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TRENDS OF NEGRO THOUGHT

BY

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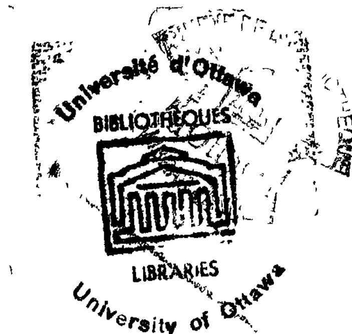

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by
Joseph Henry

Purpose: To establish the social, economic, political, and the religious ideals of the Negro people from the slavery period to the present, and to show the reflection of these aspirations and ideals in Negro literature in all of its forms (poetry, fiction, essay, biography, autobiography, and drama).

The Hypothesis:

1. Negro literature of the pre-civil war period is permeated with a lament of the slave's status and a cry for freedom.

2. Many of the literary expressions of the period are spontaneous bursts of songs growing out of: (a) the urge to lighten burdens through voiced complaints; (b) vocal expressions of the slave's conception of a better life beyond the grave, and (c) consolation taken from the sufferings and deliverance of Bible heroes. Interspersed with natural plaints about bondage are others revealing an attitude of acceptance of the slave status, depicting the carefree life of the plantation.

3. In the second period-that revolving about the civil war with its emancipation of the Negro, reconstruction, and the industrial expansion of 1860-1914, the literature reflects a spirit of collaboration with the whites for mutual progress. Newly freed Negroes wrote stories centered around the struggle up from slavery. The Negro hero came to be idealized in the doctrine of the noble savage. Writers concentrated on enlightened and prosperous characters.

4. With the third period-beginning with World War I and up to the present-there is an increased emphasis on a fulfillment of the promises of democracy for the Negro as well as for every other citizen. His literature is replete with grievances against the fixed pattern of segregation and all other evidences of racial inequality, whether they be social, economic, political, or educational. He reaches toward eventual

full integration into public life of the American people. This period witnesses a development of a race consciousness, a sense of ancestral heritage and culture, an identity with other colored races and minority groups, and defiance and challenge to the white man. The worker becomes the main character in fiction. Labor songs portray the roustabout, porter, blues singer and worker, the sharecropper and the tenant.

The attitude of the northern Negro versus the southern Negro is boldly discussed as well as that of mulatto versus black and white versus Negro. And through it all runs a thread of hope for the future, side by side with the demand for a change in the white man's attitude.

Limitations of the Study:

Period I. Before the Civil War: Slave Period

A. Historical Background

B. General Background

C. Intellectual Background

Period II. Civil War Reconstruction Industrial Expansion 1890-1914 The Emancipation of the Negro.

Period III. World War I and After: The Negro Renaissance.

A. Historical Background

B. General Background

C. Reflections of Aspirations and Ideals in Literature

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Chapter I

Introduction

In brief the purpose of this study is to portray in broad strokes the American Negro's social and intellectual progress as revealed in his literature. Appositely, it will also be remarked how essential to an understanding of Negro literature is a full appreciation of the social and intellectual history of the race which served as a background for the colored man's writings.

Due to certain trends which seem to us important and well-marked, we have arbitrarily divided the study into four main sections. The divisions were made because each of the four periods under scrutiny seemed to have its own peculiar social and intellectual problems, which, in turn, produced literary works of a more or less individual type. Nevertheless, it will be seen that these periodic trends fit into the comprehensive pattern of the study as a whole, which deals with the progress the Negro has made in integrating himself with the mainstream of American life and culture.

In the first period which we shall examine, from the appearance of the first Negro in the early colonies up to 1800, we shall note primarily the isolation which slavery forced upon the colored man and how this isolation bred a lack of self-reliance. Fortunately, a moderate system of

literary patronage helped foster the cultural ambitions of a few enslaved writers and permitted the establishment of a reputation upon which later Negroes could draw.

The emergence of the Negro's self-relization, his awareness of his own potential strength, serves as the keynote of our second section. Guided at first by the abolitionists, Negroes began to see what might be achieved by forceful common action. Not only did they begin, during this time, to form their own churches, schools, and newspapers, but also took the first strides toward a strongly independent literature of their own.

The Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century provide the limits of our third section. Here we shall attempt to show how the turmoil accompanying the end of the war, plus the added burden which was piled on the Negro when he was presented with his second-class freedom, combined to convince the Negro of the need for a period of training in which he could prepare himself adequately for the new Tomorrow which he hoped would soon be his.

The concluding chapters of this study are concerned with the attempts of the Negro-and especially the Negro author-to merge himself with the mainstream of American life and letters. No longer a freakish phenomenon, as he was in the days of Jupiter Hammon, the colored writer has finally come to the point where he expects to be viewed as a writer first, then as colored, and not in reversed order.

The Small Voice of Slavery

(1620-1800)

Chapter II

General Background

Since it is the general thesis of this work that the literature of the Negro in America has reflected to a marked degree his social and intellectual development, it is necessary, in turn, to survey briefly the historical events which brought about these social and intellectual changes. It is almost too obvious to mention that a certain set of historical conditions will implement unique social mutations. What we shall try to show in this study is, primarily, the interrelationship of the historical, the social, and finally the literary trends among American Negroes.

It will be our purpose in the present chapter to sketch in lightly the historical background against which the Negro author acted out his part. It will then be possible, perhaps, to answer charges of "initiation" and "treachery" which have been hurled at Phillis Wheatley and Juptier Hammon by the critics; then, perhaps, the awkwardness of the Negro's first literary attempts will be counted for as an historically inevitable fact rather than as a manifestation of racial inferiority.

For a short while after the first Negroes had been unloaded in America-twenty of them, at Jamestown in 1619, they

were treated in much the same manner as the great mass of white indentured servants being imported from England.

As yet, the colonists had not realized how important slaves would be in their future economy. Since there were only twenty-three Negroes in Virginia in 1625, and less than 300 by 1650, there was no urgency in arriving at a system for controlling them. By 1700, however, the colonists had begun to realize the vital importance of slaves in maintaining their agricultural production. The population figures for the Carolinas reveal how quickly changes were being made in the American scene. In 1708, the Negro population had already grown larger than that of the whites, 4,100 Negroes to 4,080 whites; in 1715, there were 10,500 Negroes and only 6,250 whites; and by 1724 the Negroes outnumbered the whites by more than three to one.[1]

There are parallel reasons for this sudden and inexorable growth of slavery. First of all, the colonists themselves, after a short period in which their consciences forced them to treat the colored immigrants as servants and not slaves, found that their tobacco, rice and indigo crops definitely needed the large labor force which only Africa could provide.

