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Contributors

Raymond Pace Alexander, Judge of Commons Pleas Court,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Alma C. Allen, Professor of Romance Languages, Norfolk Division,
Virginia State College (On leave), Bluefield State College,
West Virginia

Venkataraman Ananthanarayanan, Professor of Physics and
Mathematics

Sarvan K. Bhatia, Professor of Economics

Clyde W. Hall, Professor and Head of Industrial Education

Miles W. Jackson, Jr., Chief Librarian, Atlanta University, Georgia
John W. Jordan, Instructor of English

Elonnie J. Josey, Associate Professor and Librarian

Sheldon Marcus, Educational and Vocational Counselor,
New York Public Schools

Charles Pratt, Professor of Chemistry

Kamalakar B. Raut, Professor of Chemistry

Robert D. Reid, Dean of Faculty

Tommie M. Samkange, Associate Professor of Psychology,
Tuskegee Institute, Alabama

Philip D. Vairo, Associate Professor of Education and Chairman
Department of Education, The University of North Carolina
at Charlotte

Nazir A. Warsi, Professor of Mathematics and Physics

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Why Climb Mount Parnassus?*

by

Miles M. Jackson, Jr.

National Library Week with the theme, "Wake Up and Read," was launched in 1958 as the first attempt to create interest and call attention to the nation's libraries, to stimulate the establishment and building of home libraries and to promote the many values of reading for people of all ages in every walk of life. This week of celebrating the value of libraries is not an end in itself, but rather a concerted effort to focus on the year round activities of reading and making use of libraries.

This morning, I am not going to give you a sermon and I assure you not a lecture on why you should use libraries, because I know Mr. Josey and his staff have urged you to take advantage of your library here at Savannah State College. Instead, I want to talk with you about three men—James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. These three men have several things in common. First, they are Americans; second, they are Negroes; and third, somewhere in their writings they have revealed that librarians and libraries have played an important role in their lives as creative writers. Two of these men are contemporaries of yours and thus have witnessed all of the historic events that have taken place in your life time and mine. As creative writers they have chosen to climb Mount Parnassus to view and interpret the world as they see it. A word about Parnassus. Parnassus is a mountain in the central part of Greece. It was at one time regarded as sacred to Apollo and the Muses and as the domain of literature. I am using Parnassus figuratively here because as we will see later these three men were born in environments that you and I know so well. But more important than this is the fact that something happened to them as young men that caused them to choose creative writing as a means by which they could best make their contribution to their fellow man.

Let us take a look briefly at these three men—their places of birth, environment as young men and some of the events that perhaps led to their becoming writers. James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924. He is the eldest of nine children whose father was a Penecostal preacher. The Harlem that James Baldwin knows so well was his home for seventeen years. Baldwin describes his father as "a proud, bitter, and rigid man whom his children were never glad to see come home." In this same essay he comments further, "we had not known that he was being eaten up by paranoia, and the discovery that his cruelty, to our bodies and our minds had been one of the symptoms of his illness was not, then, enough to enable us to forgive

*Delivered at the National Library Week Convention, Savannah State College, April 30, 1965.

him." It was almost twenty years later that James was able to give this explanation of his experiences with his father, "Part of his problem was he couldn't feed his kids, but I was a kid and I didn't know that."

It was as a youngster that Baldwin discovered the library—a Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. He attended the children's story hour and as a teenager he read and re-read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Tale of Two Cities* and held as his favorite authors Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Hawthorne and many others. By the time Baldwin was fourteen, he was a preacher at the Fireside Pentecostal Church in Harlem and as one literary critic said "he preached the word, reveling in a most unholy fashion over his superiority to his father as a ministerial drawing card." Some of his teachers at DeWitt Clinton High School remember him as a "small, bright, sad-looking boy." He was editor of the High School literary magazine and spent much of his free time writing, instead of stick ball on the streets of Harlem. After three "hysterical-tinged years" as a preacher, he discovered that he would rather be a writer than a boy preacher. He realized that living at home with his family did not permit him the solitude and time for the creative process, and so for the next five years Baldwin lived in Greenwich Village earning his living as a handy man, office boy, factory worker, dishwasher and waiter. Intent on mastering the craft, he spent his evenings writing. His big break came in 1945 when he was awarded a Eugene Saxton Fellowship, which permitted him to devote himself full time to his interest in literary work. Following his first professional publication, which was a book review in *Nation* magazine, it was not long before articles and stories appeared in *Partisan Review*, *American Mercury*, *Commentary*, *Reporter* and *Harper's Magazine*.

