

## VIII. A DIGRESSION ON MAVERICK ECONOMICS: THE SLAVE AND THE PULP-FICTION WRITER

“Remember that your children are not your own, but are lent to you by the Creator.” Mohawk

It may well be that the reason why Robin Hood and Avenge-the-Poor characters are so popular and well liked in literature is the more or less instinctive recognition that positive or man-made laws can't keep up with a higher sense of justice. This higher sense of justice used to be derived in ancient times what later used to become called “Natural Law”. And if this proved to be too brutal or unbalanced an appeal was made to “Divine Law” which amounted ultimately to an equation of the two. It is curious how this ‘socio-cultural mechanism’ superceded and transgressed given historic and cultural boundaries. In this context we need to look at some publications that are not generally included in standard histories of economics. The reason for including them will soon enough become apparent.

Abraham Lincoln was once alleged to have said in essence: It was this book that triggered the US Civil War. He was oddly enough talking about a work that has since its appearance in 1851/52 been derided in turn as trivial, maudlin, Norman-Rockwellian, sensationalist, as a tear-jerker, a pot-boiler, and by the eminent James Baldwin most devastatingly as “a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*. Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty. ...[It is] like its multitudinous, hard-boiled descendants ... a catalogue of violence.”<sup>16</sup>

We are talking, of course, about Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin!*

As strong and as laudable as Baldwin's own literary achievements are, it takes some nerve to accuse a mother of seven who lost a child to cholera and mastered a full and - by all accounts - successful and happy family upbringing with a mostly absentee husband simultaneously with a literary career of no mean reach and an impeccable, unimpeachable abolitionist end. The argument that one in the near position of a white mistress may not know the true and authentic plight of a black slave of course carries much weight. On the other hand Baldwin himself wrote a fine first person narrative love story in *Giovanni's Room* as the white man with a black partner the same authentically empathetic right may be given in the reverse.

<sup>16</sup> . *Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, Ed. by Debra Rosenthal, James Baldwin, *Everybody's Protest Novel*, p. 40

To give but one key and telltale incident of the novel: The slave Eliza Harris has been told her toddler-son Harry is going to be sold separately while her husband George has already escaped to dodge the same fate. She flees the slave farm in which she grew up at night time with Harry in her arms after a day's frenzied escape hunted by slave-drivers and hounds only to face the seemingly impassable and partly frozen Ohio river between the slave state of Kentucky and the free-state of Ohio:

“An hour before sunset, she entered the village of T---, by the Ohio river, weary and foot-sore, but still strong in heart. Her first glance was at the river, which lay, like Jordan, between her and Canaan of liberty on the other side. ... In consequence of the various delays [caused by sympathetic slaves trying to give Eliza more of a head start], it was about three-quarters of an hour after Eliza had laid her child to sleep in the village tavern that the [pursuing] party came riding into the same place. Eliza was standing by the window, looking out in another direction, when [the slave] Sam's quick eye caught a glimpse of her. Haley [the slave-driver] and Andy were two yards behind. At this crisis, Sam contrived to have his hat blown off, and uttered an loud and characteristic ejaculation, which startled her at once; she drew suddenly back; the whole train swept by the window, round to the front door. A thousand lives seemed to be concentrated in that one moment to Eliza. Her room opened by a side door to the river. She caught her child, and sprang down the steps towards it. The trader caught a full glimpse of her, just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse, and calling loudly on Sam and Andy, he was after her like a hound after a deer. In that dizzy moment her feet to her scarce seemed to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water's edge. Right on behind they came and, nerved with strength such as God give only to the desperate, with one wild cry and flying leap, she vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore, on to the raft of ice beyond. It was a desperate leap – impossible to anything but madness and despair; and Haley, Sam, and Andy, instinctively cried out, and lifted up their hands, as she did it. The huge green fragment of ice on which she alighted pitched and creaked as her weight came on it, but she stayed there not a moment. With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake; - stumbling – leaping – slipping upwards again! Her shoes are gone – her stockings cut from her feet – while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.

“Yer a brave gal, now, whoever ye ar!” said the man, with an oath.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> . H. Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, New York 2003, with a *New Introduction* by Amanda Claybaugh, p. 60, 69-70

*Uncle Tom*, the title character if not the entire work, has been most severely derided as a 'white man's nigger', that is as a patronizing account which in all its professed good intentions opened more of a gulf between the ethnic groups concerned than bridge a breach. Frantz Fanon in his seminal *The Condemned of the Earth* consequently called for slaying of the white oppressors by the black oppressed – a cleansing act of liberation before which no permanent social and racial justice could be achieved. *Uncle Tom* was the first novel in the United States that sold more than a million copies, with the exception of the Bible, an otherwise unparalleled feat, and millions of copies followed in other countries.

