

D'après Paul Ginestier l'aptitude de comprendre le chant des oiseaux est égale au don de la vision poétique¹¹. Il n'est donc pas étonnant que la réponse de Ségramor ne diffère pas de l'avertissement de Galaad:

Ségramor—Attendez... (Il ferme les yeux, penche la tête attentif, les cris d'oiseaux redoublent) Ils disent... Il disent: Paie, paie, paie, paie, paie, paie, paie, Il faut payer, payer, payer. [...].
/Acte III, p.176/

Il s'ensuit que *Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* constituent le drame comportant un grand nombre de connotations symboliques sur lesquelles peut se baser l'analyse des personnages. Cette pièce, ainsi que la légende arthurienne unit plusieurs éléments qui semblent contradictoires, mais qui effectivement créent une image cohérente et suggestive. La présence de Dieu et de Satan dans l'univers du drame, conformément à l'esprit de la légende, ne contredit pas l'existence du destin personnifié par les fées, natives de la mythologie celte.

En ce qui concerne la quête du Graal, elle est traitée dans cette étude comme métaphore des aspirations mystiques des héros de la pièce. Néanmoins la symbolique du Graal, polysémique par définition, permet évidemment d'autres interprétations. Il paraît toutefois que la mise en pratique de la méthode inventée par Paul Ginestier, fait dégager des *Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* certains composants qui n'ont pas été pris en considération par les critiques de l'oeuvre coctelienne.

¹¹ Cf. Ibidem, p. 106.

Bianka Zarzycka

Treading Through America – Malcolm X's Search for Identity

The issue of black identity became central to African-American literature in the 1960s. In that decade of great social and political changes the basic question that black literature had to answer was: who is the black man? To deal with this task, black writers had to analyze their culture, experience, and history.

The starting point for the quest for black man's self was the awareness of a dichotomy in black man's identity. The term African-American encompasses two distinct cultures – the African and the American. Living on the verge of two cultures is a challenge to the individual who must operate in a world of contrasting customs and manners, different ideologies, and divergent social habits. Both cultures assert themselves in one's experience and are somehow reconciled, thus, producing a peculiar, bicultural identity. The effort to reconcile the elements of the bicultural self is an attempt to find completeness as a human being.

However, in the case of black Americans such reconciliation was complicated due to two factors: one was "cultural estrangement"¹ and the other, the denigration of black culture. For years, blacks were marginalized by American culture, and were made to feel that they were outcasts meant to perform an inferior role. Moreover, white America created in blacks the desire to reject their black culture, prompting them instead to look worshipfully upon the white culture. What follows from that cultural estrangement is that for years, to the white man, African-Americans were invisible. The white man

¹ Rajiv Sudhi, *Forms of Black Consciousness* (Godhpur: Jainsons Publications, 1991), 10.

stereotyped the blacks and endowed them with a set of degrading traits, such as laziness, stupidity, and dishonesty. He also declared them inferior human beings.

Malcolm X was among those people who felt the need to examine and explode such unjust concepts. He was the person who challenged the white stereotype of the black man as he moved to a position traditionally reserved for whites only – the position of an intellectual leader. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, ghost-written by Alex Haley, is the story of an individual who, throughout his life, tests various ideologies and lifestyles in order to understand who he really is. It is the story of a man who in search of identity first becomes a stereotypical Negro and then the stereotype's utmost negation.

Malcolm's life as presented in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* falls into three main parts: the first chapters of the book present his life as a street hustler, the central ones deal with the Muslim episode in his life (involvement with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam), while the closing ones focus on the years of his political engagement. In each period in his life Malcolm searched for a definition of himself that could serve as the basis of his life. Therefore, he changed his social roles and rediscovered the meanings of his identity in the collective context with others.

The pattern which emerges from the autobiography is the following: first, renunciation of the original identity, next, assuming a new religious identity and finally transforming that identity to suit specific political goals. To get a full picture of Malcolm it is necessary to examine these three stages in his life, and analyze his experience in terms of the identities which he successively assumed.

When in 1941, the sixteen-year-old Malcolm Little left Lansing for Boston, he was a rebellious black teenager who felt that the job of a carpenter, suggested to him by his teacher, Mr Ostrowski, was beneath his dignity and aptitude. The teacher said to the boy who hoped to become a lawyer:

A lawyer – that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work.²

These words were a blow to Malcolm. It was the first time he realized that white Americans considered blacks inferior, and that America was a land of unequal opportunities. "It was then that [he] began to change – inside" (AMX, 37).