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1. Franklin, John Hope, From Slavery to Freedom, New York, 1947, p., 78.

Secondly, and on equal importance in the rapid spread of slavery, there was the prodding by England. The Royal African Company most willingly provided the transportation, while the Whigs at home fought constantly to clear any obstructions from the establishment of a strong slavery system.

Actually, it was the magnitude of the enterprise which brought about the problems connected with slavery. It is only necessary to look at the Northern colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to see that a quick solution could have been reached were it not for the large-scale "shipments" which England greedily sent over and the Southern colonies greedily accepted.

John Hope Franklin gives us this picture of the status of the Negroes in New York, for instance:

> It was an unromantic, patriachal type of slavery which the Dutch established in their colony. The black workers from Angola and Brazil...were concentrated primarily on the farms in the Hudson River Valley, enjoying fairly humane treatment and receiving many considerations as to their personal rights. There were few laws to circumscribe their movements, and manumission was not an uncommon reward for long or meritorious services....Though the demand for slaves always exceeded the supply...the number that the Dutch imported never grew to such proportions as to cause serious difficulty;...[2]

It was this "patriarchal" aspect of the Northern form of

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2. Ibid., pp., 88-89

slavery which, as we shall see later, was to prove one of the vital factors in promoting the first Negro literature.

A second major factor in the development of literary ability among the Negroes is also evident in these days, especially in New England. Religion, which has always been important to the Negro in America, both socially and personally, proved of direct benefit to the colored population of New England, both during and after the Puritan theocracy. Many sources attest to the fact that New Englanders were especially concerned with the work of converting their colored servants, and to this end many Negroes were provided with the opportunity of learning to read the Bible. As early as 1674, John Eliot began an informal "academy" for the Negroes; Cotton Mather carried on this work in the early 1700's; and by 1728 Nathaniel Pigott had opened a school for the "Instruction of Negroes in Reading, Catechizing and Writing."

By and large, the first century and a half of slavery in America passed by without reaching any form of climax. In the North, they were treated humanely; in the South, where conditionswere severe and treatment harsh, the planters had managed to tack together system which enabled them to keep the Negro in such abject subservience that effective revolt was almost impossible. As the friction increased between the colonies and England, however, the slavery problem also seemed to take on greater importance to the whites.

They were faced with moral paradox of crying out against the injustice of their own rulers, while at the same time, forcing their colored brothers into the mire. The recognition of the hyprocrisy of this situation by a few whites led to a humanitarian wave which did help to elevate some members of the black race in the last of the eighteenth century. The errect of this all-too-brief period of humanitarianism will be discussed in the two chapters that follow.

It would seem that with the eventual outbreak of the American Revolution, the Negro would have begun to receive greater equality. This is not the case, however, and we shall see that in many ways, during the nineteenth century, his position grew worse as the country began to develop and grow strong. The irony of the situation appears most sharply when one considers that the first American to lose his life in the fight against colonial domination was a Negro.[3] But the injustice which was most bitter, perhaps, was the alteration of the very Declaration of Independence until it could neglect a situation as obvious as despicable as the enslavement of human beings. Originally, Thomas Jefferson had included several strong antislavery statements in his draft of the

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3. Attucks, Crispus, Who was killed in the Boston Massacre by a charge from a British musket.

document, but, unfortunately for the Negro and the nation as a whole, the Southerners forced their deletion. Among other charges made by Thomas Jefferson against England's ruler were these:

> He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.... Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execurable commerce....[4]

Although the Negro undoubtedly would have been more than willing to contribute heartily to the cause of national independence, the chance was never given him. In the early days of the War of Independence, a few Negroes did serve, and with valor, in the colonial forces, but General Washington issued an edict against the enlistment of Negroes in 1775 and forced the Negro to wonder how many interpretations the word "freedom" could have.

The Negro, therefore, benefited not at all from the nation's independence. He had been brought here as a commodity, and a commodity, it seemed he would remain. Although there were

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4. Quoted by Franklin, op. cit., p. 128.

opportunities in the North for a fortunate few among the colored population, the majority of Negroes in America from 1619 to 1800 were forced to toil on with no hope of mundane deliverance. The brightest thing that can be said about the period is merely that, in some ways, it was not quite so harsh as the following century, when the cotton gin stripped all semblance of humanity from the Southern slave. It was a time of blind groping for the new American, a time when he was still unable to use his own liberation. It would take even greater trials before he would be moved to vigorous and righteous revolt.

Chapter III

Intellectual Background

Dumped unceremoniously into this chaotic milieu, cut off completely from his native traditions, and struggling to combat the pressures of daily frustrations, it is of little wonder that the the first display of Negro creative talent in America appears cramped and unnatural. The qualities which we have come to associate with the Negro arts at their best----grace, rhythm, humor---will seem strangely lacking in our study of eighteenth century Negro writers. Instead, we shall find authors who, almost without exception, "know their place," and are afraid to overstep the bounds. Still unaware of the opportunities for political freedom, they could scarcely write with the freedom of spirit necessary for great literature.

Actually, during this period, we will find no American Negro literature as such. What we will discover are exceptional Negro individuals, remote from one another, and fortunate in diverse ways, who have had the opportunity to develop a certain creative literacy. Since they worked entirely as individuals, with almost no literary contact with others of their race, any steady developmental trend in Negro literature was, for the moment, forestalled. Before a genuine Negro literature was possible, it was necessary that these individual

authors should realize that they were part of much larger group, that they were working toward a common goal, and that it was possible to achieve that goal by unity of purpose and ambitious effort.

For the moment, however, prior to the appearance of racial leaders like Richard Allen and David Walker in the early 1800's, the Negro was regarded merely as a curiosity, a strange exhibit. He was a black beast, a "Nigger," in whom the display of any intelligence whatsoever constituted an amazing fact. In this situation, anything written by a Negro was news---was literature.

As we have said, the Negro, finding himself in somebody else's world, didn't know where to turn---in life or in literature. There were, however, two strong forces which helped to foster the individual author, and, as an indirect result, to formulate the initial trends of the blossoming Negro literature in America. These two major factors were religion and humanitarianism.

