

Black Panther Meets Lox and Bagel Man

Seymour Krim

CLEAVER'S SOUL MAY HAVE BEEN ON ICE, but that ingredient, soul, head, heart, fists, guns, icepick and strong basic prick is aimed right at you, baby; this is an angry, more accurately, tormented book*—and Cleaver is getting all of his rocks off to such a gashing extent that he tears holes in your white emotions that can never again be plugged up with the kind of quick-drying cement that chemistry makes available to every American with the spoiled luxury of a hardware store two blocks away. Cleaver wants to do away with that copout bandaid chemistry, even though he is too realistic (not all the time, this is an ambivalent book with chords that come out like Chinese music even though Hero Eldridge wants to english them so that there is no mistake about his intentions) to primitivize everything; but he is primitive in the grand sense; he's against faggotry—he kicks Jimmy Baldwin around as if J. B. were his gunsel, in the true homosexual sense of Dashiell Hammett's use of that word in *The Maltese Falcon*—Malted Milk America, Beatle music, Uptight Ofays Who Don't Know How To Shake Their Asses, The White Power Structure (naturally!), The Corruptive Penal System, American Colonialism, White Ultrafeminines and Black Supermasculine Menials (his disturbing polarizing words for the U.S. division of labor in which his own nation within a nation has been ruined and deballed until now as he tells it) and hands out a 100 other demerits to his and my "democracy" which he seems to have EARNED.

I say seems to have earned because there is dramatization in Eldridge; he's not a writer for nothing—even though he uses the language with a sobriety which is I believe a true reflection of his soul, the bigness of his feeling, the cold bigness of his feeling, and it creates a new kind of black Wagnerism which is a form of art as well as tough statement. Eldridge Cleaver says to me and probably to himself that he is telling the truth. But truth to a writer is a means of art, language, technique, and you would be a damn fool not to see that Cleaver like any writer is working under the limitations and strengths of his talent for expression as well as what "he really thinks and feels." Do you read me, reader? I'm certain you do (I guess) but I've reached the point in life where my uncertainties—unlike Cleaver—are more powerful than my certainties and I have to tell you this if you want an honest count on this book from one man (me) wrestling literature with another (Cleaver) with no impressions barred.

Cleaver's certainty has been saved up, a treasure of hate, my friends, until it comes out of him with axe and pick which—to be honest about this America which he hates more than he loves but like every Black American would on the deepest level like to love more than he hates—hacks you up; there is no bullshit creaming over this land such as the present writer has indulged in when he's been the deepest in that paradoxical bag, the American Jew, yes the Two Shapes,

* "Soul on Ice," by Eldridge Cleaver, McGraw-Hill Book Co. (A Ramparts Book) 1968, New York, N.Y. 210 pp. \$5.95.

America and Jew, and the long headride any such member of the human race like the American J. has to go on to figure out his place in the so-called scheme of things. Cleaver will have nothing to do with such complicated philosophical rationalization. He is the member, the representative, the articulate voice (along with LeRoi, Ishmael Reed, Calvin Hernton among the new black brilliant banditos using nouns, prepositions and hammers) of a people who have just discovered themselves and discovered with contemptuous pride the weakness of You and Me. Yes, that's the whole point; even though Cleaver (like Ralph Ellison in a different context) has done his "homework"—a black man in America had to be twice as good as a nonblack to win his niche and show the profound style of his touch, great style (I agree), Cleaver keeps telling us in these pages—that is, taught himself with a sense of depth and importance things that less serious people will never take the pains to teach themselves, even though Cleaver has burned his midnight oil and wrought a fine mind for himself, it is the fat and filth and Freud-justified "neuroses" that we have indulged ourselves with as Alienated Moderns which brings the blood to his imagination.

