

**“Just Like a Man”: William Gardner Smith’s
Last of the Conquerors – A Reading**

by
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“Negroes were among the first Americans to advocate for the intervention against the fascist powers.”

- John Hope Franklin, 1976

“Ahmaud Arbery, a young Black man, was gunned down while jogging in his own neighborhood in Brunswick, Georgia, February, 2020.”

- CNN

Private Hayes Dawkins, first-person narrator of William Gardner’s Smith’s *Last of the Conquerors* invokes a muse: “Dear God, please make the ship stay still for only five minutes” – as his I (eye) leads us from “the roller-coaster seas, the diet of soup, and the smell of the ocean to the long bright-greened finger of a peninsula jutting out from the German mainland” (13). *Last of the Conquerors* is an international novel, a journey familiar enough in canonical American male fiction; however, *Conquerors* “is not the journey usual” (Bambara).¹ Playing upon its own term “conquerors,” a pattern of ironic reversals develops progressively in the novel to illumine, for one thing, that double consciousness is as much a gift as it is a problem.² We travel with the narrator and his friends “in cold boxcars toward a little town near the center of Germany called Weilburg” (19) and from there to Berlin where the Negro company will be initially stationed during their postwar tour of duty as members of the occupation force in the United States Army. We then meet Randy and the Professor as a rollcall of the narrator’s Army friends begins. We also learn the intentional address of the novel. The narrator reflects, “I kept my eyes to the

window wondering how I would describe the view to my mother and girlfriend in letters I would send home. I had promised to tell each of them about everything I saw, about how the Germans acted, about the scenery and about my friends in the Army” (14). Hayes Dawkins is, typically, inquisitive. His narrative exists more frequently in an interrogative rather than declarative mood. “How would you describe the scenery, Professor?” he asks. Then he explains, “When there was something difficult to be done, something which required brains, we always asked the Professor. He had been to college and was a reporter for *The Pittsburgh Courier* before being drafted. He knew almost everything. That’s why we called him Professor. His real name was Charles Henry” (14).

The identity of the Professor is also that of twenty-year-old author William Gardner Smith, who, in his first novel, solicits neither what Toni Morrison calls “the white gaze” nor that of the conservative Black critic. The voice of his speaker directly addresses his friends, his peers, and, indirectly, his family. In that way, *The Last of the Conquerors*, at a time when “Black” was a derogatory term and Negro the imposed standard, anticipates what Nikki Giovanni will twenty years later entitle *Black feeling, Black talk, Black judgement* (1968).³ As the novel also precedes James Baldwin’s rejection of “theologies which deny one life,”⁴ it marries genres – the epic and the personal – to become what the late professor Nellie McKay calls a “brisk seller in its time and the first twentieth century novel to probe the sensitive issues of white racism and black soldiers in a segregated Army” (McKay 61). What may have been the first novel to probe the issues of racism in the United States Army also foregrounds John Oliver Killens’ *And Then We Head the Thunder* and, more recently, Charles Fuller’s *A Soldier’s Play*, but it is by no means the first to “interven[e] on the fascist forces” (Franklin). Smith’s novel of ironic reversals and

resistance to pandemic fascism echoes its predecessors as it heralds definitive developments in the Negro-cum-African American novel.

As an international novel, *Last of the Conquerors*, true to that American genre, is a love story. As such, the novel, about soldiers in struggle, textually invites comparison with two foregoing novels. The real name of the professor in *Last of the Conquerors*, Charles Henry, recalls that of Frederick Henry, narrator of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and Henry Fleming, "hero," of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the Civil War* (1895). In each, the protagonist runs away from battlefield duty in the war against fascism: Henry Fielding from a clash between Confederate and Union forces in a Civil War battle; Frederick Henry, an American voluntary soldier, deserts the struggle between the Italian and Austrian forces. The ideals of each protagonist have been shattered. Henry Fielding runs away in a paroxysm of fear; Frederick Henry deserts the Italian army to seek a separate peace on "an island of peace" with his nurse now love, Catherine Barkley. By contrast, neither Hayes Dawkins, Randy, the Professor, not even Homo, Murdoch, or Corporal Stephenson of their company runs away from the fascistic injustice they encounter as exercised by the white American commandant who "translocates Southern racism" to the German camp (Mitchell 26-42). It is the good fight even for the lost cause that is the zest of life in *Last of the Conquerors*. It is here where Hayes Dawkins and Ilse Mueller recall the implications and fate of Frederick Henry and Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*. Frederick Henry, wounded in battle, deserts his ambulance driving unit in the Italian Army, the war against the fascists, to flee the carnage and escape with Catherine to the beauty and serenity of the Swiss Alps. As Leslie Fielder in *Love and Death in the American Novel* reads it: "Poor things, all they wanted was innocent orgasm after orgasm on an island of peace in a world at war, lovemaking without end in a scarcely real

country to which neither owed life or allegiance” (317). By contrast, Hayes and Ilse find their “island of peace” in Ilse’s bed cushioned in the welcoming home of her Aunt and Uncle as Hayes avoids bed check in the Berlin camp, or by strolling “the clean beautiful city” of Berlin despite the destruction or wandering in the idyllic German countryside or by enjoying the opera, concerts, lounges, or Wannsee beach. Hayes muses,