Both the Puritans and the members of the Church of England seem to have taken the attitude that religion was important to the Negro mainly because it could make him more obedient and temperate as a servant. Neither religious group ever faced up squarely to the problem of racial equality in the

eyes of God, but both were contented with the more expedient matters of keeping their domestics in line.

Cotton Mather, exponent of the "Jim Crow" doctrine of heavenly elect, compiled a short series of "Rules for the Societies of Negroes"[1] in 1693, which only serve to illustrate his "friendly" interest in keeping the Negro in his place. It is perhaps a sign of some progress for the times that thirteen years later Mather, with a far deeper understanding of the Negro's problems and potentialities, published *The Negro Christianized: an Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, The Instruction of Negro Servants in Christianity*.[2] In the latter work, Mather explains that he has been impressed by the intelligence of many colored men with whom he has come in contact, and that he believes their talents might be utilized in such endeavors as tutoring the younger children of their masters. For the early eighteenth century these are impressive words.

Although it was not until later in the century, when Whitefield brought to America a more evangelical religion, that the Negro could partake with real emotion in spiritual

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1. Cotton, Mather, "Diary of Cotton Mather," 1681, *Massachusetts, Historical Society Collection*, VII (Seventh Series), 1911, pp. 176-177.
2. Cotton, Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro Servants in Christianity*, 1706.

exercise, there was another important missionary effort at work. This was the drive sponsored by the Society for Propogation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and organization sponsored by the Church of England.[3]

The missionaries of the S. P. G., led by the Reverend Samuel Thomas, went into the Southern colonies with the intentions of educating the slaves in the rudiments of Christian thought. Their work, however, was blocked on all sides. Slave owners, fearing that once a slave became a Christian he would begin to demand freedom as his natural right, initiated theological and political legislation designed to protect the existing system. The General Assembly of Virginia highhandedly decided that "the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of a person as to bondage of freedom,"[4] a sentiment with which Bishop Sherlock of London was induced to concur. To keep the peace between his missionaries and the excited planters, he made the following declaration "Embracing the Gospel does not make the least difference in Civil property."[5]

Nevertheless, the process of Christianization, while limited in scope among the slaves, did serve to bring the first

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3. See C. F. Pascor, Classified Digest of the Records of the Society for the Propogation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, with Much Supplementary Information, 1893.

4. Roi Ottley, Black Odyssey, 1948, p. 47.

5. Ibid., p. 47.

glimmers of education to the Negro. Reverend Thomas, forced into a constant battle with the stupidity of the Southern whites, worked untiringly in 1702 and 1703 for the conversion and education of the Negroes of the Carolinas. When he returned to England, he had converted thirty-two Negroes to Christianity, twenty of whom had been taught to read and write. When it is realized that the planters believed that any intellectual development was the first sign of group consciousness and incipient revolt; this limited achievement of Brother Thomas takes on added lustre.

Meanwhile, Spanish Jesuits, Cominicans and Franciscans were laboring for the conversion of Negroes in Florida, while the Quakers, an important segment of the Northern population, were providing the first organized opposition to the evils of the very system of slavery. As early as 1680 the Society of Friends had begun their campaign against bondage, asking simply if it were in the Christian spirit to buy and sell human beings. By 1787 the sect could report that no slaves were held by its members, and by that time the congregation was actively petitioning the new Congress for complete freedom for its colored brothers.

The religious conscience of Presbyterians, Methodists

and Baptists finally came to fruition in the statement by the Methodist Episcopal Church that:

> We view it as contrary to the golden law of God and the prophets, and the inalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution, to hold in deepest abasement, in a more abject slavery than is perhaps to be found in any part of the world, except America, so many souls that are capable of the image of God.[6]

It is apparent, however, that the religious forces at work during the eighteenth century were mainly external. That is, religious groups, aware of the sinfulness of the system, were willing to work for abolishment of the practice, and for the well-being of the individual Negro. But there was little that the Negro himself could find in this religion. As yet, he had no religious group of his own to provide him with a working faith and a feeling of spiritual and human communion. Not until the Founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 by Bishop Richard Allen, of whom we shall have a great deal to say in a later chapter,[7] was an organization provided for the Negro's unmolested worship and spiritual education.

Until the Negro could have a church of his own, the flamboyant preaching of George Whitefield, the New England

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

7. Chapter VII of this work.

evangelist, served as an emotional substitute. It is not difficult to imagine the effect that the colorful Whitefield, loud and uninhibited, had on the still unsophisticated minds of his Negro listeners.

> In 73 days he rode 800 miles and preached 130 sermons. His voice could be heard by 20,000 people in the open air. He made violent gestures, danced about the pulpit, roared and ranted, greatly to the delight of the common people who were tired of gentlemanly, unemotional sermons from college-bred ministers. He introduced....revivalism ---sinners becoming vocally and violently "saved".[8]

It is to Whitefield's vigorous type of religion that we probably owe the main inspiration of the works of two of the most important authors in the present period: Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley. Hammon's complete absorption in the idea of salvation was almost certainly drawn from Whitefield, while Phillis Wheatley's first published work is An Elegiac Poem on the Death of George Whitefield. Gustavus Vassa, an important "autobiographer" of this century attests to the power of Whitefield's preaching:

> I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervor and earnestness, and sweating as much as I ever did while in slavery on Montserrat beach... I was very much struck and impressed with this; I thought it strange that I had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner before, and was no longer at a lost to account for the thin congregation they preached to.[9]

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8. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, 1942, Vol., 1, p., 111.

9. Gustavus Vassa, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, 1789, II, p., 52.

The great wave of humanitarianism which began to sweep over the Western World during the eighteenth century was reflected on the Negro problem in America in three ways. First of all, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, there was the great confusing problem of how slavery could be rationalized in a republic based on the ideals of freedom; secondly, the group-conscience stirred up by this problem created an audience for works by Negroes; and finally, the concept of humanitarianism led to a system of personal patronage which fostered much of the small amount of literary work produced by Negroes in this period.

That there was an audience for work by Negroes is clearly apparent if we look back at the reading habits of eighteenth century America. Prominent on the "best seller lists" of the day were such stimulating works of adventure as The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano by Vassa; Briton Hammon's A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverences of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man: Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, by Ottabah Cugoano, a British citizen and former slave; and the Letters of Ignatius Sancho, the Duke of Montagu's butler. All Americans whether slaveholders or not, seemed anxious to study-at second-hand-the problem which was so very close to them.