Why not wipe out such lameys as ourselves? is a thought that only LeRoi, Reed, Hernton and now Cleaver have brought to reality within my immediate knowledge; and why not, given the existential ironies under which they have had to live their triple-joked, authentic Black Humor lives? By that I simply mean the amazing putdown enforced by Western society on merely the obvious flag of their pigment—why not kill in your heart, rape out on the streets (as Brother Eldridge did), wear the wildest bop earrings or beret or shades or spangles you can dream up as the superfreak in a world of white ghosts, why not whip it out and motherfuck the entire *Stranger* (Camus, that is) universe that a weird, incredible, unbelievable, insane, you name it, fate has popped you into? I (too) am merely trying to dramatize the state of mind or, deeper, being out of which Cleaver expresses himself; and why his book goes beyond Cleaver because his specific personality has been shaped by the Idea of Black all over the world and now into the universe itself; but then I, the kind of Other Person and nonblack whom Cleaver must ultimately sit down to the table with, as a result of reading him and UNLIKE him, see this Idea as ultimately a human one and not Black at all; and while I or someone like me will one day be killed because of this birth of a great new perspective in an ancient, often rotten world, a half century from now it will be part of the refreshing miracle that expands man's consciousness, changes history, broadens the appreciation and knowledge of one's human brothers, sweetens the sting of everyone's mortality when color has long been erased or only used to highlight the basic oneness of all of us—thoughts too abstract and probably over-optimistic to touch Cleaver right now, understandably so but sadly so.

CLEAVER AS A WRITER, and I must always return to this base in reacting to him, doesn't always have the *seichel*, the literary sophistication, the ease among the stars, the footwork that a high cliff asks for when you walk it, that his deep-pump overflow toward all of experience asks for; I find his touch heavy when it should be easy, his irony explicit when I prefer a hint, his rage cold when I prefer my murder warm (which obviously is his point, that from his coalblack cannon-mouth he can not afford any warmth toward me), his Big or would-be

Big Cock a threat which I acknowledge but also a drag because I'm not a cunt but a man like himself. Yet, what I'm building to saying, is that the Other Man writing this knows, feels, understands, is willing to take Cleaver's smear of me and mine to the point where it makes me a bigger and better representative of the non-god God that lives above our separate individualities as something to aim at; he, Cleaver, explodes and tears to shreds like a cat with a roll of toilet-paper many of the soggy American myths that so many of the middleclass—decent, let no one talk you out of it!—people I know and half-am used to love, or did love out of IGNORANCE, and I love him for it; yes, I, responding, wording my report to you of the Cleaver experience feel he is a potentially great American because he is giving the society which made all of us a new dimension not only of conscience (which is too abstract, as abstract as Eldridge can get when he juggles strategies for World Revolution and Black Realpolitik out of his fancy dialectical bag) but of concrete reality which it behooves all of us to incorporate in our blood and then our institutions so that we can get closer to what we always wanted to become as individuals living together in a social order which is finally and ultimately our own creation and responsibility. Cleaver may believe he is writing for himself and for the Black Brother and Sister but let me tell him and tell you that he is writing for us and that we need him the way we need money and love and a smile from someone we respect.

But Eldridge, who has spent almost half of his adult life in prison—where this book was mostly written, dreamed, sweated—speaks of necessity unlike this writer with those steel bars crossing his prose like punctuation; it's stupid for a white man (And I've recently been needled by a black man who digs me but thinks my minority lot is soft into finding another color category for myself, as a Jew, so I'll say not white man but Olive Man) who has never been behind American society's tangible repressive disgrace, prison, to try and wipe them out in a curve of the mind on paper—like here; when this reporter went up to Sing Sing for the dead *New York Herald Tribune* he was knocked on his mental-emotional ass, his paltry reserve, by the 80% majority of spades who dominated the prison and set the tempo, embodied the very idea of prison in America today, and whatever public responsibility he had as a self-absorbed loner was appalled by what the country he still believes in has done to its own kind. Cleaver of course has no such illusions; if America is to live for him as something more than a Clown's Hell it will have to be made into a different society, by ourselves, than the one which has NOT been hell for me and would be Revolutionary Bullshit to say so. But not for Cleaver to say so, which is an important distinction when we try to remake our society on the basis of differences of experience rather than lumping it callously and unfairly together. To Cleaver the U.S. is "this shitty land" and of course it is excrement from his point of view; yet as he knows what America has done to its black citizens was in itself no more horrible or unmanning than that done by other Western white societies, certainly a disgrace before the memory of any Gods that were but not the unique curse of this crude republic, from my reading of history; yet Cleaver, as an American himself, levels his hatred primarily against our own mutual homeland because it has betrayed him and thousands of other colored Americans with its democratic slogans, rhetoric, pretensions. This is what he can not tolerate: that