Like many of the earlier American writers, who as young men became disenchanted with America and became exiled, Baldwin moved to Paris in 1948. It was while in Paris he was able to develop in a more congenial atmosphere. He stated that he wanted to go to Paris so that he would not become "merely a Negro writer." Europe soon allowed him to view America objectively. Being far enough away, he discovered that this had many advantages. But after a few years he found that Paris was not completely the haven he had expected—*he found no green pasture*. At least he was able to publish his first book, a novel with a significant enough title, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. This first novel was a realistic and poetic story of the religious life of a fourteen year old boy in Harlem. This first book was plainly an autobiographical novel. Who else was more qualified than James Baldwin to write on such a subject? In 1955, *Notes of a Native Son* was published and brought together ten essays that revealed his feelings on a number of subjects. Following this second book there followed several novels and essays. And as you know, *The Fire Next Time* was a best seller in 1963 and is considered an explosive summing up of his views on the racial problem in the United States. I might add that Baldwin's first play *The Amen Corner* was produced at Howard University in 1954 and again last

year in Beverly Hills, California. A very recent play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* opened on Broadway and is now appearing in Europe. Librarians like to think about Baldwin's introduction to the Harlem Branch of the NYPL was the beginning of his becoming a writer.

In Ralph Ellison's recent book *Shadow and Act* published in 1964, his dedication reads, "For Morteza Sprague, a dedicated Dreamer in a land most strange." An author dedicates his book to an individual or individuals who have been an inspiration to him or contributed in some great way to the writing of his book. It is significant, I feel, to note that Morteza Sprague, the dreamer, is a librarian at Tuskegee Institute and has been for thirty years or more. Ralph Ellison attended Tuskegee Institute and as a freshman took an introductory course in literature from Mr. Sprague. Ellison's main interest was music then. He had played trumpet in the Oklahoma City High School band and was studying harmony and form at Tuskegee. In the Spring of 1962, I had the good fortune to meet Ralph Ellison, and he told me that during this time he also had a great interest in sculpture and contemplated, at one time, while at Tuskegee, changing his major to sculpture. This was before he even dreamed of earning his living by writing. In fact, Ellison's father had hopes of Ralph's becoming a poet. His father did not reveal this until many years after Ellison dropped out of Tuskegee.

Now Ellison is an older man than Baldwin and five years younger than the late Richard Wright. Ellison came up a different path. He was born in Oklahoma, attended Tuskegee for three years and out of this early experience his life was shaped so as to make him into a different kind of writer. Ellison lost his father in a different way than Baldwin—rather than losing his father to death it was to desertion. His father had been a construction foreman, served in the Army in the Philippines and the Orient, had read widely and because of his love of literature had named his son Ralph Waldo Emerson Ellison. His mother was strong minded and had definite convictions. Although she worked as a servant for white families in Oklahoma City, she also campaigned among Negro voters for Eugene Debs' Socialist Party. Ellison recalled that his mother bought him a phonograph player and records, electrical sets and a toy typewriter and told him that "the world would not always be in the condition it is if he fought hard to change it." At an early age his mother had encouraged him to read, and he discovered while in high school, T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and because of his interest in poetry he attempted to "follow up all the footnotes, reading all those books." Perhaps, it was in the library at Tuskegee when he discovered Countee Cullen's poem "Heritage." A poem that was to make a profound change in his attitude towards the Negro.

Ellison left Tuskegee at the completion of his third year because of a misunderstanding regarding his scholarship. He went to New York for work and study in music and sculpturing and never returned to college. In New York he met Richard Wright who felt he had talent in writing and encouraged him. Ralph wrote short stories, articles on jazz and on other aspects of America cultural contribu-

tions. In 1952, his first novel *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award and wide acclaim as an American novel. The writing of this work established Ellison in the ranks of the great American novelists.