The humanitarian feelings aroused by Edmund Burke, John Fox, John Wesley, Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry and others had its most direct effect, however, in bringing about the surprising appearance of a system of limited literary patronage. Unlike the patronage of Maecenas or Henry VIII, the system in America was largely of a paternalistic sort. The Lloyd family of Long Island, for instance, finding that Jupiter, their slave, was able to learn reading and writing without undue difficulty, provided him with the time and books necessary for something of a literary career; the Wheatleys, struck by the very obvious precocity of Phillis, their maid, gave her the benefits of culture, American and European, to enhance her creative abilities. It is of such considerate masters that we owe the most important early Negro works.

Even with the help provided by sensitive white people the Negro in these infant days of his literary development was still forced to work in isolation, a black individual in a white world. His choices were simple; he could forget his heritage and write as if he were nothing more than a darkly pigmented white---was the practice of Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, and Benjamin Banneker; or he could trade on his "difference" from the whites by writing naive and adventurous accounts of his treatment in this strange and

"civilized" world. It was a limited field for the aspiring Negro writer, and the beginnings of a Negro literature are consequently slow in unfolding.

Nevertheless, although they are to some extent outside of the major trend of Negro literature in America, these early writers, forced to stand by themselves, did serve two important and primary functions. First, they provided proof to all who needed it that Negroes, when educated, could think as rationally and write as effectively as whites. Secondly, by publishing accounts of their mistreatment, they have presented to the world a graphic picture of the harshness and inhumanity to which they were being subjected.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the Negro of this period was still almost entirely a static force, going nowhere, and humanitarianism, plus the attraction of the bizarre reputation, on the one hand, and the limited agent of paternalistic patronage, on the other, produced a limited literary output.

A truly Negro literature in America would have to wait for a broader base from which to operate and expand. Before Negro authors of commanding stature could be expected, at least two things were necessary: a more general educational system, to acquaint him with his own people and their unique and besetting problems.

Chapter IV

Literature from (1760-1800)

American Negro historians have always been somewhat distressed by the fact that our first Negro writers of any importance seem to have completely cut off from the problems which beset their brothers. One must be critically blind to set up Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley or Benjamin Banneker as artistic precursors of a long line of racial leaders. To be frank, they are important only by a special dispensation--the fact that they were able to write, as Negroes, at the time when other Negroes had little opportunity for literary endeavors.

Actually, none of these writers is indicative of the great mass of Negroes in their period. Hammon and Phillis Wheatley were members of proudly humanitarian, northern households; Banneker had the help of Thomas Jefferson in achieving a reputation; all three, paternalistically encouraged in their education and literary excursions, had freedoms far beyond the imagination of most plantation slaves.

Although Jupiter Hammon,[1] who was born about 1820, spent all of his life as a slave, we know from his own writings that

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1. See Oscar Wegelin, Jupiter Hammon, 1915

he was allowed by his master "to do any kind of business."[2] The Lloyd family, with whom he lived near Queen's Village on Long Island, seemed to have been prosperous, humane, and considerate. Hammon never ceased to extol the merits of his masters.

> I have good reason to be thankful that my lot is so much better than most slaves have had. I suppose I have had more advantages than most of you who are slaves have ever known, and I believe more than many white people have enjoyed.[3]

Whatever education Hammon received, it is to the Bible and to the Wesleyan hymnals that we must trace his major influence. These two sources are always evident. A few lines from An Evening Thought will serve to illustrate Hammon's reliance on his religious readings:

> Salvation comes now from the Lord,
> Our victorious King.
> His holy name be well ador'd,
> Salvation surely bring.
> Dear Jesus give thy spirit now,
> Thy grace to every Nation,
> That had't the Lord to whom we bow,
> The author of Salvation.
> Dear Jesus, unto Thee we cry,
> Give us the preparation;
> Turn not away thy eye;
> We seek thy true Salvation.[4]

The most remarkable fact about this poem, and of almost all other Hammon's poems, is that there is no indication, whatsoever, that the author is a Negro, a slave. For that

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2. Jupiter Hammon, An Address to the Negroes in the State, New York, 1787, p., 4.
3. Ibid., p., 6.
4. Benjamin Brawley, Short History of American Negro, 1913, p., 23.

matter, his works are so lacking in an understanding of the evils of slavery that he has become a whipping-boy for some historians of the Negro. Ottley[5] and others have found Hammon to be something of a turn-coat, who used his literacy for convincing his colored brothers that slavery was their proper state, and humility and obedience their highest goals.

Hammon's conciliatory attitude is clearly apparent in his most widely circulated work, An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York. This little pamphlet must have been deemed extremely "sound" and influential by the slave-masters of the 18th century. Even before Hammon's death, it had run into its third edition. The reasons are obvious:

> Now whether it is right and lawful in the sight of God, for them to make slaves of us or not, I am certain that while we are slaves, it is our duty to obey our masters in all their lawful commands, and mind them....Now I acknowledge that liberty is a great thing, and worth seeking for, if we can get it honestly; and by our good conduct prevail on our masters to set us free; though for my own part I do not wish to be free; for many of us who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, would hardly know how to take care of themselves; and it may be for our own comfort to remain as we are.[6]

It is possible, however, as some authors have maintained, that Hammon's address, for all of its soft pedalling, was a

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5. Roi Ottley, Black Odyssey, 1948, p., 22-23.

6. Hammon, op. cit., p., 4.

primary cause for the legislation introduced in New York in 1799 for the gradual emancipation of the slaves.

Although Hammon was occasionally able to write prose of some force and effectiveness, it must be admitted that his verse is more doggerel than poetry. There is a certain native religious feeling and a marked musical sense in all his works, but a close reading will show them up to be constructed largely of bad rhymes and monotonous meters. One stanza from An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley is typical:

> That thou a pattern still might be,
> To youth of Boston town,
> The Blessed Jesus set thee free
> From every sinful wound.[7]

More of a poet, if somewhat less typical as a Negro, was Phillis Wheatley.[8] Phillis, the household slave of John Wheatley, a wealthy Boston merchant, was probably born in 1753. The date of her birth has been uncertained from the fact that in 1761, when she was purchased on her arrival from Africa, she was "in the circumstance of shedding her front teeth."[9]

As a short resume of Phillis' life in America helps to explain her essential difference from the majority of Negroes in the American colonies. Having served the Wheatley family well as maid and companion, the young Phillis seems to have been pampered, idolized, and, to some extent, exhibited by