either black or white oldsters (like the present writer, 46) are suckers enough to buy the phony American Dream, hollow, gassy, based on the self-deluding Head Calls without Body, not backed up, a fantasy. Eldridge, like a black D. H. Lawrence, wants to bodify this phantom of "capitalistic democracy" with a truer one which immediately does away with "imperialism" and "colonialism" (I put the words in quotes because they are now catchphrases of the New Left and the New Black Left which omit the more complicated economic details of our life with other nations which have been shitty but is a lie to say entirely so because out of the hard ambition of his radical prison thinking comes the notion, beautiful in its clearheadedness for a socialist future but not as simple as he makes it sound, that "Negro bondage" in America is based on state-policy avariciousness abroad. I am certainly no expert in this area—does one have to be a genius about everything today? yes!—but the hard edges of this concept, like a silent movie, seem to me dated, corny, big-talk revolutionary analysis, necessary for Cleaver's "total picture" thinking but unconvincing to me.

Let me explain: Eldridge Cleaver, like Richard Wright and Theodore Dreiser in a solid U.S. tradition before him, has taken the writer qua writer's abnormal sensitivity to injustice (Hemingway: "Madame, it's the sense of injustice that makes a writer") and, discontent with that, developed his political insight, worked on it, honed it, to the point where he has devised his own Grand Strategy for being a writer-revolutionary in total action AGAINST a "white bourgeois" world order he can't live with. I find that the new American Black writers are more powerfully concerned with the building of revolutionary intelligence today than in reacting with non-political imagination and quiet but equally serious insight into experience; this thoroughbred breed of non-arousing writer is always valuable, in my opinion, just as Chekhov was compared to Gorki or Isaac Babel compared to Mayakovsky, and writers of every time and country in upheaval who have begun like revolutionary fire-engines often ease their speed with a more subtle knowledge of their PARTICULAR value to a time and find reality and a lifetask in what they once despised—the untheatrical shot into the sidepocket of the universal nappy pooltable, so to speak; but, as you know and very likely agree with, right now the burning, "crucified," murderous, socking, seemingly unstoppable thrust of all black writing that gets and often (as with Eldridge) deserves great attention is to change the conditions of life itself and THEIR author's condition specifically. I find enormous value in the mind-widening implications of Cleaver and the other three word-terrorists I've mentioned (Jones, Hernton, Reed), I understand the need, learn from it, get inspired by it, have to integrate it into my other experience and fake out none of its reality; but I also find, and warn the reader as well, that the enthusiasm to kill for a liberty conceived on a greater scale than it's ever been known before is bringing in its wake equal amounts of literary horseshit, new slogans, superficial posturing, tons of noise, screams, denunciations, and all the rest of the unloading of every piece of undigested glop that can "pass" for importance. Much of the Black protest stuff that I read gets to me as a man, a person, as it should, but I often feel it is better meant for gut theater, film, guerilla street demonstration, war dance and every other means of expression than the written word, which has to resonate through your mind, body and soul like

good orgasm is supposed to do for a woman and do it REPEATEDLY each time you read it— the name and the game of literature, which is marble supposed to look and feel like silk.

