed to recall Richard Wright, even it can be said, of Poe, the presiding *figura* of a Dixie intimately local yet other.

For from the outset Trapp’s portrait is given in terms that anticipate this iconic, almost heraldic destruction. The carefully pitched opening bears out Trapp as self-within-self, a kind of vernacular *Doppelgänger* set down in a West Virginia implicitly as much dream-wasteland as actual map:

Always when he looked in the mirror his eyes were different. Sometimes they peered out from the broken glass asking an unanswerable question, sometimes they were angry and damning, sometimes they were sullen and brooding – too often

they were the eyes of a dead man, jellied and blank . . . Thus he would stand, sometimes for over an hour, a silent ugly man who could no longer tell whether he was inside the mirror or inside himself. (7)

The ensuing detail amplifies the double self. His first encounter with Johnny, apple-owner with apple-thief, then with David Diggs (“a nervous, jerky flow of words” 12), leads to more self-reflection in the house’s broken mirror. Is he whole, part, ever divided, ever to be joined again? Drinking at Telrico’s with Diggs his face is said to be “a gratework of wrinkles” (18), as if en-webbed in, and by, time. In his shack he hardly sleeps but when he does it is as though his actual life has become oneiric: the circus tent of Harry Simcoe’s Continental Show – a once-European institution brought to America, his orphan fostering-out with his sister Hilda; the Depression-era drift and illusory Retirement Plan Insurance; and his friendship with the Italian performer and his European voice and manners, the bequeathed stuffed dog, and his own eventual role as circus hand dressed in shabby-cavalier uniform. For Trapp the outward life becomes interior, wakefulness the dream.

Mocked at first by Beetlecreek’s black children he even so dreams on, would-be benign Pied Piper, imagining the juncture of the two race-communities through pumpkin and dandelion wine picnics, children at play. Yet he does so perched in an apple tree “like some kind of vulture bird” (60). The omen weighs perfectly. The pumpkins, the picnic, the colloquies with Diggs, and his mentorship of Johnny, all turn against him. He may well dream of “coming alive again” (170) but the dream ends in the accusation of molesting the children and in fire and death. Johnny’s rite-of-initiation into the Nightrider gang eventuates in Trapp’s own end. Amid the flames of his small-holding – “his figure exaggerated by the light of the fire” (202) – he looks to have become the fugitive double-self he has seen in the mirror. If for a moment he has been the winner then, inexorably, he has ended up the loser, his dream lost. In Demby’s conception of him, both unparented and unable to parent, Trapp finally serves as lost hope, a grown Huck disabled by Beetlecreek’s bad faith, its encompassing false witness both white and black.

Each of the other key players take their cue accordingly. Johnny alternates from one implicitly tranced state to the next. Initially he can be the boyhood reader, his chosen text *Doctor Zorro and The Dope Smugglers*. At night he can dream of his mother suffused in blood, in hospital and fighting consumption, a figure of helpless, drowning haemorrhage. In the barbershop he is the Pittsburgh boy outsider,

subject both to the quick-fire black southern josh and repartee of Tolley and the customers about his sideburns and witness to dismissive gossip about white men ("He *do* have funny eyes" Jim Anderson says of Trapp, 29). To the Nightriders he is the object of gang mockery yet also their self-desiring recruit, the appalled yet fascinated observer-participant as the Leader twists off the head of a baby pigeon with its blood splattered against the wall. With Trapp, as though in interlude, he can be both story-listener and co-spirit in the recognition of his own will to the power of word and narrative.

