

Americans in Paris

A Literary Anthology

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Frederick Douglass

Douglass (1817–1895), father of African-American letters and liberation, came to Paris late in life, in 1887, but while there laid, in this letter home, a kind of cornerstone for the approaching 20th-century black American fascination with Paris as a potential paradise—a place where, as James Weldon Johnson would later write, a black man could have “the sense of just being a human being.” Douglass also saw in the classical statuary in the Louvre evidence of the antiquity and nobility of Africans. Like Emerson finding divine order in the humdrum order of the Jardin des Plantes, Douglass’s is one more case of an American seeing in a Paris museum what he needed to see.

Letter from Paris

Hotel Britanique.
Avenue Victoria.

Paris: November 19, 1887

Dear Friends Hayden and Watson:

I do not forget that I promised on parting with you in Boston to let you have a line from me during my stay abroad. Nothing has occurred during my absence thus far which could be of special interest to you or to my American friends. I have everywhere been received in this country and in England with civility, courtesy and kindness and as a man among men as I expected to be. I have felt however that my presence here even in silence, has a good influence in respect of the standing of the Colored race before the world. The leprosy distilment of American prejudice against the negro is not confined to the United States. America has her missionaries abroad in the shape of Ethiopian singers, who disfigure and distort the features of the negro and burlesque his language and manners in a way to make him appear to thousands as more akin to apes than to men. This mode of warfare is purely American and is carried on here in Paris, as it is in the great cities of England and in the States. So that to many minds, as no good was thought to come out of Nazareth so no good is expected of the Negro. In addition to these Ethiopian Buffoons and serinaders who

presume to represent us abroad, there are malicious American writers who take pleasure in assailing us, as an inferior and good for nothing race of which it is impossible to make anything. These influences are very bountiful and not only tend to avert from us the sympathy of civilized Europeans, but to bring us under the lash and sting of the world’s contempt. I have thus far done little to counteract this tendency in public—but I have never failed to bear my testimony when confronted with it in private—with pen and tongue. When I shall return to England, as I hope to do, in the spring—I shall probably make a few speeches in that country in vindication of the cause and the character of the colored race in America in which I hope to do justice to their progress and make known some of the difficulties with which as a people they have had to contend. Notwithstanding what I have said of the malign influences I mentioned the masses of the people both in France and in England are sound in their convictions and feelings concerning the colored race. The best elements of both countries are just and charitable towards us. I had the great pleasure yesterday of an interview with a member I may say a venerable and highly distinguished member of the French senate, M. Schoelcher, the man who in the final hours of the Revolution of 1848 drew up the decree and carried through the measure of Emancipation to the slaves in all the French Colonies. Senator Schoelcher is now over eighty years old, but like many other European statesmen is still able to work. He attends the Senate daily and in addition to his other labors he is now writing the life of Toussaint, the hero of Haytian Independence and liberty. A splendid testimonial of the gratitude of the Emancipated people of the French Colonies is seen in his house in the shape of a figure of Liberty in Bronze breaking the chains of the slave. The house of this venerable and philanthropic senator has in it many of the relics of slaveholding barbarism and cruelty. Besides broken fetters and chains which had once galled the limbs of slaves, he showed me one more collar with four huge prongs placed upon the necks of refracting slaves designed to entangle and impede them in the bushes, if they should attempt to run away. I had seen the same hellish equipment in the States—but did not know until I saw them here, that they were also used in the French Islands. Monsieur Schoelcher spoke much in praise of Thomas Jefferson—but blamed Washington. The latter could have, (he said), abolished slavery and that it was his fault that slavery was fastened upon the American Republic. I spoke to him of Alexander Dumas. He said he was a clever writer, but that he was nothing in

morals or politics—he never said one word for his race. So have nothing to thank Dumas for.

Victor Hugo the whiteman could speak for us, but this brilliant colored man, who could have let down sheets of fire upon the heads of tyrants and carried freedom to his enslaved people, had no word in behalf of liberty or the enslaved. I have not yet seen his statue here in Paris. I shall go to see it, as it is an acknowledgement of the genius of a colored man, but not because I honor the character of the man himself.

I have seen much here in Paris in the way of ancient and modern sculpture and painting which deeply interested me. The Louvre and the Luxembourg abound in them. I have long been interested in Ethnology—especially of the North African races. I have wanted the evidence of greatness under a colored skin to meet and beat back the charge of natural, original and permanent inferiority of the colored races of men. Could I have seen forty years ago, what I have now seen, I should have been much better fortified to meet the Nortts and Gliddens of America in their arguments against the negro as a part of the great African race. Knowledge on this subject comes to me late, but I hope not too late to be of some services—for the battle at this point is not yet fought out and the victory is not yet. Yesterday through the kind offices of Mr. Theodore Stanton who procured tickets for us, I had the pleasure with him and Mrs. Douglass of sitting in a favored part of the gallery of the French house of Deputies and listening to the deliberations of that august body. Answering to our house of Representatives but with powers more enlarged. It presents a fine appearance and though somewhat noisy it was in point of manners an improvement on our house of Representatives. I saw no one squirting tobacco, smoking, or his feet above the level of his head as is sometimes seen in our National Legislature.

Colored faces are scarce in Paris. I sometimes get sight of one or two in the course of a day's ramble. They are mostly from Hayti and the French Colonies. They are here as students and make a very respectable appearance. I met the other day at the house of Pere Hyacinthe a Mr. Janveir of Hayti a young man of the color of our well remembered friend Samuel R. Ward who is one of the finest scholars and most refined Gentlemen in Paris. I was very much delighted to find such a noble specimen of the possibilities of the colored race and to find him so highly appreciated by cultivated ladies and gentlemen of Paris. If a race can produce one such man it can produce many.

I am not ignorant of what is transpiring in the states. To days cable gram tells of the Death of Ex President Arthur an able man and while it must be regretted that he has fallen in the midst of his years, there is nothing in his career as President of the U.S. that proves him to have had any sympathy with the oppressed colored people of the south. I see that Mr. Blaine is likely to be the Republican Candidate in 1888. All I have to say is that whether he or another shall be chosen as our standard-bearer I see nothing better for us then to follow the Republican flag. We have not gained all that we had a right to expect under it, but under it we gained all that we have.

Please remember me kindly to the Wendell Phillips Club. I shall not soon forget the pleasant Evening and the happy send off the members of that Club gave me on the 11th Sept.

With kindest regards to yourselves and your families.

Always truly yours
Frederick Douglass.