CLEAVER, HALF-JOURNALISTIC AND HALF-LITERARY, an important exponent of "journalit," which to me is the most exciting American prose form of this period, is nevertheless sitting tight or at least uneasy on the literary implications of his work and emphasizing the activist ones. His future as a writer, not someone who uses writing, lies undeveloped right now with this good evacuating blast behind him; enormous race-political pulls are working on him as they were on Baldwin when he was hottest as a leader, writing words on the run to Selma, Ala., and back; and I mean these pulls are going to continue to work on Eldridge even though he is now a cat on the double run, his fleshly future of more concern to most than his literary one, the outward drama of his headlined, bylined life more apparent than the unceasing inward one toward his art, his craft, his "black soul," and, yes, his country—that monster mother who birthed him.

I believe I know Eldridge well enough now from having lived inside the pages of his life to know that at this point, wherever he is, and I wish him all the good blues that have ever been sung for their stoicism as well as their beauty as companions on his "journey of the spirit"—the words are James Joyce's—that if it came to a showdown he would sacrifice his painfully-founded commitment to literature (and he's worked like a bitch) for the responsibilities that he obviously now believes are of huger need than his talent and himself. Probably this is humanly necessary in spite of all I've said here and believe. If my "I" were black, naked to the storm, hopelessly vulnerable until made powerful or at least as WORKABLE as anyone else's within the human condition, and if it could only truly live in the world under a fantastic new set of conditions, this "I" too would find it impossible to pursue the private trip of "artist" when the cities of the soul were burning down to the pure green seed underneath and the vision of a new day on the earth transformed me as I believe it once transformed Cleaver and gave us all such a metaphysical black kick in the ass as a result.

SEYMOUR KRIM's *new book*, *Shake It For the World Smartass*, is due in September from the *Dial Press*.

The School System: A Cry of Despair

Daniel Gordon

THE BEAUTY AND EFFICACY of truth generally receive their most triumphant vindication in the exposé article or book. No other literary form—and I don't hesitate to sweep into this comparison novels, scientific papers, psychiatric case histories, political and philosophical tracts, horoscopes—so successfully exhibits truth as an esthetic and rational delight. To learn at last the whole horrid truth about some evil, even one that, like poverty or sex or automobile bumpers, we have long endured, is lovely. What a relief to know the worst! What an entertainment!... We get a similar shuddering gratification from the Marxes, Freuds, Joyces. But their revelations are really only attempts to establish new criteria and data for truth, while the exposé, making no unsettling departure into novelty, denounces perversions and transgressions, such as lies, thefts and bigotry, of a morality already accepted in principle. The exposé surpasses the truth-telling of a Marx or Freud, because it presents us with the truth not merely as a perplexing guide to dubious action but as the action itself. The exposé is the truth armed, the exposé is a bombshell—isn't that how publishers usually advertise it?—which in the moment of its publication goes off with a splendid bang, shattering and routing the enemy. A Marx urges us to fight. But a documented disclosure of the miscreancies of a meat packer or a politician seldom summons the reader to the wars except as a spectator. The book itself is the ultimate weapon and the whole battle, winning instant capitulation or at least blushes from the abashed culprit. The truth works.

Here, however, in David Rogers' *110 Livingston Street*,* we are offered a possibly unique example of the exposé as a cry of despair.

Before I discuss this strange betrayal of expectations, I must assert that this analysis of the New York city school system is undeniably excellent. *Undeniably*, because even those who are prominent targets of Dr. Rogers' strictures would not dispute most of his facts and even some of his conclusions. For instance, he finds that Superintendent Bernard Donovan has, like his predecessors in command of the system, often been frustrated by his subordinates when he attempts reforms (but not always to his chagrin, since his commitment to reform is less than fervent). Or there is Dr. Rogers' minutely detailed demonstration that a majority of New York citizens and almost all of the city's economic, political and social eminences are covertly or overtly opposed to a desegregation of the schools.

ALTHOUGH THE BOOK IS DIFFICULT TO READ because of the clumsiness of its organization, it amply fulfills its preliminary function as an exposé—the esthetic-emotional—by heaping up scandalous stories which pleasurably justify our sus-

* 110 LIVINGSTONE STREET, by David Rogers, Random House, New York, 1968. 584 pp. \$8.95.