In Boston Malcolm became increasingly race-conscious. The experience of "being within a vast black population for the first time"³ awoke his sense of race and influenced his attitude towards life. The flashy nightlife of the black ghetto, black clubs and restaurants with their poolrooms held a natural lure for Malcolm who "felt relaxed among Negroes who were being their natural selves and not putting on airs" (AMX, 43). This ease was manifested by 'zoot suits' and 'conks.' Any self-respecting black man wore brightly coloured outfits with pants that were unusually wide at the knee and cut narrow at the bottom. Hair had to be 'conked,' that is straightened, to look like a white person's hair.

Malcolm aspired to be just like his new friends. He bought for himself a zoot suit from a white store and conked his hair. When he moved in with a white girl, Sophia, he acquired utmost respectability and highest status in the eyes of fellow blacks. He was accepted by them, which he considered quite an achievement.

Later, as a spokesman for the Nation of Islam, Malcolm would emphasize that the conk was a tragic element of his youthful waywardness and his "first big step towards self-degradation" (AMX, 54). As he realized later, together with a zoot suit, he bought for himself a racism – loaded status symbol. That colourful outfit, which white America sold blacks, expressed "the colonized position of the

² Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (with the assistance of Alex Haley), New York: Grove Press, 36. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in the text.

³ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., 54.

black people."⁴ A zoot suit was a token of black inferiority; it was designed by whites to emphasize the servitude of blacks. Whatever white America offered to them – skin bleaching or hair straightening products – blacks would buy. Black man's only goal was to look like a white man, the costs did not matter.

It seems that at this stage of his life, Malcolm's identity was virtually identical with the stereotype of a lazy and stupid 'nigger.' He embraced the stereotype and acted exactly as the white man thought he should act. Malcolm hated his blackness and looked up to the whites. He appropriated white standards of beauty and followed white fashion. Later, he would consider it pathetic.

This destructive influence of white standards expressed itself also in Malcolm's rejection of the black woman Laura for the white Sophia. Obviously, in 1942 Malcolm looked at things differently. He desperately wanted to belong to the so-called "Hill elite," and his association with white women was in his eyes the evidence of his masculinity and power. With his straight hair and a white woman at his side he almost felt like a white man who could do anything he wished.

According to Malcolm's friend, a musician Jarvis, Malcolm was seeking in his Boston years a sense of self-importance. "These feelings that he had about importance and being somebody in the world took place long before he landed in prison."⁵ That is why, he sought out the company of celebrities and always wanted to be among famous and notorious people. Malcolm needed the acclaim of the ghetto. And when he became involved with the Boston's underworld fringe, this acclaim seemed to be complete.

It seems that by choosing to become wayward, Malcolm selected the approach he thought was left for him. To be black meant, according to Malcolm X "to wear a badge of shame which was so mystically and deeply accepted that all the practical injustices the

⁴ Rajiv Sudhi, *Forms of Black Consciousness* (New Delhi: Jainsons Publications, 1991), 91.

⁵ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., 56.

white world might visit upon the black would seem only a kind of inverted justice."⁶ As an adventurous teenager, Malcolm covered this shame under flamboyant clothes which, paradoxically, made it more visible. Moreover, by violating white laws he chose the 'honesty' of open rebellion against the white oppressors. For a black seventeen-year-old boy in America, streets, liquors and reefers were the only future he could hope for. White women and straight hair were just to make up for the awareness of the unavoidable future fiasco.

When Boston lost its charm, Malcolm, known by then as Red because of his red conk, moved to Harlem. There he was schooled in hustling, pimping, peddling dope, and conning. Conning was a form of rebellion, it was a game in which a black man, 'darky,' played out the white man's fantasies of black identity and "thereby mastered the master and gained the only self-respect available to him under the circumstances."⁷ Malcolm believed that white people were obsessed with their own sense of self-importance, therefore he personified black stereotypes just to entertain whites.

Although Malcolm claimed that at that time he had a politically 'sterile mind,'⁸ it is clear that the Harlem years sharpened his race-consciousness. The idea behind conning or "Uncle Tomming" was to create a barrier between the whites and blacks; it was to emphasize differences in language, behaviour and manners between the two races. Malcolm flaunted himself as a wild, uncivilized Negro to play with white people's sense of superiority. Therefore, to claim that he was blind to racial issues is inaccurate.

Many years later, when Malcolm was asked what he had been before he joined the Nation of Islam, he said: "I was a bum. I was a

⁶ Robert Penn Warren, "Malcolm X. Mission and Meaning" in *Malcolm X As They Knew Him*, ed. David Gallen (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 220.