It may be a bit of a stretch to claim that this was the literary work that killed Lincoln, but not really that much of a stretch actually. Neither may he have been unhappy about it as he was one of the first to ascertain its literally earth-shaking influence. Considering Lincoln's assassination and the death of countless combatants and non-combatant victims in the War of Secession Beecher Stowe's literary endeavors - as much as they are frowned upon by the literary establishment for its alleged 'non-literary' and pot-boiler qualities - could not have been entirely without merit.

In fact from the simple point of view of effective expressiveness and getting its chosen point across we would wager any world literature aficionado to come up with passages of any great writer anywhere on the globe which could even hold up to that passage. You may argue that Kennedy's *Profiles of Courage* and all the more so his Harvard Anti-Nazi Master's Thesis *Why England Slept* really were the causes of his death, but, alas, empirical evidence is much slighter and harder to garner than that patently available with regards to Beecher Stowe.

Of course there were successors, as Baldwin has pointed out, and no mean precursors. If you belong to the ultra-realistic school of literary percipients that maintains that only 'oral history' accounts, documents, and autobiographical narratives can hold up the torch of truth, that eyes all and any fiction with suspicion – never mind its efficacy – than of course you prefer authentic accounts like *The Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, *The History of Mary Prince – West Indian Slave*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, or the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* written between 1789 and 1861 and you may well be right in doing so.

To put things into economic perspective and to remind ourselves that (taking Whooppy Goldberg's words from another context: ) "It ain't over!" we only have to quote a contemporary standard neoconservative textbook on the history of

economics which states under the headline “A Controversial Book on American Slavery” with eerie obliviousness to what biases are involved here:

“...Chicago economist Robert W. Fogel joined forces with Stanley Engerman to apply statistical analysis (known as ‘cliometrics’) to the issue of American slavery. *Time on the Cross* (1974) contested the view that slavery was an inefficient and unprofitable mode of production and would have disappeared on its own without the Civil War. With painstaking research, Fogel and Engerman insisted that slavery was so efficient that only war could have brought about its demise. Fogel was accused of being a racist, even though he married a black woman, but finally felt some vindication upon winning the Nobel Prize in 1993  
...<sup>18</sup>

Here the economic man or better the economic cardboard-cutout has turned fully Frankenstein’s monster, or better Social Darwinist, and one is reminded with a strong shudder of the docu-drama of Theodore Kotulla about the Auschwitz Commander Hoess, whose problem was not at all that he had been ordered to burn Jewish concentration camp inmates, but whose problem was that the dead were piling up with such rapidity that he could not burn them swiftly enough! In other words the problem that occurred to him was neither ethical nor even human, the problem that occurred to him was merely technical. The film goes to some length then to quote the Commander how he finally came up with a *technical* if not quite final *solution* that in his eyes made him eligible for a special order of merit from his Nazi superiors.

The only way to get out of this incredibly disgusting discombobulation which tries to hide itself badly under the names of ‘objectification’ and ‘science’ seems to be to take recourse to the next to the last chapter of Henry George’s magisterial refutation of Social Darwinism *A Perplexed Philosopher* dedicated to but by no means exhausted with Herbert Spencer. The chapter is titled *Principal Brown*. It is a bitingly acerbic satire unusual for the generally fair and even-minded George. In this chapter the imaginary “Principal Brown” back-paddles in an ante-bellum Southern State on an abolitionist stance he had originally and innocently taken in the Free North. What is so caustic about the satire is not only the fact that all the tired excuses used to justify slavery reappear to this day to justify any and all kinds of economic injustices, what is so caustic about it is that viewed in the daylight of post-Ricardian economic analyses we are all, economically speaking, in no better position than the fictitious though socio-typical ante-bellum slave-mother Eliza Harris desperately trying to save her toddling son Harry from the noose of the traders.

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<sup>18</sup> . M. Skousen, *Making Modern Economics*, Armonk, New York, 2001, p. 445

Question: As deplorable as all this might be what has a tear-jerking fictitious abolitionist story of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century lost in a supposedly sober and objective History of Economics of the 21<sup>st</sup>?

The answer is easy: The Soviet Union fell with a crash, brought down not by the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry - as much as Reagan and John Paul adherents would like to make us believe that - but by its own denizens, mainly and solely because of its complete disregard for Human Rights. Socialism had Social Justice writ large upon its banners, but it wouldn't even secure a basic modicum of human rights to its proletarian "master class". Any economics that does not make human rights a center and core piece of its basic and essential first principles will crash just the same and just like the ante-bellum slave-holding South. Any kind of proprietorial, economic, financial, or monetary policy is there to serve all and every passenger of our spaceship earth, and be it the least of them and all the yet on unborn. No man, woman, or child is meant to have Mammon, Midas, St. Econom or even the pronouncements of the Fed as its masters.

Upon this mirthful digression on the Maverick Economics spawned by slave-plantation economics we may embark on the Protest Economics of Pre-Socialism and Socialism.