It should be noted that Ellison's orientation as a young man is very much revealed when one takes a look at his attitude towards himself as an American Negro. He believes there is a distinctive Negro culture and that the Negro identity of the future will be shaped and molded out of the unique Negro folk tradition. In answer to the question, "What am I?" Ellison remarked, "I answer that I am a Negro American. That means far more than something racial. It does not mean race, it means something cultural, that I am a man who shares a dual heritage. For me, the Negro is a member of an American-bound cultural group with its own idiom, its own psychology, growing out of its preoccupations with certain problems for hundreds of years, out of all its history. The American Negro stock is here, a synthesis of various African cultures, then of slavery, and all of the experiences of Negroes since." We might agree or disagree with what Ellison says. But there are certain facts of Ellison's life and writing. When he says of America, "I think it is a wonderful country." We know he means it. As a writer he sees our problems as human, not racial and tries hard not to get into the field of sociology in his writings. In his introduction to *Shadow and Act* he states his feeling about reading. "The pleasure which I derived from reading had long been a necessity. And in the act of reading, that marvelous collaboration between the writer's artful vision and the sense of the reader's sense of life, I had become acquainted with other possible selves—freer, more courageous and ingenuous and even wise."

In 1909 on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, Richard Wright was born of a peasant father and a mother who was a devout christian. She was forced to support her young family because of circumstances beyond her control. By fifteen, Richard Wright had lived in Natchez, Jackson, Greenwood and Carters in Mississippi; Elaine, Helena, and West Helena in Arkansas; and Memphis. As we can see, his childhood consisted of moving from one Southern town to the next, or part-time jobs and sporadic schooling. At fifteen, he ran away from home and took a job in Memphis. It was in Memphis where he had his first public library experience. In his essay "*The Ethics of Jim Crow*," published in 1937, he describes how he devised a way to borrow books from the public library. ". . . It was almost impossible to get a book to read. It was assumed that after a Negro had imbibed what scanty schooling the state furnished he had no further need for books. I was always borrowing books from men on the job. One day I mustered enough courage to ask one of the men to let me get books from the library in his name. Surprisingly, he consented . . . Armed with a library card, I obtained books in the following manner. I would write a note addressed to the librarian and sign the name of my white supervisor. I would stand at the desk, hat in hand, looking as unbookish as possible. When I received the books I would take them home. If the books listed in the note happened to be out, I would sneak into the lobby and forge a new one."

In Memphis, Wright developed a passion for reading, cutting his teeth on authors such as Theodore Dreiser, H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. His first published pieces were poems, articles and stories. The Federal Writers Project hired him and published one of his stories in the anthology, *American Stuff*. His first book *Uncle Tom's Children* (1936) was followed by *Native Son*, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, *Black Boy*, *The Outsider*, and several other works of lesser stature.

In the course of Richard Wright's life, he rejected America three times: once as a Negro Nationalist, once as a young political revolutionary and finally as an expatriate. He searched for an honorable adjustment in this country, but ended up moving his family to Paris where he died about four years ago. Unlike James Baldwin, Richard Wright, alienated and disallusioned, died away from his homeland. Yes, something did happen to Richard Wright as a young man.

Very briefly we have looked at the lives of three American writers. Three men who have climbed Mount Parnassus. Now the question—"Why Climb Mount Parnassus?" We could reply, "because the view is better from there," or "a writer needs to be in the clouds in order to have the objectivity to see those things in life we all see much clearer and with depth," or "to associate with the muses on some sort of esoteric level." You can see we could go on and on about reasons for climbing Mount Parnassus. But I would like to invite you to ask yourselves this question now. Perhaps you will not have an answer immediately. I assure you—there are pat answers that can be given to you in class or in a convocation such as this. But I think the real answer will come through personal discovery.

I would like to emphasize the fact that my brief remarks this morning are not intended as a critique of American literature, but rather an attempt to call your attention to three men who through personal discovery found libraries and books, in a very practical way, to be a source of inspiration that I would like to pass on to you. Being content to use only textbooks or to go on day after day blindly—past the campus library is not the way to make this discovery—it is not the way to begin the climb of Mount Parnassus.