⁷ Sidonie Smith, *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1974), 13-14.

⁸ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., 62.

⁹ Cunningham and Golden, "Malcolm: The Boston Years," *The Nation*, 6 May 1961, 391.

misfit. I was an outcast. I was a black man in America."⁹ This statement of self-analysis must be understood as a reflection of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. When writing the *Autobiography* and referring to his pre-Nation period, Malcolm presented his youth critically in order to better enhance Elijah's redemptive claims. Speaking about his conk, zoot suit and hustling activities, Malcolm said: "It makes you wonder if the Negro has completely lost his sense of identity, lost touch with himself" (AMX, 54).

However, up to 1946, Malcolm was happy with his identity of a strong Harlem hustler. He was respected and recognized which made him feel successful and self-important. He did not see his own degradation, since he believed that he was living an enviable life. In moments of despair or temporary crisis he would take drugs which "helped [him] to push the thought to the back of [his] mind" (AMX, 146). In other words, he tried to avoid thinking and evaluating his life. He just struggled to survive.

Malcolm X's experience of Boston and Harlem was in the 1930s and 40s considered symbolic of how white America shaped the black sense of identity. Since in the 1940s black people were still deprived of basic rights, they had very little to lose. They got involved in robberies and crimes and "[help] themselves narcotized to keep from having to face their miserable existence." (AMX, 102) Their self-esteem was shaped by negative feedback from the white environment. Therefore, their sense of self was perverted and they often did not have an idea of who and what they were.

Had it not been for his imprisonment, Malcolm X would have probably remained Detroit Red till the end of his life. Malcolm's prison period, lasting from 1946 to 1952, led to the first extraordinary transformation he underwent "as he searched for the truth about himself and his relation to black consciousness, black freedom and unity, and black religion."¹⁰

⁹ Cunningham and Golden, "Malcolm: The Boston Years", *The Nation*, 6 May 1961, 391.

¹⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 6.

While serving a sentence for burglary, Malcolm was introduced by his brother to a quasi-religious, black nationalist organization called "The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America." By that time, Malcolm had already undertaken programmes of reading and debating. His friendship with an intelligent burglar called Bimbi led him to studying the Bible and philosophy. His mind was, therefore, ready to absorb new ideologies. The ideas of the Nation of Islam were what influenced him at that stage of his life.

Malcolm's brother, Reginald, told him about the faith of Black Muslims. The Muslims believed that the white man was the devil who had deprived black people of their own language, religion and culture. The black man was, therefore, alienated in time and space because he had no history, no country, and no identity. Reginald also stressed the destructive power of Christianity which "taught the 'Negro' that black was a curse [and] it taught him to hate everything black, including himself" (AMX, 163). Islam, according to Black Muslims, was the only true religious alternative for the black man.

After Reginald's first visit in prison, Malcolm had some "first serious thoughts ever" (AMX, 161) – thoughts regarding the lost "Asiatic" identity of the black man and the gradual downfall of the white world. He was so impressed by the ideology of Black Muslims, the followers of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, that he decided to devote his life to spreading their teachings.

Malcolm is emphatic when he speaks in the *Autobiography* of his prison conversion. The Black Muslim faith was a "binding light that enabled him to move from personal darkness to some personal light."¹¹ It transformed his understanding of the world and of the relationships between people. After his conversion, Malcolm voluntarily gave up prison-made substitutes for drugs and cigarettes, as well as went on a Muslim diet. He felt he needed to purify himself after his long-term promiscuity and dependance upon reefer and alcohol.

¹¹ Rajiv Suthi, 98.

Despite Malcolm's claim that the transformation was a blinding light, some continuity seems to exist between his old self and his new one. This continuity is evident in the account he gives of his self-education. He had started reading books and dictionaries before he was introduced to the Nation. Therefore, his interest in education and intellectual growth was at least partly aroused by his own ambition and curiosity, and not only by the requirements of the Nation. Carol Ohmann notices that the whole account Malcolm X gives of his conversion to the Nation dwells very little on the subjective nature of the experience. Instead, it concentrates "on measurable achievements, on feats of learning, performed early and late, at the expense of sleep and in neglect of meals."¹² It can be argued, therefore, that the change Malcolm X underwent at that time did not necessitate any complete or drastic revision of his conception of himself, although it did lead him to reassess the world in which he had lived.