I had lain on the beach many times, but never before with a white girl . . . Here, away from the thought of differences for a while, it was odd how quickly I forgot it . . . No one stared as we lay on the beach together, our skins contrasting but our hearts beating identically . . . Odd, it seemed to me, that here, in the land of hate, I should find this one all-important phase of democracy. (44)

As Professor Keith Mitchell writes, Hayes Dawkins “understands that he is in another country, one that has been defeated by the Allies and one that is dependent upon his and other black soldiers’ presence for order and stability. Here, he believes, that he can be a man” (Mitchell *ibid.*). As Professor Stanley Schatt rightly observes, “Afro-American writers grapple with something more complex than anything Hemingway or Fitzgerald ever needed to ponder: the historical, cultural, and mythic strands of the African American identity” (Schatt 80-82).

One of the most robust readers of the African American novel, Professor Addison Gayle, Jr., in his deeply researched study, *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (1976), argues that *Last of the Conquerors* (1948) inherits from the lineage of novels such as those that follow the nineteenth-century Emancipatory Narratives: Martin R. Delaney’s *Blake: Or, the Huts of America* (1859), Sutton Griggs’ *Imperium in Imperio* (1889), and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and not from what James Baldwin would identify in his previously quoted essay as a non-black authored protest tradition in the American novel (citing Mrs. Harriett Beecher Stowe as chief progenitor) or what Professor Gayle defines

as “the protest novel, one designed to rouse the conscience of those determining the actions of men” (Gayle 61).

The relation between *Last of the Conquerors* and *Blake: Or, the Huts of America* is, again, suggested by a name. The Henry of *Last of the Conquerors* recalls Henry Holland, one of the aliases assumed by the hero of Delaney’s novel. Like Henry Holland, Corporal Stephenson in *Last of the Conquerors* responds to an act of egregious injustice by waging a successful revolutionary act – the *tour de force* of the novel. Moreover, when Henry Holland rescues the slaves of his former master, he urges a strategy of solidarity: “Nothing can separate you, your strength depending upon your remaining together” (Gayle 25). In *Last of the Conquerors*, Hayes Dawkins tells us that,

Sometimes . . . we would . . . open the Schnapps, unload the fish which was freshly fried in the mess hall by the grace of a first-rate mess hall sergeant. We told all our troubles at these parties; described the girls back home, recalled things that had happened and you swore you would never tell anyone, and Dalton and Professor solved the troubles of the world. (61)

Not only in his novel but in his autobiographical reflection, William Gardner Smith urges this sense of belonging or solidarity by describing himself as,

A wandering black man, shedding many of the habits and reflexes of my birthplace, Black all the same, with the specific depth of emotional experience, the specific difficulties, and also the specific joys that entails. I was not alone: hundreds of other Black exiles crossed my path, became friends or acquaintances . . . Agreed on one thing: “we’re not going home.” (Schatt 81).

In addition to a sense of belonging fusing strength and identity, *Last of the Conquerors* shares, with Delaney’s *Blake*, utter contempt for white hypocrisy. Henry Holland, Blake’s revolutionary figure, announces “I have altogether lost faith in the religion of my oppressors” (Gayle 25). Such contempt galvanizes the revolutionary action in *Last of the Conquerors* as the Southern American white Captain in Camp Bremberg at Wilnsdorf, Germany, commands

Corporal Stephenson to prepare fraudulent dishonorable discharge papers for black soldiers. When the Corporal refuses, Captain Polk, the officer, orders him court-martialed. What evolves is the thrilling *coup* of the novel. The revolutionary theme and the theme of solidarity in *Blake* amplify in *Last of the Conquerors*.

In Sutton Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio* (1889), the motif of resistance resonates in *Last of the Conquerors*. For Addison Gayle, Griggs is "a novelist of ideas" who "objectively presents side by side the viewpoints of radical and conservative alike. Attention is focused on debate" (Gayle 73). We learn that the Imperium is a secret society which maintains as its objective ". . . to unite Negroes in a body to do that which the whimpering government childishly but truthfully says it cannot do . . . A government in exile . . . having laid dormant for many years preparing its work in secret, surfaces after a fatal attack on a postmaster, an Imperium member, by a white mob" (76). The debate between nationalism and assimilationism in *Imperium* amplifies in *Last of the Conquerors* as a dialogical examination of fascism. Hayes, Randy, and the Professor meet their peers in the commodious Berlin camp where the men meet the welcoming German girls; where Hayes meets Ilse Mueller. During mess hall, in a discussion with the convivial, self-confident Philadelphian, Austin Holmone, who prefers to be called "Homo," Randy, the hater of Germans, whom he had fought in the war to defend democracy, exclaims, "Damn Krauts . . . How anybody from the states gonna like these damn Krauts" (15, 21)? "How come you don't like them? Because of what you read about them in stateside papers?" asks Homo. "No," Randy says, "I know what they're like, I fought against them." Homo shrugs, ". . . they ain't so bad." Randy barks, "that's what's wrong . . . you guys which ain't seen no action come over here and let these women make a fool out of you. Just because some of these bitches let you have a little bit now and then, you go thinkin' they're great . . . You ought never forget what Hitler said about you in