Left to his own devices he thinks of himself as locked in the specific time-and-place of his Aunt Mary's hostility and yet wonder if he is not resident in some other-world – "Everything he had done since he arrived in Beetlecreek had the feeling of being an episode in a dream (118)." This sense of displacement persists, the bus-station wrapped around in "quiet" and his own index of "separation" (119) or the first encounters with the Nightriders and Bill Trapp which are described as suffused in "dream feeling" (119). In turn the sight of his uncle drinking with Trapp, the shack episode with the pigeon, the joshing he receives at the barbershop, his vision of his uncle as loner, and even his fantasies about girls become "dream scenes" (119), a litany of disconnection. "What if Beetlecreek were a ghost town and he were the only inhabitant" (123) he speculates, alterity as the necessary condition. Finally, in himself becoming a Nightrider, the township's revenge-agent, he serves as Trapp's betrayer, and yet both like and unlike Trapp, his own secret sharer, the one self shadowed and fractured in the serial of the others.

Demby's portraiture of David Diggs carries the imprint of a life overwhelmingly driven to be the thing it is not. His marriage to Mary Phillips Diggs mocks their early passion, a life of deadly church-centered southern routine and gingerbread-baking for the Fall Festival country fair and anticipated in the stillbirth of their child and the pregnancy before marriage and for which he has given up Edith Johnson ("He came to Beetlecreek and did his duty" 97). With Trapp he crosses the race-line, finds succor, drinks, a wary friendship, and yet intractably snared in a South which not only has made the mutuality of blackness and whiteness ancestral taboo but turned blackness into its own close-tied human knot:

There was no way to explain to the old man how complicated the story was, how Negro life was a fishnet, a mosquito net, lace, wrapped round and round, each little thread a pain . . . too complicated. (104)

His hope lies in Edith, city-savvy, feisty, a drinker on equal terms in Telrico's as against the gingerbread-baking Mary, with her rise to Chair of the Women's Missionary Guild and preening for the approval of the minister. Yet as Diggs awaits the late-to-arrive Edith, he finds himself listening to the addled patter of Doc, the bus depot shoeshine man with his dream of a magical numbers fortune. The voice is one of roulette, exactly the game and scale of chance Diggs is embarking on with Edith. She it is, whisky to hand, abrupt-irritable in speech, impatient with a cat that has crept on to the Detroit-bound bus, who duly embodies the sheer contingency of their action. Leaving as the fire engines race towards Trapp and his house they represent no great promissory romance but rather a dark, peevish and all too late extrication. Beetlecreek, black and white, south and north, real and unreal, for both Biggs and Edith, as for Johnny and Trapp, will travel with and inside them.

For all its Depression-era time or West Virginia specificity of black locale, in other words, the Trapp-Johnson-Diggs configuration affords nothing if not its own kind of existential haunting. Each close-encounter, Johnny with Trapp, his aunt, the barbers and the Nightriders, Trapp with Diggs and the town, Diggs with both Mary and Edith, is given in terms that embed their shared force of disconnection in an idiom, an imagery, to match. Demby, on this measure, goes beyond simple point-for-point realism into infinitely more psychic territory, a south whose racialization operates at synaptic inner levels. The arising narrative makes for a rare achievement.

In these respects *Beetlecreek* can be also said to anticipate *The Catacombs*, however ostensibly different their fashioning. For Demby's second novel, a reflexive tour-de-force clearly as well out ahead as any in the then contemporary mid-1960s (the novel itself runs from March 1962 to March 1964), cannily situates blackness – again inevitably but not exclusively the axis of the novel – within almost all the levers of the postmodern repertoire. To be sure it invites comparison with other African American landmarks kindred in compositional spirit. These, symptomatically, look to Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) with its trope of black on white as both mythic rite-of-passage from enslavement to freedom and the inscription of black word on white page; William Melvin Kelley's *dem* (1967) with its vision of Harlem and white suburbia as mutually refractive but disjunctive American realms; Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) as a reflexive primer in how Africa, Afro-America, lies at the very core of America's making; and Trey Ellis's

Platitudes (1988) as a 'new black aesthetic' novel-colloquium given over to what kind of art a post-Civil Rights black authorship might best deploy. But *The Catacombs* acts within Demby's self-appointed imaginative parameters, a "narration" (223) set in "cubistic time" (40), and pitched for its own tapestried runs-of-consciousness. It also offers his own version of black Europe, a sounding-board for the tremors of America amid the theatres of Civil Rights, the supremacist white South under challenge together with the burning cities of the North.

