

## *Barack Obama's Autobiography*

Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father*, Canongate, 2008, £8.99, ISBN 978 1 84767 094 6

This autobiography of Barack Obama's (first published in the U.S. in 1995) is very good, and deserves the praise it has been given. Ian Critchley, in the *Times*, typically of its reviewers, thought it, "Thoughtful, moving and brilliantly written, . . . shot through with an honesty lacking in most politicians' memoirs." If Obama becomes President, all Americans, not just blacks, can feel justifiably proud that the man at the top of *their* tree can think and can write: tell a story, turn a sentence, describe a scene, convey character, write dialogue, and all without relying on cliché. He'd be a President *anybody* would have to recognise was a thinking, civilised man, someone to put our Browns and Milibands to shame.

*But* I'm still not sure that, if I were an American, I'd vote for him.

He's *so* honest he's not afraid to show that he lacks faith in the civilisation he possesses, even as he demonstrates that he possesses it. He is drawn, repeatedly, to fellow blacks' expressions of distrust—distrust not just in individual whites or in particular *bits* of American life but in the whole civilisation they are all part of, as if the whole thing, himself included, were just a white conspiracy or construct, a "Matrix", as in the film of that name. A high-school friend, Ray, he plays basketball with:

We were always playing on the white man's court, Ray had told me, by the white man's rules. If the principal, or the coach, or a teacher, or Kurt, wanted to spit in your face, he could, because he had power and you didn't. If he decided not to, if he treated you like a man or came to your defense, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his. Whatever he decided to do, it was his decision to make, not yours, and because of that fundamental power he held over you, because it preceded and would outlast his individual motives and inclinations, any distinction between good and bad whites held negligible meaning. In fact, you couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black, unfettered self—the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass—had been freely chosen by you. (p. 85)

An old poet, Frank, warning him about education, just before he starts college:

And the people who are old enough to know better, who fought all those years for your right to go to college—they're just so happy to see you there that they won't tell you the truth. The real price of admission. Leaving your race at the door. Leaving your people behind. (p. 97)

A teacher in a run-down black school in the most run-down part of black Chicago, telling him, after he's graduated but before he goes back to do a higher degree, what a real black education would be:

Just think what a real education for these children would involve. It would start by giving a child an understanding of *himself*, *his* world, *his* culture, *his* community. . . . But for the black child, everything's turned upside down. From day one what's he learning about? Someone else's history. Someone else's culture. Not only that, this culture he's supposed to learn is the same culture that's systematically rejected him, denied his humanity. . . . So that's what we're dealing with here. Where I can, I try to fill the void. I expose students to African history, geography, artistic traditions. . . . It's about giving these young people a base for themselves. Unless they're rooted in their own traditions, they won't ever be able to appreciate what other cultures have to offer— (pp. 258–9)

It's understandable that someone who's black—and despised on that account—living in a white man's world, should be drawn to the fallacy variously expressed here, but that doesn't make it any less a fallacy, or snare. If it were true that the court is so completely the white man's that everything, including the very words in which you might say so, are his, and not your own, then you can't say so and can't know it to be so. What you say is self-refuting. And there's an obvious sense in which to be educated you've *got* to leave your race at the door. You can't learn arithmetic—or to read and write—as a black, or white, man. There's no black, or white, Chemistry; and there's no black, or white, or women-only, literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> Laying down my race or my sex at the door of education, as laying down something partial, isn't a price I pay but

1 He shows us what it is to *not* leave your race at the door, when he writes about *Heart of Darkness*. (His comments echo a well-known essay by Chinua Achebe—on which see *Words in Edgeways* nos 7 and 14):

The way Conrad sees it, Africa's the cesspool of the world, black folks are savages, and any contact with them breeds infection. . . . the book teaches me things. About white people, I mean. See, the book's not really about Africa. Or black people. It's about the man who wrote it. The European. The American. A particular way of looking at the world. If you can keep your distance, it's all there, in what's said and what's left unsaid. So I read the book to help me understand just what it is that makes white people so afraid. Their demons. The way ideas get twisted around. It helps me understand how people learn to hate. (p. 102)

a reward I receive. What an infernal nuisance and distraction it would be never to be able to lay aside and escape my race or my sex or my age or anything else about me determined by my genes and hormones. And as for teaching black children in English-speaking America that their traditions are African and that the American English in which you say so and they understand you to say so belongs to some *other* culture than your and their own... isn't that so crazy a self-contradiction that anyone who cares about the truth—especially someone with no time for “sloppy thinking” and “received opinion”—*must* repudiate it, whatever his sympathy with the experience that might have led another into it?