Mein Kampf" (28), to which Homo replies, "the women don't have anything to with it . . . and I know what Hitler said. I also know what Bilbo says" (21).⁵ Yet Homo's gift of double consciousness is not shared by the liberal white Captain Doyle, commander of the Berlin camp who (even breaks the rule and) drinks with his black troops; he is "my boys" friendly with them, but hates Jews: "There was one good feature about Hitler and the Nazis . . . they got rid of the Jews," he says (105). Undoubtedly, double consciousness, the gift and the problem, informs the novel's probe of phenomenological fascism. In fact, the examination and the war on fascism, for one thing, has distinguished the Black American novel. Absent the gift of double consciousness, the captain does not realize that his action of favoring one maligned group while hating another unveils the face of racist white supremacy.

In any case, the ancestral novel bearing the angst pulsing in the love story between Ilse Mueller and Hayes Dawkins in *Last of the Conquerors* is James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). *Last of the Conquerors* does not mimic Johnson's novel. It is not a *bildungsroman* as *Autobiography* is. In fact, Smith constructs a five-book (rather than five chapter) story, suggesting an epic panorama whose expanse exceeds that of the I (eye) of a personal narrative while maintaining the urgent prize of an individual story as it reflects, in this case, the black everyman. Moreover, Smith rejects the premise of innocence upon which, especially the white American *bildungsroman*, is built.⁶ In *Last of the Conquerors*, soon after Ilse and Hayes meet, Ilse confesses, "I wish I could find love that is everything," and asks Hayes, "Do you know love such as that?" Hayes replies, "I know it . . . most wonderful thing in life, love. Love is marvelous. I know love. Love is not wild . . . How old are you Ilse?" Ilse answers, "Twenty-four, and you?" "Twenty-two. I am twenty-two . . . I stretched, content in my great wisdom." Tongue in cheek or not, this wisdom reflects the embrace of maturity which the

young white American traveler to Europe rejects as he moves away from struggle when his ideals are shattered. Hayes glories in his assumed manhood. Indeed, manhood is as prominent a theme as love and home in *Last of the Conquerors*. When Murdoch completes his tenure and receives his orders for home, he at first feigns joys but then admits to Hayes: “I don’t want to go home . . . I can’t leave this place . . . I don’t never want to go back . . . Here, I feel just like a man” (62-68, emphasis mine). A series of ironic reversals complicate the most frequently used words in the narrative: *man*, *woman*, *love*, and *home* as they play through the love story.

Last of the Conquerors engages Johnson’s novel at its most poignant juncture. It smashes the assumptions of middle-class aspirations, seeing them as completely irrelevant to the stubborn lie inherent in the conviction of white supremacy – the presumption of pandemic fascism. Johnson’s novel is often appraised as the laureate expression of the earliest themes emerging in the African American novel: the theme of “passing” and the theme of the “tragic mulatto.” These embody the desire to escape not to “coitus interruptus,” but from the brutal policing with impunity of knee-on-the-neck preservation of American racism. What links the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Last of the Conquerors* is a feeling: “I know it,” says Hayes, “Love is not wild. Love is marvelous.” It is that feeling of knowing something stronger and wonderous, transcendent of abuse, that causes the narrator of *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* unfathomable remorse. He has become an undistinguished white man who knows that he has “sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (510-511).

Last of the Conquerors is a whale of a story. As the young Hayes Dawkins queries the complexities of love amidst pandemic fascism, the novel foregrounds James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956). Despite its flaws – one of which is a tendency in male fictions to commodify women through a concatenation of phantasmagoric language⁷ – *Last of the*

Conquerors is a novel for now. It charts the long resistance against fascism that distinguishes the African American novel and projects its directions as crowds gather all over the United States, angered by the murder of an unarmed black man by a white policeman who positioned his knee on the man's neck, preventing his ability to breathe. The explosive complexity and energy of love that *Last of the Conquerors* expresses vitalizes these combatants for justice.

Notes

¹ Toni Cade Bambara coined this phrase to refer specifically to African American-authored literary practices. See *The Salt Eaters* (Penguin Random House, 1980).

² W.E.B. Du Bois's groundbreaking theory of double-consciousness founds modern sociology: "One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

³ Giovanni's 1968 collection of poems, all illustrative of the title.

⁴ James Baldwin's 1949 *Partisan Review* essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son*, Beacon Press, 1955, pp 13-23) refers to Richard Wright's *Native Son*: "For Bigger's trouble is not that he is cold, or black, or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human..."

⁵ Theodore G. Bilbo was a racist icon during the time of the novel.

⁶ See Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design* (Columbia University Press, 1963), R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, 1959), and Ray B. West, Jr., *The Art of Modern Fiction* (Rinehart & Company, 1954) among many scholars on the definition and composition of the *bildungsroman*.

⁷ Writing in the 1950s, Paule Marshall's "Reena" (in her 1983 collection *Reena and Other Stories*) asserts that women had not been born, existing only in the fantasies of others.

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