

The Episode of the Blind Pianist

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I

It is well-known that there are some digressive episodes inserted into Willa Cather's My Ántonia (1918). Among these passages, one told by the Russian, Pavel, is without a doubt the most horrible and shocking of all. In this he tells the story of a couple attacked by wolves. The episode where the narrator is going to the theater to see the opera 'Camille' relates the fascinating stage of beauty and excitement experienced by Jim Burden. However, the episode of d'Arnault is sure to lead the reader into the wonderful and marvels that human beings possess in a most extraordinary way. It is the story of a Black piano prodigy who is completely 'blind.'

This episode of the piano prodigy begins with Jim Burden's encounter with the blind pianist at a concert in the hotel of Black Hawk. After giving us her short impression of the pianist, Cather focuses on the story of his unusual life; how he became blind; how he was found to have extraordinary talent for music; how he learned to play the piano; and how he subsequently became a pianist. In concluding the whole story, Cather returns to the scene at the end of the concert in the hotel.

According to Willa Cather: a reference guide, the only thesis that treats the problem of the 'model' of the d'Arnault is Ella May Thornton's "Mystery of Blind Tom." It says that the 'model' of d'Arnault is a blind black pianist, born in 1849, in Columbus, Georgia. He was a rather famous piano prodigy at that time. However, the thesis never treats, from the beginning until the end, d'Arnault, but only Blind Tom. The conclusion itself is hardly convincing, as it is completely lacking in the reasonable comparison of the two pianists. Another shortfall in her thesis is that there is never shown any way of getting access to the information for Blind Tom. Hence, we are at a loss for a primary source about him, when we try to see again if her conclusion is reasonable.

However, fortunately enough, Extraordinary People published in 1989 by Darold A. Treffert, a psychiatrist, treats and introduces in detail the 'case' of Blind Tom. That is to say, Blind Tom was an 'idiot savant' piano prodigy. Dr. Treffert quotes mainly from Dr. Edward Sequin, another psychiatrist. Dr. Sequin was a contemporary with Blind Tom, and he wrote a vivid portrayal of the blind piano prodigy, from a psychiatrist's point of view. So it is possible for us to know what the blind pianist looked like, and how he performed and so on through the observations of his contemporary. Therefore, the comparison of the two pianists has been done more closely and reasonably, which leads us to the conclusion of the problem of the 'model' of d'Arnault.

In this paper the comparison of the lives of the two pianists will be treated first; then that of their appearances; and finally, that of the two piano performances.

II

First of all, the life of the Blind d'Arnault and that of Blind Tom will be closely compared. Cather starts to write the life of the Blind d'Arnault as a black baby son on a plantation in the Deep South. He becomes blind when he is three weeks old, because of an illness: "He was born in the Far South, on the d'Arnault plantation, where the spirit if not the fact of the slavery persisted. When he was three weeks old, he had an illness which left him totally blind" (185). It can also be known from this quotation that he was born, at least, after 1865, because "the fact of the slavery" did not persist in law, but certainly to a large extent in practice.

On the other hand, Blind Tom was born to slave parents near Columbus, Georgia, on May 25, 1849.¹ It is not exactly known whether he was born blind, but when he was 'sold' to General James N. Bethune of Columbus, Georgia, in 1851, he was blind and was considered of no value. Here seems to be a difference between the two pianists, but the fact remains that they were both blind black babies.

The extraordinary interest in the sound of the piano or music is also the common characteristic between the two blind pianists. Cather writes about the sound of the piano that charms the Blind d'Arnault: "He felt his way through the lilacs, along the boxwood hedge, up to the south wing of the Big House, where Miss Nellie d'Arnault practised the piano every morning If Miss d'Arnault stopped practising for a moment and went toward the window, she saw this hideous little pickaninny, dressed in an old piece of sacking, standing in the open space between the hollyhock rows, his body rocking automatically, his blind face lifted to the sun and wearing an expression of idiotic rapture" (186). Here he is completely fascinated by the sound of the piano that Miss d'Arnault plays, though, because of his blindness, he never knows what it is.

Music of the piano also fascinates Blind Tom in his childhood. After being sold with his mother to Colonel Bethune, Tom is allowed to go anywhere in the mansion, because of his blindness. It is worth noting that he is interested in the sound of the piano that the Colonel's daughters play. For example, Darold A. Treffert, in his *Extraordinary People*, quotes Dr. Edward Sequin's comment² on Blind Tom as follows: "Fascinated with sounds of all types---rain on the roof, the grating of corn in the shelter, but most of all music--- Tom would listen to the colonel's daughters practicing their sonatas and minuets on the piano" (16).