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7. Brawley, Op. Cit., p., 25.
8. For the basic facts of Phillis Wheatley Life, see the anonymous "Memoir" in the 1834 edition of her poems. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, 1931, pp., 16-29, provides an excellent summary of her life and works.
9 Ibid., Vernon Loggins, p., 34.

her owners. That she was precocious is scarcely to be doubted, for as early as 1767, when she was only 14, she had written the highly-finished To the University of Cambridge in New England. A few lines will indicate the young girl's skill:

> See Him, with hands outstretch'd upon the cross!
> Divine compassion in his bosom glows.
> He hears revillers with oblique regard.
> What Condescension in the Son of God!
> When the whole human race, by Sin had fall'n;
> He deigned to die, that they might rise again,
> To live with Him beyound the starry sky,
> Life without death, and Glory without End.[10]

Her genius, once recognized by the Wheatley, entitled Phillis to special care. In July of 1772 we find her sriting to a friend:

> I have been in a very poor state of health all the past winter and spring, and now reside in the country for the benefit of its more wholesome air.[11]

When her health failed to improve in the following year, the Wheatleys dispatched Phillis to England with Nathaniel, their son, having formally manumitted the young poetess before her departure. In England, Phillis proved the toast of society. The Countess of Huntingdon became her patroness, and the noble families with whom she stayed on her "tour" urged her to gather her works into a short volume, Poems on Various Subjects, published in 1773.

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10. Phillis Wheatley, Poems on Various Subjects, 1773, pp., 15-16.
11. Charles Deane, Letters of Phillis Wheatley, 1864, p. 13.

Upon her return from Europe, Phillis' fame spread throughout the colonies, some of her works running through six editions during her lifetime. But her good fortune was short-lived. With Mrs. Wheatley's death in 1778, the Wheatley household was broken up, and Phillis was forced to enter a much harsher and more prejudiced world. Her marriage to John Peters in 1779 proved to be a costly mistake. A lazy roustabout, Peters dragged his wife down with him into abject poverty. Phillis Wheatley died quietly on December 5, 1748, after several years of drudgery in a cheap lodging house.

Whereas the poetry of Jupiter Hammon had been found to suffer from the crudity and sentimentality resulting from his inadequate education, that of Phillis Wheatley is,perhaps, too artificial and sophisticated. It is difficult to find in any of her 46 poems genuine feelings of intellectual originality. Her poems, largely occasional pieces, treat conventional material in conventional idiom. For all the attempts to place Phillis Wheatley in a position of early importance in American letters, the judgment of Vernon Loggins is probably just. He finds that her work

> is in spirit and execution little different from the sentimental poems turned out, both in England and in America, by numerous skillful versifiers of the 18th Century who knew well the neo-classical rules for writing poetry and who followed them with studied ease.[12]

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12. Loggins, _Op. Cit_., p., 16.

She was closer in both diction and sentiment, to the tradition of Dryden and Pope than she was to the sadness and resolution of spirituals and work-songs. She could write with force and artful grandeur---

> Aeolus in his rapid chariot drove
> In gloomy grandeur from the vaults above;
> Furious he comes. His winged sons obey
> Their frantic sire, and madden all the sea.[13]

---but the fires of personality are never seen biting their way through the high poetic polish of the lines. Her forte was Biblical paraphrase, Miltonic description, and a score of cold and precise elegies tied up nearly into heroic couplets. She was, in short, a skillful imitator. Nevertheless, it must always be remembered that even skillful imitation was noteworthy when it was originated from an oppressed heart.

When Phillis does refer to herself as a Negro, the fact is so clothed in neo-classical rhetoric that it is difficult to distinguish any genuine emotion. A poem written for the Earl of Dartmouth upon his appointment as George III's Secretary for North America contains one of her two personal references;

> Should you, my Lord, while you peruse my song,
> Wonder from whence my love for Freedom sprung,
> Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
> By feeling hearts alone best understood,
> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Stel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd:
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway?'[14]

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13. Wheatley, <u>op. cit</u>., p., 80.
14. <u>Ibid</u>., p., 74.

What we know of Phillis from her poems is seldom stated directly. Her delicacy, humility and intense religious faith are all revealed by indirection. Thus, her one wholly subjective poem, "On Being Brought From Africa," seems colored throughout with a strong religious belief poured into a strict Puritanical mold:

> 'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan lan,
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
> "Their colour is a disbolic die."
> Remember, Christians, Negros black as Cain,
> May be refin'd and join the angelic train.[15]

Although Phillis Wheatley is of some importance in the general study of American literature, her stature in the history of Negro literature is debatable. If she is important in illustrating a trend, it is mainly because her work is to one side of this trend. The paradox ceases to annoy only when one realizes that Negroes in young America were given severely limited opportunities for literary excursions. Only when fostered by extremely humanitarian masters was it possible for them to obtain even the time for writing. Thus, the only Negro writers we shall find, indeed the only ones we should hope to find, prior to 1820 are the "exceptions." Only the "exceptions," it must be realized, were

15. Ibid., p., 18.

given the basic knowledge of reading and writing.

What Phillis Wheatley expresses in her poems has little bearing on the development of Negro literature in America; nevertheless, the fact that she wrote, and that she wrote well, within her artistic imitations, helped to convince doubting whites that a Negro, given the opportunities for an education, might after all, be capable of developing an intellect. The mere fact that Phillis Wheatley, a Negro and a slave, could write accomplished verse would later serve as useful ammunition in the struggles of the Abolitionists.

Perhaps the most accomplished of all the Negroes in the period directly following the inception of the infant republic was Benjamin Banneker,[16] a prodigious character in any Negro history. His position as a man of letters certainly must be considered, but he was, in addition, an astronomer, and almanac-compiler. All in all, he was considered by the white people of his day as the most distinguished contemporary Negro.

Banneker was born in Maryland in 1731 of a free mother and a slave father. When the young boy had completed his elementary school studies, a progressive Quaker, George Ellicott, took him up as his protege, providing him with books on

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16. See Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History, 1927, pp., 137-143.

astronomy and mathematics and instilling in him a reverence for the poetry of Pope. Inspired by confidence of Ellicott, Banneker finally merged his literary and scientific interests, and in 1791, issued the first of his almanacs.