William Demby, 'real' black writer-expatriate in Rome with Italian wife and son James, seeks to take the measure of his time in a relentless consumption of newspaper and TV. Yet he also enters his own story as 'William Demby,' friend, occasional lover, of 'Doris,' black extra cast as a handmaiden in the Elizabeth Taylor film-spectacular *Cleopatra* and the mistress to Count Raffaele Della Porta, executive in a British airline company. Both authorial selves, at once actual and virtual, patrol each other, while they at the same time patrol a violent world of Cold War, the OAS and the Algerian War, the assassination of John Kennedy, the space race, local Rome suicides, and the 'blackness' of each sorry race-death from Europe's colonial rape of Africa (the Count has a sister who serves as a nun in the Congo in reparation for their father's racism and plundering) to the US's Birmingham bombings and desegregation battles in Alabama with their follow-through in the DC Freedom March. Demby/'Demby' describes it as "truly . . . a Gothic age" (38), a "Year of the Plague" (38), a media glut of "poisons and strange and violent deaths" (38). This is modernity seen postmodernly, a global trauma narrative made up of each *petit récit* and yet played out against the novel's own referred-to bulwarks like Judaeo-Christianity, the Catholic calendar of Rome, and Greek tragedy.

The respective narratives, discrete yet braided into each other, could not be busier, full of allusion, dialogue, extract, dream. Robert Bone gives a useful cue when he invokes Gertrude Stein's notion of the world as "continuous present," the simultaneity of life and text, event and awareness (Bone 1969). The one narrative can be said to be utterly bound into the world, its power politics and ideologies, and the other into virtuality, self-aware as to its own formation and in which 'Doris' can at once be her creator's creature yet also able to answer back and even accuse him of authorial vampirism. Both, in truth, are treated as parallel and operative fictions. Demby's tactic, certainly, is to elide the two, the novel as double-helix, moving tableau or mosaic, with the

catacombs as enclosing life-and-death iconography. The upshot is a literary equivalent of the *décollage* art compositions by the Italian neo-realist installation artist Mimmo Rotella mentioned on the very opening page (“The sun has finally come out and my Rotella collages have begun to dance like gorgeous jungle flowers” 3), the sustained energy of interactive facts and fiction, disclosure and speculation.

Demby/‘Demby’ discusses his/their life, and his/their novel, with friends, with the reader, with himself. On a visit to the country with his family an old Marchesa tells him she prefers mystery novels to any other kind. The one or other author responds “I am beginning to feel trapped in a mystery novel myself” (172). Well he, or the both of them, might, for the world they seek to inscribe exists inside a McLuhan universe of medium as message, huge, unstoppable electronic fictions of fact. *The Catacombs*, an image to refract the novel’s technique as much as its religious-ontological vision, acts wholly on this new media world-order, the instantaneousness of the modern. An ostensible diary entry by Demby/‘Demby’ gives the novel’s rules of the game:

When I began this novel, I secretly decided that, though I would exercise a strict selection of the facts to write down, be they “fictional” facts or “true” facts taken from newspapers or directly observed events from my own life, once I had written something down I would neither edit nor censor it (myself). (93)

As the narrative wheels round and forward this is added to, glossed, time and again – Doris’s might-be pregnancy and uncertainty as to whether the Count or Demby is the father, her loss of the child, and the final revelation to the Count of life over death as he steps for the first time into the catacombs. “I am telling Alice how the novel shall end” (36) says the author early in the novel. He reports a literary session in which “One novelist even began to criticize the novel as though it had already been written, which is perfectly in harmony with the theory of cubistic time I am so recklessly fooling with” (40). The process of de-familiarizing the all too familiar, or familiarly constructed, world elicits the comment “I am beginning to have the strangest feeling that we are all nothing more than shadows, spirits, breathed into life and manipulated by Pirandello’s fertile mind” (45). As the one story launches into the other, moreover, the accommodating author even slyly acknowledges “I return to the typewriter” (160).