The faith of the Nation of Islam "gave coherence to the variegated experiences of his life."¹³ Assessing his hustling years, Malcolm realized that his life had been a parody of success, that it had been worthless since it had slavishly imitated white patterns. He had looked toward the white world for his own authentication. The Muslim ideology taught him to be proud of his blackness and to despise whites and their culture. The teachings of Elijah Muhammad changed his system of values since

Elijah Muhammad spoke of how the black man was Original Man, who had been kidnapped from his homeland and stripped of his language, his culture, his family structure, his family name, until the black man in America did not even realize who he was. He told us... how his teachings of the true knowledge of ourselves would lift up the black man from the bottom of the white man's society and place the black man where he had begun, at the top of civilization (AMX, 197).

¹² Carol Ohmann, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Revolutionary Use of the Franklin Tradition," *American Quarterly*, 1970, 139.

¹³ Carol Ohmann, 137.

Malcolm, for the first time in his life, came to consider himself superior to the white people and decided to build his new identity on the conviction that his race had a glorious past of which he should be proud.

It may be worthwhile to consider, at this point, why Malcolm decided to join this new religion. It seems that he was searching for a social base which would affirm his identity. The streets could offer him only the identity of a bum and social misfit. The Nation, on the other hand, allowed him to reorder his life on a number of levels while – for the first time – fusing his personal religious sense with his black consciousness.¹⁴ Malcolm could now reorder his life guided by new goals and ideals. When looking back at his life, he recalled that it was as if "someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person" (AMX, 232).

Thus, the conversion gave him a sense of renewal and a new purpose to his life: "his self-education was empowered and directed by that purpose."¹⁵ When he left prison, Malcolm X invested all his time and energy to spreading the Muslim version of black history. He became a faithful follower of Elijah Muhammad and a devoted leader of the Nation. His new commitment gave Malcolm a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity – "And now Islam meant more to me than anything I ever had known in my life. Islam and Mr Elijah Muhammad had changed my whole world" (AMX, 186).

However, this enthusiasm for Muhammad's teachings did not last forever. Since Malcolm grew intellectually independent, he was bound to end up in conflict with "the cultic parochialism on which the Nation depended."¹⁶ Fanatic allegiance to Elijah Muhammad began to restrict a studious and analytical minister Malcolm X. However, it was primarily the news of Elijah's adultery and indulgent life that alienated Malcolm from the Nation of Islam. Malcolm's reaction to the

¹⁴ Louis A. De Caro, Jr., 84.

¹⁵ Louis A. De Caro, Jr., 86.

¹⁶ Louis A. De Caro, Jr., 110.

astounding news was a mixture of shock, anger and disappointment. With time, though, he began to see good sides of his separation from the Nation. In an interview for the New York Times he said:

I feel like a man who has been asleep somewhat and under someone else's control. I feel that what I'm thinking and saying is now for myself. Before it was for and by the guidance of Elijah Muhammad. Now I think with my own mind.¹⁷

Malcolm's split with Muhammad began a new phase in his life which climaxed during his pilgrimage – known as the Hajj – to Mecca in 1964. He came to Mecca as Malcolm X and left it as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the pilgrim whose eyes were suddenly opened to the possibility of racial reconciliation. The experience was due to “a transforming exposure to the company of white Muslims, whose existence he had known about but denied, and to a leveling spiritual brotherhood with them.”¹⁸ In the *Autobiography* he writes about the impact of the journey to Mecca:

My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the Holy Land, I saw what I never had seen in thirty-nine years here in America. I saw all races, all colours, – blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans – in true brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshipping as one! (AMX, 362)

The conviction that the true Islamic faith was really nonracial made Malcolm redefine some doctrines of his faith. However, it does not mean that Malik Shabazz was a character discontinuous with Malcolm X. Malcolm did change his view upon humanity and became “a human rights advocate,”¹⁹ but this did not undermine his older view of race. When asked by a journalist, Claude Lewis, whether there was a new Malcolm X, Malcolm replied: “Well, there is a new one [...]”

¹⁷ Interview with Malcolm X, *New York Times*, 22 February, 1965.

¹⁸ Peter Goldman, “Malcolm X. Witness for the Prosecution”, in: *Malcolm X As They Knew Him*, ed. David Gallen, 237-8.

¹⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, 14.

perhaps in approach. I can get along with white people who can get along with me.”²⁰ Thus, the Hajj liberated Malcolm from the parochial vision of devilish whites which he endorsed under Muhammad. Nevertheless, the new perspective did not blind him to the persistence of American racism.