But Banneker did not stop there. He proceeded to dispatch a manuscript copy of the first almanac to Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State in the new government. With it he enclosed a long letter, subsequently famous, pleading for a more liberal attitude toward the Negro. It begins:

> I am fully sensible of the greatness of that freedom which I take with you on the present occasion; a liberty which seemed to me scarcely allowable, when I reflected on the distinguished and dignified position in which you stand, and that almost general prejudice and prepossession, which is so prevalent in the world against those of my complexion.[17]

Banneker continues his appeal with an outspoken recital of the evils of slavery and a list of the problems encountered in the compilation of his almanac.

Jefferson's reaction to the letter seems to have been a mixed one---although it is common for Negro scholars to cite only the statesman's highly complimentary reply to Banneker. His answer was certainly laudatory:

> Nobody wishes more than I do, to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethern talents

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17. Benjamin Banneker, Copy of a Letter From Benjamin Banneker, to the Secretary of State, With His Answer, 1792, p., 3.

> equal to those of other colours of men; and that the appearance of the want of them, is owing merely to the degraded condition of their own existence, both in Africa and America.[18]

One wonders, however, at the sincerity of the latter statement when, a few years later, Jefferson is found confessing to Joel Barlow this very real doubts about the intellectual abilities of the Negro:

> I have a long letter from Banneker, which shows him to have had a mind of very common nature indeed. We know that he had spherical trigonometry enough to make almanacs, but not without the suspicion of aid from Ellicott, who was his neighbor and friend, and never missed an opportunity puffing him.[19]

Taken in conjunction, Jefferson's letters serve almost perfect illustrations of the impending wave of 19th Century humanitarianism. Men like Jefferson, immersed as they were in the literature of freedom, and actively working at all times for national and individual independence, were intellectually committed to the cause of abolition. On the other hand, as we may clearly see in the short extract from the Barlow letters, these men psychologically unwilling to admit the basic, human equality. In their eyes, every Negro Banneker had need for a white Ellicott. No darky, Jefferson seems to be implying, could think that well on his own.

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18. Ibid., p., 11.
19. The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Monticello Edition, 1904, XII, 322.

Until proof is presented, Banneker's literary reputation must rest almost entirely on his one long letter to Jefferson. There are, however, several short words which are generally attributed to him with some confidence. Foremost of these is the so-called "Secretary of Peace Plan." Fired by the political agitation, pamphleteering an oratory which characterized his day, Banneker, or whoever else might have written the essay in the almanac for 1793, volunteered a set of principle for laying the groundwork for international peace. With what seems like a remarkable display of common sense, Banneker, viewing the composition of the President's cabinet, questioned the advisibility of maintaining a Secretary of War while there were no provisions for a Secretary of Peace. In addition to the cabinet change, Banneker advocated a six-point peace plan: Freedom of religion, sanctity of the human life, a free education for every child, abolishment of military uniforms and titles, and the perpetuation of a "museum of peace" in which documents, and literary works of a specific nature would be publicly exhibited.

In surveying the importance of Benjamin Banneker it is wise to recognize immediately that he was first of all, a man of active intelligence, and only secondarily a Negro. "His life was a search for independence," says John Hope Franklin, "through preoccupation with problems of, more or less, a universal nature."[20]

20.John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 1947, p., 158.

Banneker, much like Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon, was to become important to his race primarily as an example. It is obvious that the majority of Negroes who were able to achieve literacy in the 18th Century were still unable to realize that they could expand their writing skills on a Negro subject matter. In short, these three early "major" figures are indicative of the Negro author's lack of self-recognition. He was writing with one eye on his patron. Unsure of himself, he was writing neither as a colored man nor a white one. Before he could prove use to his race, it would be necessary for him to know himself for what he was, to mark well the institution of slavery, and whether free or slave himself, know that for the time being at least he was primarily a Negro.

There were in the 18th Century, Negro writers, who, while of less historical importance, were much closer to the racial mainstream of their times. Briton Hammon, and Gustavus Vassa were, perhaps, not fully educated men; they were however blatantly explicit in their bitterness.

Of Briton Hammon,[21] the first Negro-American prose writer, we know only what he tells us in his pamphlet, A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man. Published in 1760, this brief work details Hammon's adventures after leaving his birthplace in Plymouth, Massachusetts: shipwrecked, captured by Florida Indians, a thrilling escape, and eventually returned to his master. Vernon Loggins is not being unkind when he describes

21. See Loggins, op., cit., pp., 30-31.

Briton Hammon's work as "a colorless recital....Its one distinction in Negro literature is probably priority."[22]

The opening paragraph reveals Hammon's cautious and pedestrian approach:

> As my capacities and conditions of life are very low, it cannot be expected that I should make these Remarks on the Sufferings I have met with, or the kind Providence of a good God for my preservation, as one in a higher Station; but shall leave that to the Reader as he goes along, and so I shall relate matters of fact as they occur to my mind.[23]

Writers of far greater sophistication and social impact were Gustavus Vassa and the author known to us only as "Othello." Although their works, in outline, are similar to Briton Hammon's Narrative, they were autobiographers of a substantially more complex intellect. Swiftly paced, and emotionally fired, their memoirs served to arouse the white population centralize the Negro's frustrated impulse for freedom.

Gustavus Vassa,[24] snatched from Africa by the slave traders as a child, grew up in the debasing moral climate of Virginia plantation life. After being traded from master to master, however, he was eventually able to purchase his freedom and migrate to England, where he joined energetically in the anti-slavery movement. As part of this campaign he published

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22. Ibid., p., 31.

23. Briton Hammon, A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man, 1760, p., 1.

24. Loggins, Op. Cit., pp. 41-47.

in 1789, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, of Gustavus Vassa, an adventurous narrative which went through eight editions in five years. A biting document, The Interesting Narrative lashes out mercilessly at the "Christian" practice of enslaving Negroes:

> O, ye nominal Christian!' Might not an African ask you---Learned you this from God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice?...Why are parents to lose your children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and wretchedness of slavery.[25]

This is angry writing. Having achieved a certain measure of independence, Vassa has not forgotten his own miserable days in slavery nor the shackles which still encompassed his brothers. Unlike Phillis Wheatley, who slipped out of her Negro character when she slipped into an education, Vassa, it seems, had turned his intelligence to the sole end of providing a voice for his people.

And there is no fakery here. Some of Briton Hammon's narrative, it is probable, was tied up by some helpful editor; it is almost certain from its depth of feeling and factual documentation that Vassa's memoirs come exclusively from his own hand.

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25. Gustavus Vassa, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African Written by Himself, 1789.