Suitably, towards the close, a summary is ventured, the composite Demby of the novel as reflexive-conceptual writer bearing “the theory of this narration”:

“What I mean . . . is simply this. That everything and everybody, real or invented, characters in books or in newspapers, the ‘news’ itself, stones and broken bottles *do* matter, *are* important, if only they are looked at, if only they are observed, just because they are composed of matter. Because everything and everybody, real or invented, characters in books, even the book jacket and the colored ink on the cover design, is composed of matter and for this reason matters, must therefore breathe in harmony with a single governing law, respond according to its aliveness, its *alertness*, to the degree that is awake or awakened, to the shifting humors of the wind-tormented involucre of our physical environment, which through Penelope’s law of tapestry, Penelope’s law of changeless change, can, as it so often does, become transmuted into climate and weather, weather peaceful or calm, these wild pregnant storm signals that flash ignored through our minds...” (208-9)

The inter-connectedness of the world, in other words, however apparently binary for its power-brokers, however vicious the separation implied in its wars and murders, requires art, narrative, a metaphysics (“existence is sacred” 202) in all its rich indeterminacy – its contestation of single meanings – to act as counter-acting force. To that end Demby suggests that as much as *The Catacombs* acts as tabulation, memory-record, a story conscious of its own storying, its play of self-reference aims always for the quite more consequential goal: the need to see humanity, the world, in its fuller, better kinetic whole, in essence the principle of life over death.

Commentary has understandably seized upon the novel’s organizing narrative, the visual and sculptural art references, the religious schema. But it has not anything like sufficiently addressed the novel’s seams and allusions to black life and history or the ends they serve. Demby avails himself of allusions to Isak Dinesen as Gothic prophet of the modern world; uses a letter from Steinbeck, newly a Nobel winner, to suggest language’s moral duty; tacitly adverts to Marshall McLuhan as the semiotician of global media; and invokes names from Ezra Pound to James Baldwin as literary fellow-travellers – however in themselves contrary – in the quest for order out of disorder. His art-allusions run from Rotella to Michelangelo’s *Pietà* to Losavio: each as artists who have both ‘made new’ and in the transcending, indeterminate configuration of their art implied the need equally to make new and reconfigure a humanity trapped in its prior habits of ideology and practice. Teilhard de Chardin supplies the key theology, a Catholic metaphysics, as the process of thought or action or belief whereby the world is coned or spiralled to rise above its fixities of black-white or either-or hatred, the lethal oppositeness of war.

It is in the context of these matrices, and actually a matrix of its own, that *The Catacombs* as the 'black' story of Demby/'Demby,' Doris, the Count, and Rome as at one and the same time ancient Holy City and modern international metropolis, offers imaginative sway. A complex serial of allusion builds within the unfolding narrative, Africa, Afro-America, Afro-Europe as pathways into understanding earliest civilization and yet also the contemporaneity of US Civil Rights or De Gaulle and Algeria. Pausing, as it seems, as he writes his section of the novel about Doris and her night with the Count, the author begins a letter to a black woman writer-friend in Alabama. Can she write her poetry beyond the battles of desegregation? Can her husband, Donald, imagine drawing cartoons of "the more grotesque aspects of being a Negro doctoring a small Alabama town, or about 'the Race Problem'" (6)? He is interrupted with word of a lecture by the Italian translator of *Beetlecreek* on "The White Whale and Other Myths" (7). He turns both to Whitman's Civil War diaries and newspaper reports of plastic bombs in Algeria. The Dixie of black and white, America and Europe, Europe and Africa: the spectrum is one of humanity absurdly, punitively, specified un-benignly into fissures of race, color, colonialism.