It is the Colonel who is very much surprised to discover that this blind black infant has the extraordinary talent for piano music. Strangely enough, the boy can play the piano wonderfully, although nobody teaches him how to play the piano. Treffert's quotation from Sequin says: "Late one night Colonel Bethune, who had no idea of the boy's talent heard music coming from the drawing room in the darkened house. Thinking it must be one of his daughters playing, although that would be odd at such a late hour, he ventured downstairs and was startled to find the 4-year-old blind boy, so limited in other ways, playing a Mozart's sonata--- with

flourish and without error” (17). In the case of Blind Tom, his talent is accidentally discovered by the master, or, in other words, by a family member who has ownership of him.

When we assume that Blind Tom can be associated with Willa Cather’s blind pianist, it seems that Cather tells her story of the discovery of the latter’s musical talent more dramatically. In her story, Miss Nellie d’Arnault first saw the blind boy called Samson play the piano: “The door opened; Miss Nellie and her musicmaster stood behind it, but blind Samson, who was so sensitive to presences, did not know they were there. He was feeling out the pattern that lay all ready-made on the big and little keys. When he paused for a moment, because the sound was wrong and he wanted another, Miss Nellie spoke softly. He whirled about in a spasm of terror, leaped forward in the dark, struck his head on the open window, and fell screaming and bleeding to the floor” (188). The talent for music of this blind boy is, in the same way as Blind Tom, accidentally discovered by a family member who has ownership of the blind boy.

The latter half of Blind Tom’s life as a professional pianist can be shortened as follows: 1) getting³ education of music under some teachers, 2) then having concerts, even in Europe, as a ‘genius,’ with the Colonel Bethune as his manager, 3) at last performing even in the White House.

In Cather’s story, she does not tell us much about the fame of the Blind d’Arnault. But it is not so difficult to surmise it. He seems to make a concert tour and win some fame, if not world-wide, like Blind Tom. For example, she writes: “Before he left us, he showed us his gold watch which struck the hours, and a topaz ring, given him by the Russian nobleman who delighted in Negro melodies, and had heard d’Arnault play in New Orleans” (192).

Moreover, it is worth noting that he is touring with his manager, which fact, again, reminds us of the Colonel Bethune, as the manager of Blind Tom. Only once at the end of the concert in Cather’s story, the manager appears. She writes as follows: “D’Arnault played until his manager came and shut the piano” (192). She writes no more about him. We do not know what he looks like, and so on in detail. But the touring with the manager is, without doubt, one more example to show the similarity between the two pianists.

In spite of these similarities between them, however, it is worth pointing out here that there are two clear differences. Dr. Sequin describes how Blind Tom is led to the piano at a concert and introduces himself: ‘He is led by the hand or sleeve before an audience, and begins by presenting himself in the third person, and in a few words thrown away, rather than spoken, saying, “Blind Tom will play this or that piece for you,” etc., after which he begins the piano’ (18). According to Dr. Sequin, Blind Tom is led to the piano by somebody else, and he introduces himself, oddly enough, in the third person. On the other hand, Cather’s pianist resents being led by somebody else at a concert. Jim Burden, the narrator, observes how the pianist appears before the audience: “The door from the office opened, and Jonnie Gardener came in, directing Blind d’Arnault--- he would never consent to be led” (183). We can see a very clear difference between them with regards to their attitudes toward being led by somebody else.

One more clear difference is the way of their introduction. As is shown above, while Blind Tom introduces himself in an odd way, that is, in the third person, Cather’s pianist presents himself in the following way:

“Good evening, gentlemen. No ladies here ? Good evening, gentlemen. We going to have a little music ? Some of you gentlemen going to play for me this evening ?” (183-84). It is undoubtedly showmanship that makes him address the audience like that, and probably makes him unwilling to be led by somebody else. Generally speaking, it is possible to say that Cather’s pianist speaks much more fluently than Blind Tom.

III

Secondly, let us compare the appearances of the two pianists. The comparison will show that Cather’s pianist seems to be ‘modeled’ after Blind Tom. The former, for instance, is portrayed thus in her story: “He was a heavy, bulky mulatto, on short legs, and he came tapping the floor in front of him with his goldheaded cane. His yellow face was lifted in the light, with a show of white teeth, all grinning, and his shrunken, papery eyelids lay motionless over his blind eyes” (183). We should note here he is ‘all grinning,’ because the ‘idiotic’ character of Cather’s pianist is suggested in his laughter. That is to say, after an illness which left him totally blind, his mother was the first to recognize that he is not ‘right’ in the head: ‘His mother, a buxom young Negro wench who was laundress for the d’Arnaults, concluded that her blind baby was “not right” in his head, and she was ashamed of him’ (185). When Cather writes that he was ‘not right’ in the head, we can easily conclude that the illness also caused him to be ‘idiotic,’ which may be proven by the fact that he is called ‘yellow Martha’s simple child’ (185). Moreover, his ‘idiocy’ seems to be well-known to the audience at the concert, because, for instance, Jim Burden writes as follows: “The moment he sat down, I noticed the nervous infirmity of which Mrs. Harling had told me” (184). It is no doubt that Jim recognizes the ‘idiocy’ of the pianist, when he says ‘the nervous infirmity.’