To be fair to this important work it would be necessary to quote liberally and at some length. Nevertheless a few random paragraphs may illustrate to some extent the fresh and powerful viewpoint which illuminates the entire book. Here, for example, is a scene from Vassa's youth on the plantation, a scene which illustrates the "civilized" world:

> The first object which engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney, and was going. I was afraid it would tell the gentleman anything I might do amiss; and when I immediately after observed a picture hanging in the room, which appeared constantly to look at me, I was still more frightened, having never seen such things before.[26]

A Christian, Vassa never lost the naivete of his childhood beliefs. He never questions the authenticity of the memories of his youth:

> I remember two ominous snakes, each of which was thick as the calf of a man's leg, and in color resembling a dolphin in water, crept at different times into my mother's night-house, where I always lay with her, and coiled themselves into folds, and each time they crowed like a cock.[27]

Throughout the book there is a pervading tone of mysticism, childlike sensitivity and wonder. But interlaced with these qualities is a strong moral strain, a continuing note of reproach against the very obvious evil which the white slave-owners perpetuated without a twinge of conscience. Vassa,

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26. Ibid;, p., 11.

27. Ibid., p., 4.

the Negro, is beginning to fight back, and, at the same time is showing his race how to fight back.

Crusade for Freedom

(1800-1865)

Chapter V

General Background (1800-1865)

We have tried to show in the early chapters of this study that the attributes of Negro literature in the eighteenth century were direct reflections of unique historical, social, and intellectual situations. Thus, the segregation of the Negro in a caste system, following his forced removal from his native home, led naturally to the isolation of the individual from artistic contact with other members of his race; lack of education kept literature itself at a minimum; limited humanitarian patronage, while providing some literary opportunity for a small group, led to the imitative and unrealistic endeavors of Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley.

We shall find, however, that a completely different set of forces were at work after 1900, and, in consequence the work produced by Negro authors during this period will be found to be of a markedly different sort. In the present chapter, and Chapter VI, we will discuss the movements and incidents which helped to mold the literary works of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Then, after a perusal of these works, we will be able to see the connection of events which led almost inevitably to the work of the abolitionists, Negro and white.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century it was rapidly becoming apparent that the South was entering into a state of decay.

The cultivation of tobacco had almost exhausted the soil; the staple crops of indigo and rice were no longer in great demand on the glutted market. Confronted with this agricultural crisis, the Southern planters, it was believed, were almost willing to let the institution of slavery fall into decay with the plantation.

Suddenly, however, in 1793, a young Northerner without a job came South to look for employment. Eli Whitney quickly found it. With almost amazing ingenuity and speed, Whitney provided the Southern planters with a cotton gin which could seed cotton efficiently enough to make it an extremely lucrative crop. The invention of the cotton gin, coupled with England's rapid development of a textile industry, completely altered the place of the Negro in America. With the gin used for the tedious task of seeding, a great mass of Negro labor was still needed for cultivating the precious cotton plants. Furthermore, since it could be grown almost anywhere, King Cotton managed to push slavery further and further to the west.

The need for more slaves presented the South with a dilemma, however, brought on, in part, by the heroism of Toussaint L'Ouverture's insurrection against the French rulers in Haiti. Making use of the Southerner's trepidations, anti-slavery groups in the North began to renew their efforts, although the Negro paradoxically continued to grow in value as a commodity in the Southern economy. Action was started in Congress toward the

termination of the slave trade and abolitionist societies initiated their first tentative maneuvers. The passage of the first fugitive slave law in 1793 stresses both the Negro's urge to escape and the planter's desire to keep him as a farm implement at all costs.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the early 1800's is the almost unparalleled hypocrisy, both social and political. This hypocrisy is most evident in what is commonly termed, "The closing of the slave trade." No phrase was ever more inaccurate. Actually, the law was passed in 1807, with a list of stringent fines and sentences for violators, but there was never any real enforcement. It was common practice, for slave-runners when caught and placed under bond, for instance, simply to forfeit and the bond-and then return to their ships for another trip to Africa.

And if the traffic in slaves from Africa was considered an evil blot on the face of America, the domestic slave trade was even more obnoxious. Baltimore, Washington, New Orleans, and other Southern cities took on a carnival air at auction time and provided the visiting foreigner with a glowing picture of American "freedom" in action.

In the eighteenth century, the South's slave system had been to some extent a paternalistic one. The number of slaves had still been fairly small at the time; they played an integral part in the household affairs of the plantations, and they were

able to conduct their affairs with at least a modicum of leisure. With the blossoming of cotton, however, the last shred of the Negro's individuality as a human being was stripped away. He became a device, not quite as useful as the cotton gin, but necessary to have around. John Hope Franklin is understating the case when he says that

> It has been assumed too frequently that slavery provided an idyllic existence not only for the owner but for his slaves as well. The fact is, however, that even for the planter...there was little in the way of recreation and other diversions to foster a zest for living either on the plantation or in the Southern towns. Even under the most favorable circumstances, the plantation with its inherent isolation and consequent social and cultural self-sufficiency frequently bordering on stagnancy tended to perpetuate the barrenness.[1]

This was a difficult time for the Negro. The effectiveness of the first great humanitarian wave had been spent, and the full force of the abolitionist movement had not yet been felt. The Negro, then, was on his own- at a time when he was weak, and disorganized, and while his masters were interested only in his expedient use as a cloddish factor in their economy.

In some ways, however, the almost hopeless position in which he found himself actually drove the Negro into concrete social action, as we shall see in the next chapter. Injustice finally forced him to discover his own individual power.

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1. John Hope Franklin, <u>From Slavery to Freedom</u>, New York, 1947, p. 197.

Furthermore, he learned under duress that it was easier to bring about desired ends while working with a group than to try to exist as an isolated individual.

Chapter VI

Intellectual Background (1800-1865)

From the last decade of the eighteenth century until the foundation of strong and active abolitionist groups in the 1890's, the Negro was left almost entirely to his own devices. If he wanted to progress socially, he had to provide his own initiative and use his own intelligence. All of the elements for change were at hand: deep dissatisfaction, a growing feeling of co-operation, and, dimly within sight, the vision of an eventual day of freedom. The early years of the nineteenth century were, we shall find, among the most important in the social and intellectual growth of the Negro population.

It is true, of course, that this Negro growth was accomplished almost solely in the North, but the motivating power that initiated the changes most definitely had its source in the cotton-country. Unlike the writers and racial workers of the previous period, the nineteenth-century Negro author never forgot that, though his lot in the North might be light, it was for the general good of all Negroes that the lines of battle were being drawn.