Doris herself, film extra as may be, flawed, a wine-bibber, the daughter of 'Demby's' own early college love in the south, Barbara Havers, even so suggests the incipient black Madonna ("She breaks out laughing, and somehow her dream-secret Negro laughter seems sacrilegious here in this country trattoria on the ancient Appian way, and the Catacombs with their layers and layers of bone-powder death just across the street" 17). Laura, a Creole Jamaican woman-friend, kills herself, another female suicide adrift under male governance (she lives with a poet who has abandoned her) in the wake of Marilyn Monroe's self-destruction. The press gives reports of a crisis of bourgeois male self-identity, feminism as breaking inherited both black and white forms of patriarchy and the politics of phallicism. The Count, Doris reveals, is said to be "fascinated with the idea that there are gangsters in America and that one of them is my father" (102). Doris bills herself for 'Demby' as "a fellow Nigra-American all alone in Rome" (113) as he, in turn, observes that "the (white) European world is cold" (121). The uncertainty as to the colour of her baby, black, white, both, a new beginning, speaks perfectly to a world caught up in the zig-zag, the cat's cradle, of its own contradiction.

Which, both Dembys ponder, will best bring the world together, Vatican II (with its first African cardinal) or the Krushchev-Kennedy

Vienna meeting about the bomb, the eucharist or contraception? The text imagines the Count in Doris's company believing himself to be a crocodile on the Nile, the exact locale of her role in *Cleopatra*. At RAI-TV Demby works on a documentary on Harlem starring Louis Armstrong, jazz's premier horn and voice at the very centre of Europe. On his visit to America Demby takes heed of the Birmingham bombing, a Cleveland race-beating, the Clay-Liston fight, the Black Muslims, the DC Freedom march ("Never in my life have I seen so many Negroes in one place" 177), Oswald's shooting of a 'New Frontier' Kennedy. If, however, this is a litany of injured blackness, blackness also reminds of a way forward.

The novel invokes Africa not simply as French-Algerian war but an example of a place and timeline possessed of culture-before-technology, an organic power of word, art, culture, the human nexus. In this it is the Count's sister, the nun, who bears witness:

She said the problem with Africa is that they speak there a *human* language the rest of humanity has almost forgotten. Africa is not wild, she said, it's just a *real* place, the people haven't learned to think or talk like a machine yet, in Africa, she said, people think and talk more like an IBM electronic brain than a combustion engine. (195)

This version of Africa as humanly inter-wired is to be set against the "squarish cadence" (196) of the west, the geometric logic of line as against the spontaneous logic of circle. That trope of circle acts to round out the novel – Doris in the catacombs. Her child is no more, she disappears, the Count is bereft, the fiction evaporates. What is left is the dance of life ("Voulez-vous danser avec moi?" is repeated several times as motif), the image of a shared global Africa as the touchstone of a wholly interconnecting and contingent humanity and yet also lost womb. Demby's novel, itself life-filled even about death, gives a reminder of transcending human possibility and yet in the face of every kind of human division, its own kind of requiem. Blackness has entered Europe just as it has entered the world and in no more telling a respect than in how it brings to bear the memorial footfall of Dixie.

Looking to the experiences chronicled in *Love Story Black*, its narrator, Professor Edwards, black, another longtime European novelist-expatriate (sound familiar?), and currently teaching both African American literature and *Beowulf* and the Medieval literature of romance at a Staten Island college, speaks of them as "strange journeys through time and reality." Commissioned by *New Black Woman Maga-*

zine to do a series of articles on Miss Mona Pariss, ancient *chanteuse*, blues queen, his emerging account causes Gracie, the magazine's editor, Edwards's on-off lover and an always sharp but foul-mouthed black Vassar graduate, to observe "I know you're a novelist – and a fairly good one . . . But even *you* wouldn't put a thing like this in a novel" (25). For this is Demby in lighter, even comic-fantastical vein, his novel a seriously clever, well-turned portrait of south-to-north American cultural blackness and its linkage to Africa and the wider world. It deserves a far better order of attention that it has received.

