Rosa Bobia

The Critical Reception of James Baldwin in France

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APPENDIX
The James Baldwin Interview

In January 1985, James Baldwin granted this author his first and only interview on the subject of his reputation in France. In Atlanta, Georgia, he talked about his early years in France and the French and African-French response to his works.

How would you describe the French reception of you as a Black writer in France in the early fifties?
Until you brought it up, it never occurred to me. I never thought of my reception in France at all. As I see it, my reception goes back to 1948 because I was completely unknown at that time. The French reception was not a reception at all. I arrived and I was left alone. It was a peculiar silence because I did not know the language. There were no friendly white liberals patting me on the head. If I could make it I could make it. I didn't want anyone's help. They watched me at a distance with a sort of sardonic not hostile eye.

A young writer often finds it difficult to find publishers especially in a foreign country. Yet, your first two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* were published by the reputable La Table Ronde in 1957 and 1958 respectively. What were the circumstances that led to their publication?
Well I'd been in Paris a long time, I knew lots of people in the publishing world. It was my milieu so to speak. Everyone knew that I was supposed to be a writer. I had published a lot of short things in America, England and in France. So I had a small reputation. And, my face was known in all these publishing circles and at cocktail parties. I had friends in the publishing business. Henri Eil, a friend of mine at La Table Ronde, translated *Mountain* at the request of Colette Duhamel.

You were not the only Black American writer in France in the fifties. What is your perception of the French response to you as compared to Richard Wright and Chester Himes?
Others saw me in their light, but I didn't. I was just a kid. Our writing was very different. Then you see I didn't stay in France. My life as a writer in France grew by itself.

The French critics ignored Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* upon its publication in France in the fifties. Do you have an explanation for the absence of French criticism of Ellison's work?
I suspect that the French didn't feel that anybody else could be as cerebral as they. I think they were completely baffled by Mr. Ellison. He had produced a work like Mr. Sartre.

The documents on the reception of *Giovanni's Room* in France were very few. Yet, a French critic, writing in the journal, *Arcadia*, said that the work was well received by the French public.
I wasn't there, I don't know. In America, there was a kind of resentment. The French ignored it. There may have been a kind of underground reception in all the obvious places and in places not so obvious. But in terms of the public reception, I think it existed. They said I had written my novel. I was expected to write *Mountain* for ever.

What was the response of African-French writers and critics to you works? Did your response to the Negritude movement have something to do with what seems to be a lack of their response.
It might have. It all happened so fast. I knew Alioune Diop and Aimé Césaire. I think I was very baffling to them. Negritude was a concept that was baffling to me. With Diop and Senghor and Césaire, my relationship was very good. It was difficult to them, I think, to deal with a Black American writer. The image of a Black American was set by Richard [Wright]. I didn't fit in. I was a maverick. They didn't know quite what to do with me. Senghor's definition of negritude is still very useful because he talks about European reality and African reality. There must be something about me written by these authors, certainly by Diop, Senghor, and I would hazard by Césaire and even by the late Jacques Alexis and others I would think. However I know of no documented reception.

In 1973, *Notes of a Native Son* was published in France for the first time. It was published in the United States in 1955. It seems that the French wanted to get a look at the book that was so vehemently attacked by writers like Amiri Baraka.
It seemed very remote from the French concerns. It seems that you are right about the reason for its publication. At any rate, it seems a very strange thing to me.

Although your critical reception does not seem to reflect it, the quality of an author's work in translation may influence the critical reception. Have you any notion of the quality of the translations of any of your works?
I'm only aware of the French translation of *Mountain*. It was the only one that I had anything to do with. My grasp of written French is not that good. For *Giovanni's Room,* I wasn't there. I was told that *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* was awful. I know that I have some Japanese translations.

Finally, do you have any copies of your works in French?
No, you see [laugh] I do not need it.