Most commentators of Malcolm's biography point to the fact that after his trip to Mecca, Malcolm's political convictions became anti-capitalist and pro-socialist. He built his own organization – Organization of Afro-American Unity – and struggled to attain new goals: human rights for African-Americans, and black solidarity that would transcend all organizational differences.²¹

In the last years of his life, Malcolm's identity evolved away from religious towards a more political one. He claimed that the black man should be economically and politically active; he insisted on putting black representatives in civic and federal offices. Therefore, his religious consciousness gave way to political engagement. And even though most categorizations of Malcolm's last years are subjective and rigid, one requires special attention. Michael Eric Dyson claims that Malcolm's last year marked a shift from a saint to a revolutionary. Dyson bases his view on the trajectory of Malcolm's career – away from a deeply religious, through nationalist towards an alleged socialist.²²

The identity transformations that Malcolm X underwent during his life were primarily attempts to free himself from the traps of the white world. Even in Lansing, as a young boy, Malcolm was aware that he was in racial minority and that his rights were limited. Therefore, he tried to assert his manhood in a variety of ways. His autobiography clearly expresses his determination to build an identity of his own, and not imposed by whites. He finds the identity of a religious rebel more

²⁰ Interview with Malcolm X in *Malcolm X As They Knew Him*, ed. David Gallen, 186.

²¹ “Organization of Afro-American Unity: Statement of Basic Aims and Objectives” in appendix of *The Last Year of Malcolm X*, George Breitman, ed., (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1967), 113-124.

²² Michael Eric Dyson, 24.

valuable than the identity of a Christian church-goer because it has nothing to do with hypocrisy. And aggressive nationalism or socialism is better, according to him, than nonviolent integrationism because it presupposes black superiority.

The three identities that Malcolm assumed in his life were not as incongruous as they may at first seem. When he was in the Holy City of Mecca he experienced a strong feeling of completeness:

In that peace of the Holy World... my mind took me back to personal memories I would have thought were gone forever... as far back, even, as when I was just a little boy, eight or nine years old. Out behind our house, out in the country from Lansing, Michigan, there was an old, grassy "Hector's Hill," we called it - which may still be there. I remembered there in the Holy World how I used to lie on the top of Hector's Hill, and look up at the sky, at the clouds moving over me, and daydream, all kinds of things. And then, in a funny contrast of recollections, I remembered how years later, when I was in prison, I used to lie on my cell bunk... and I would picture myself talking to large crowds. I don't have any idea why such previsions came to me. But they did. To tell that to anyone then would have sounded crazy (AMX, 365).

These thoughts are more than a simple recollection. Perhaps in recalling these moments Malcolm realized that his childhood preconceptions of himself had been fulfilled. The strange path that his life had taken - from childhood to troubled youth and prison, and then to the Nation - all seemed to be a sort of prelude to the reality in which he found himself in 1964. The phases of his life were now "in unity, in harmony, and he experienced a new mode of being, entire and fulfilled. He had, indeed, reached the end of a pilgrimage."²³

When analyzing the life of Malcolm X, one should also pay attention to Malcolm's frequent change of nicknames and names. His first nickname was 'Homeboy' and it was given to him by his friend Shorty who undertook to "school [him] to the happenings," (AMX, 44) that is hustling and pimping. Then, his Boston associates called him 'Red,' which, in turn, was changed into 'Detroit Red' to distinguish

²³ Carol Ohmann, 147.

Malcolm from other famous Reds. And, finally, in prison he earned himself a nickname 'Satan' which alluded to his irreverent attitude toward God and the Bible. Later, Malcolm changed his name two more times, first into Malcolm X and then into El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Malcolm's need to change his names is symbolic. The nicknames he earned in the streets of Harlem and Boston were expressive of his street hustler's identity. His later rejection of his family name, Little, followed his realization of what slavery and colonialism did to black people. When he became Malcolm X - the X replaced the white slave master's name of Little which "some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed on [his] paternal forbears" (AMX, 199). Finally, the religious elation he experienced in Mecca made him choose the name of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz in order to manifest his devotion to Islam. In the words of a critic "Malcolm's autobiographical journey has led him from the socially projected, non-individualizing and dehumanizing name of 'nigger' to a name both individual and reflective of universal humanity."²⁴

One more final aspect of Malcolm's search for his racial identity should be mentioned. He often emphasized the inadequacy of the American system to provide the basis for such an identity. Therefore, he went beyond the shores of white America to look elsewhere for building materials out of which to build this new identity. Africa was to help American blacks discover their history and culture. Pan-Africanism was, according to Malcolm, the key to all problems of cultural heritage and identity that frustrated African-Americans. Had he lived, Malcolm would have probably guided black Americans towards their true black identity. This road would have probably led through Africa.

²⁴ Sidonie Smith, 99.