As Edwards reels in the life of Mona, well into her eighties, cranky, anachronistically dressed, as ready with her whisky and pork chops and collard greens as her Zora Neale Hurston down-home vernacular, he finds himself obliged almost freakishly to co-exist both in his own 1970s and the Jazz Age 1920s. For her part Mona has emerged from 'Orlando County' in an unspecified South, sung her way out of rural obscurity into international show-time, if a Josephine Baker then one at whom she takes any number of gossipy slaps. Alongside in the same ghetto Manhattan tenancy ("crumbling brownstone" 21) is the Reverend Grooms, "a light-skinned Black man with . . . puffy jowls" (3), a speaker of 'the word' and bibber of jugs of Gallo red wine. Edwards, required to lie naked alongside Mona in her boudoir as she speaks her history, is not only to tell her story but actually to help it conclude, the perfect life-imitating-art parody of the participant-observer. Mona unlocks her own version of the Afro-South brought north and delivered as much to Europe as to New York.

Mona herself, just as much as her story, cuts across all manner of stereotype but in no respect more so than in keeping her virginity: a gift, an honouring, of her early one-time love, 'Doc.' He, the perfect lover-man, handsome, a legendary Pullman Porter, having vowed to protect her is castrated by the Klan. Grooms, in fact, turns out to be the same 'Doc,' his own apartment meticulously recreated as a Pullman carriage. He also refers Edwards, now accompanied by the beauteous Hortense Schiller, to the Halbrin Theatrical Storage Company where Mona's trunk has been assigned through more than fifty years and ended up in Harlem. Its papers, starting with newspaper cuttings about Cal Coolidge's election and not least about 'Doc,' the dresses and trinkets, open the one era of blackness to another, the one past South to a present-day North and from there to Europe and Africa.

In the interim Edwards tries to keep his own life in balance. His college classes become their own mirror of the times, especially when Melinda Rodriguez, Puerto Rican radical Marxist, berates him as he teaches Richard Wright with the “you’re an associate professor of English right? . . . If you ask me neither you nor Richard Wright know your ass from a hole in the ground – you’re both a couple of jive turkey nigger cultural sell-outs . . . !” (31-2). As he moves from this to classes on courtly love the connection to Mona becomes quite inescapable: Chaucer pre-shadows ‘Doc,’ *The Knight’s Tale* pre-shadows Mona’s biography. Gracie, PR virtuoso as much as editor, a TV presence, hosts a revolutionary poetess who believes in glorifying the pimp as true insurrectionist (the gathering held at Soul Conglomerates). Edwards’s love-affair with Hortense takes them to Ghana on a scheme to have ‘African Liberation Movements’ out-sourced to black businessmen and consumer marketing, where she abandons him for marriage in Zambia to the Catholic Marxist Georges Mantu, and where he comes down with food-poisoning – each the deflation of his mythic fantasy of Mother Africa.

Only in the final, and literal, consummation of his bed story-listening with Mona does he find scale, perspective, for his own evolving thoughts as to race, masculinity and blackness. With Grooms/‘Doc’ finally killed by his consumption of “Gallo wine communion wine” (136), and the building under demolition, he re-enacts the love-making which by rights should have taken place decades earlier between ‘Doc’ and Mona. Theirs is the South as mythic black ancestry, a ‘love story black’ worthy of European medievalism, its own unique, and enduring triumph of sorts even if scarred by pain, white cruelty. As Edwards stands in for ‘Doc,’ and Mona dies euphorically in their sublime anachronistic one act of love, a happiest de-flowering as she imagines herself down by the southern river of her young womanhood, so the ‘story’ hitherto still to be told is finally able to have its own ending. It has become, in effect, a story of intersecting worlds: one of the South in all its race hierarchies and cruelty, one of Harlem as reflecting the Manhattan to which so many black southerners have migrated and made home, one of the Europe both bequeathed in the medieval romance-tradition taught by Edwards in class and of historic colonialism, and one of Africa as originary continent in all its human richness and yet also the site of slave history and its own abuses of peoples and power.