Unfortunately, we do not have much information about Blind Tom’s appearance. But let us note the following observation by Dr. Sequin: “If some person of the company is invited to play a new tune that the sable artist will have to repeat, he being used to it, understands what is the matter, and shows his satisfaction by his countenance, a laughing, stooping, with various rubbings of the hand, alternating with an increase of the side way swinging of his body, and some uncouth smiles” (18). It is not hard to see something ‘idiotic’ in his ‘laughing’ or ‘uncouth smiles’, because he is known as “idiotic musical genius” (16), and he “gave no other sign of intelligence than this everlasting thirst for music” (17). He was ‘idiotic’ and had ‘idiotic’ smiles, which seems to be one of the characteristics introduced by Cather in creating her pianist.

One more characteristic common to the two pianists is their swaying of the body before the audience. In other words, they both keep swinging. Jim Burden, the narrator, writes, when he sees the pianist play the piano: “When he was sitting, or standing still, he swayed back and forth incessantly, like a rocking toy. At the piano, he swayed in time to the music, and when he was not playing, his body kept up this motion, like an empty mill grinding on” (184).

It is interesting to know that Blind Tom also sways at the piano. Dr. Sequin writes about Blind Tom’s performance: “. . . , alternating with an increase of the sideway swinging of the body, . . .” (18), which reminds

us the same swinging movement of the body by Cather's pianist.

IV

Lastly, we are going to compare the performance of the piano by Blind Tom and that by Cather's pianist. Before the comparison, it is worth pointing out that, interestingly enough, they both have 'absolute pitch.' In other words, in spite of their blindness, they have the ability to identify the pitch of any tone heard. As for Blind Tom, going around Europe to make a concert, he is experimented with by some teachers of music who suspect his extraordinary talent for music. As a result, he is proved to have 'absolute pitch.' Dr. Sequin says: "Tom and Colonel Bethune then toured Europe. While there, Tom was subjected to a test to determine whether he had perfect pitch. As Tom listened, two pianos were hammered on noisily and haphazardly, while on a third, simultaneously, a run of 20 notes was played. Seated at one of the pianos immediately afterward, Tom was able to repeat the run of 20 notes perfectly. The fact that he could distinguish and reproduce those notes appeared to prove to the experimenters that he possessed absolute pitch"(18).

It is interesting that Cather's pianist also has 'absolute pitch' in her story, in spite of its being a kind of a technical term, which supports the fact of the assumption that Cather's pianist comes from Blind Tom. Cather writes, for example, about her pianist: "Several teachers experimented with him. They found he had absolute pitch, and a remarkable memory. As a very young child he could repeat after a fashion, any composition that was played for him"(188-89). Here we should, at the same time, note that, just like Blind Tom, Cather's pianist is experimented with by teachers of music.

Now let us proceed to the comparison of the performance between the two pianists. Dr. Sequin depicts the performance of Blind Tom at a concert. It seems to be considered as that of full of force: "His execution is sometimes sweet, oftener of unknown force, which manifestly proceeds from powers higher up than his wrist. When he sends certain clangorous agonies his shoulder blades bear as it were directly on the keys, his whole frame vibrates with the instrument"(18). Reading that "his whole frame vibrates with the instrument," we can know that he plays the piano, with barbarous energy, if not with elegance.

Cather, on the other hand, shows how her pianist plays the piano in the following way. Jim Burden, the narrator, observes: "As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses---that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly"(189). We can see his strong vitality in playing the piano, which is stated, in other words, by Jim: "He looked like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood"(191).

After all these comparisons of the two pianists, it is possible to say that basically they are quite similar, and that there is some possibility of Cather's drawing some inspirations to create her blind pianist. As a matter of fact, as was shown in this discussion, there are some complete differences between them, but, in

spite of these differences, it seems reasonable to see some kind of association between them.

It may have been possible for Cather to read Sequin's book in creating her pianist, but it is still uncertain if she really got inspiration directly from his book. For Blind Tom was such a famous pianist at that time that many journalists, it is said, leave comments on his performances. So we may need to decide from what source she got information of Blind Tom, if she really had him in her mind in creating d'Arnault.

Works Cited

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Notes

1. See p.395 in "The Mystery of Blind Tom."
2. According to the notes of Extraordinary People, all the quotations from Sequin are from Idiocy and its Treatment by the Physiological Method. N.Y., 1971, (originally published 1866).
Unfortunately enough, it was impossible to quote from Sequin's book, so that all of his comments are from the former.
3. See pp.397-400 in "The Mystery of Blind Tom."