How else is the fallacy to be understood except as an example of the harm white racism provokes black Americans to do to themselves? It isn't an escape from racism but a succumbing to it. What does it say about Obama that he doesn't feel called on to say so?

The question for Barack Obama's reader (and more urgently, of course, for Obama himself) is, how does he stand now in relation to this attractive and delusive fallacy? He plainly records his younger self, as an actor in his book, as having been drawn to it but does he, as the older writer of the book, draw back from it, or not?

The answer to that seems to me unclear—to the point, perhaps, of being wanting in honesty. He never owns the fallacy as his own but he never repudiates it either. Of course, in a way, his book is throughout a sort of implicit repudiation, all the evidence you could ever need of his triumphantly taking hold, *as his own*, of what he might, at various points in his life, have been tempted to see as someone else's culture. (If only one could look forward to an English Prime Minister, black or white, at all similarly taking hold of it!)

But that he himself sees his own book as such evidence, I don't see. There's a passage near the end which seems to me to show the fallacy's continuing attraction for him. It's about the American legal system.

He says, firstly, and no doubt perfectly fairly,

The study of law can be disappointing at times, a matter of applying narrow rules and arcane procedure to an uncooperative reality; a sort of glorified accounting that serves to regulate the affairs of those who have power—and that too often seeks to explain, to those who do not, the ultimate wisdom and justness of their condition. (p. 437)

Then he turns to say something on the other side, to defend the law as having something to do with justice. And it's the terms in which he makes the defence that I find suspect. He becomes vague and sentimental, *speechifying*.

To begin with, he never mentions “justice”. His word for what the law is when it isn't merely power dressed-up is “memory”: it is the memory of a “conversation” in which “a nation arg[ues] with its conscience”. On one side of the conversation (I take it) is the law as it serves the interests of those with power; on the other side are the voices which, seeking to make it something different, and better, appeal to conscience.

Now, to make any very spirited defence of the law, Obama needs to find conscience—or justice—to be a principle within it, something native to it, not forced upon it or imported into it from outside. And he does make a slight gesture towards doing so. He quotes the Declaration of Independence—*We hold these truths to be self-evident*—and mentions, in passing, Jefferson and Lincoln. But these universally acceptable tokens got out of the way, he finds the voice of conscience not anywhere within or close to the law but outside it, in the voices exclusively of “protest”:<sup>2</sup>

In those words [of the Declaration] I hear the spirit of Douglass and Delany, as well as Jefferson and Lincoln; the struggles of Martin and Malcolm and unheralded marchers to bring those words to life. I hear the voices of Japanese families interned behind barbed wire; young Russian Jews cutting patterns in Lower East Side sweatshops; dust-bowl farmers loading up their trucks with the remains of shattered lives. I hear the voices of those who stand outside this country's borders, the weary, hungry bands crossing the Rio Grande. I hear all these voices clamouring for recognition, all of them asking the very same questions that I sometimes, late at night, find myself asking the Old Man. What is our community, and how might that community be reconciled with our freedom? How far do our obligations reach? How do we transform mere power into justice, mere sentiment into love? The answers I find in law books don't always satisfy me—for every *Brown vs Board of Education* I find a score of cases where conscience is sacrificed to expedience or greed. And yet, in the conversation itself, in the joining of voices, I find myself modestly encouraged, believing that so long as the questions are still being asked, what binds us together might, somehow, ultimately, prevail. (p. 437)

<sup>2</sup> It's not as if his own experience, recorded in his book, doesn't suggest a connection between law—however imperfect—and justice by showing him how impossible of attainment justice becomes where there is no law, as in his childhood Indonesia, under Sukharno, and in Kenya, where he has no success retrieving some “lost” luggage until he appeals to the local alternative to law, family and tribal loyalty:

“That's where it all starts,” she said, “The Big Man. Then his assistant, or his family, or his friend, or his tribe. It's the same whether you want a phone, or a visa, or a job. Who are your relatives? Who do you know? If you don't know somebody, you can forget it. ... [That's] what holds everything together here.” (p. 322)

And if I stood inside that country's borders, as a citizen, and voter, I'd wonder what a sort of President it would be whose sympathies were so one-sidedly aroused by the voices of "protest" (including of foreigners protesting that they wanted to get into the country illegally); who thought the law he pledged to uphold was one part justice to twenty parts expedience or greed; and who doubted the civilisation he belonged to—and himself along with it—so distinctly that he made doubt seem a form of belief. And if such doubt *is* universal amongst black Americans—as I think he suggests it is—I wonder whether his book, for all its qualities, doesn't, in the end, give Americans a good reason not just for not having *him* as their President but for not having a black man at all.

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