West Virginia, Rome, Harlem. *Beetlecreek*, *The Catacombs*, *Love Story Black*. Demby offers his own composite re-telling of Europe in the South, the South in Europe. If in his novels he shares with other

US authorship, southern and otherwise, a focus in Atlantic histories separate yet joined he does so from a unique perspective: black, Dixie case-hardened, Italian as well as English-speaking, and taken up with the visual as well as literary arts. The South, for sure, has never been the one cultural arena. Its voices long have jostled and contended, written and spoken, high-genteel and vernacular, region for region. Europe, even more evidently, bespeaks national and local tradition even as it offers itself as a one shared entity of geography, past-into-present, thought and art. Yet the two, along with Africa, have had a necessary interaction, whether Jefferson in Paris or De Tocqueville about his different American itineraries, whether Richard Wright at the Café Tournon or any of the European émigrés in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor or William Styron. In Demby's three narratives the processes of exchange take on new energy, respectively 1950s Dixie, the South heard and seen from 1960s Italy, and both in however different a degree as refracted in a story set in 1970s Manhattan. It makes for a rare, encompassing achievement.

Notes

- ¹ William Demby, *Beetlecreek* (1950; Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 131. All page references are to this edition.
- ² William Demby, *The Catacombs* (1965; New York: Harper & Row/Perennial Library, 1970) 230. All page references are to this edition.
- ³ William Demby, *Love Story Black* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978) 57.

Bibliography

- Bell, Bernard. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987.
- Berry, Jay. R. "The Achievement of William Demby." *CLAJ* 26 (June 1983): 434-51.
- Biggers, Jeff. "William Demby Has Not Left the Building." *The Bloomsbury Review* 24:1 (2004).
- Bone, Robert. "William Demby's Dance of Life." *Triquarterly* 15 (Spring 1969): 127-41.
- Coles, Robert. *Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black Writing in Europe and Africa*. New York: Garland, 1999.
- Demby, William. *Beetlecreek*. New York: Rinehart, 1950. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- . *The Catacombs*. New York: Random House, 1965. New York: Harper & Row/Perennial Library, 1970.
- . *Love Story Black*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978.

- Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and The Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Ellis, Trey. *Platitudes*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- . *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Gray, Richard, and Owen Robinson, eds. *A Companion to The Literature and Culture of The American South*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- Hall, James C. *Mercy Mercy Me: African American Culture and The American Sixties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Hansen, Klaus. "William Demby's *The Catacombs*: A Latecomer to Modernism." *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*. Ed. Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer. Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1982. 134-43.
- Hine, Darlene Clark and Jacqueline McLeod, eds. *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Jaskoski, Helen. "The Catacombs and the Debate Between The Flesh and The Spirit." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35:3 (Spring 1994): 181-200.
- Jones, LeRoi / Baraka, Amiri. *The System of Dante's Hell*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- Kelley, William Melvin. *Dem*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967.
- Lee, A. Robert. *Designs of Blackness: Mappings in the Literature and Culture of Afro-America*. London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1998.
- . "Richard Wright's Inside Narratives." *American Fiction: New Readings*. Ed. Richard Gray. London: Vision Press, and New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1985. 200-21.
- Margolies, Edward. *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Black American Authors*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968.
- O'Brien, John. *Interviews With Black Writers*. New York: Liveright, 1973.
- Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo-Jumbo*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972.
- Walker, Margaret. *For My People*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1942.
- Wright, Richard. *Uncle Tom's Children*. New York and London: Harper and Bros., 1938.
- . *Eight Men*. Cleveland, Ohio: World, 1961.