It must be remembered that the situations outlined in the preceding chapter were pre-eminently Southern ones, although they certainly affected the Northern Negro as well. However, slavery itself was slowly but surely passing from the scene north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The period from 1790 to 1830 saw the gradual emancipation of almost all of the North's colored population.

While, in 1790, there were in the entire United Sates only 59,466 free Negroes, the number had risen to well over 300,000 by 1830.[1] Of course, when this group of free Negroes is compared with the total colored population, of over three-quarters of a million, it is possible to see that a great deal of work had still to be done. But it was this growing percentage of the Negro population, located primarily in Philadelphia, New York and Boston, that provided the leadership for the large number still in slavery.

Before he could progress at all it was necessary for the Negro to educate himself.[2] At all times, since the first slave appeared on our shores, there had been some tutelage for a fortunate few under the patronage of their masters. Most Negroes, however, found it necessary to teach themselves. Richard Allen speaks in his autobiography of the eagerness for learning which inspired all of his early activities. Lemuel Haynes, another important religious leader, speaks humbly of the "chimney-corner education" with which he was able to provide himself-an education adequate enough to eventually qualify him for a Master of Arts degree at Middlebury College. Other Negroes

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1. Benjamin Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro, 1924, p. 40.

2. For a full discussion of this topic, see Carter G. Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, 1915.

distinguished themselves in a similar manner in educational fields. John B. Russwurm, of whom we shall have more to say later, was graduated from Bowdoin in 1826; Theodore Wright completed a course in theology at Princeton in 1828; Robert Chavis also studied at Princeton and eventually conducted a successful school for whites in North Carolina.

An even greater impetus to the self-recognition and cohesiveness of the group was provided by the Negro press, which, starting independently of the abolitionist movement, was elevated by the movement to a position of great importance. Much more than the ivory-tower literary efforts of the early writers, an entirely Negro publication such as Freedom's Journal,[3] which was established in 1827, could bring to all men of color the facts and views which had a direct bearing on their position. Founded in New York City by Samuel Cornish and B. Russwurm, the Journal, although it had a short life of less than three years, proved to the Negro that an independent publication such as this was both possible and desirable. From that time until the present, the Negro press has always stood as a bulwark against the threats of injustice and prejudice. When Freedom Jouranl expired, the African Sentinel, published by John Stewart in Albany, New York, took its place. When the latter ceased publication, the Weekly Advocate began, and then the Colored American. Negroes, growing in strength and intelligence, and eager

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3. Brawley, op. cit., discusses the growth of the Negro press; also see Lois Fox, New York City Newspapers, 1820-1850.

to share their views, provided these papers with an avid audience. David Ruggles' Mirror of Liberty, published somewhat later, was to prove what an influence the press could have in building up and directing emotional forces, for it was the Mirror of Liberty, the National Reformer and similar journals, which helped unite the Negroes behind the growing ranks of abolitionists.

Not only did the Negro publications of the early 1800's provide local information, but they also attempted to convince their readers that the Negro had a noble tradition and that the entire world was full of instances of brilliant achievement by men of color. Loggins points out that "stories of the lives of such eighteenth-century Negro personalities as Benjamin Banneker, Phillis Wheatley, and Gustavus Vassa were told and retold." In this climate of racial pride, Benjamin Lundy was quick to point out that

> beyond the power of contradiction the African bosom yet glows with the generous emulation that erst nourished the arts and sciences to maturity in Ethiopia and Egypt-while Asia made less pretensions to knowledge, Europe was involved in Barbarism, and America was still unknown to the civilized world.[4]

It was this growing feeling of racial pride upon which the abolitionists capitalized. And it is almost certainly true

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4. Benjamin Lundy, Genious of Universal Emancipation, April, 1831.

that this pride stemmed most directly from the Negro publications of the period.

Certainly the most important institution in the early nineteenth century, both for the Negro's intellectual and social development, was the church. It was not the church, as a whole, however, which provided any help, but the churches, which Negroes were forced to organize in protest against discrimination. In the 1770's churches for the exclusive use of the colored people were founded in some of the Southern states, but with the growing fear of insurrection, the whites enacted laws preventing their slaves from entering into public meetings, even in the house of God.

Even in the North, religious meetings were difficult for the Negro to arrange. Richard Allen[5] has described how he and others were pulled from their knees while in prayer and forced to leave a "white church." In desperation, Allen and Absalom Jones founded in 1787 the African Free Society of Philadelphia, out of which was formed the Bethel Church, Methodist, with Richard Allen as its leader, and St. Thomas' Episcopal, under the guidance of Absalom Jones. With these two churches as a beginning, the Negro hastened to establish a firm religious organization, and by 1816 they were able to inaugurate the African Methodist Episcopal Church with Richard Allen as their first bishop. Other denominations also founded separate Negro churches during this period. There were Negro Baptist congregations in

5. See Chapter VII of this study.

New England as early as 1809, by 1840 Negro Episcopalian, Congregational and Presbyterian churches were common throughout the North.

It should be clear that, under the pressure of changing economic conditions in the South, and with the limited freedom allowed then in the North, the Negro was beginning in the first decade of this new century to create for himself an entirely new world. He was no longer a lost soul who could cry out for help only to God. He had discovered that within himself he had the capabilities for initiating change, and that with the help of other members of his race he could eventually secure the equality for which he had been striving so long.

Therefore, it should come as no great surprise when we study the writings of the Negro in the next chapter, that he was no longer the meek and subservient puppet which he had been in colonial days. We shall see in the works of Allen, Ruggles and Walker that the Negro had at last won his own self-respect; in the slave-narratives we shall find that he had discovered how inextricably his future was tied up with his past; and finally, in the poems of men like Haynes and Horton, we shall hear the brave and loud cry for freedom, a cry which would go on, and which still goes on.

Chapter VII

Literature from (1800-1865)

In the ten years between the death of Phillis Wheatley in 1784 and the publication of Richard Allen's first pamphlet in 1794, something important had happened in the development of Negro literature. To read one of Phillis' neo-classical elegies and then to turn to Allen's *Narrative of the Preceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia* is like turning from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Gulliver's Travels*. If these works are indicative of their periods-and to a great extent we believe them to be-they reveal the first group of Negro writers as happy children building, with as much care as they can, castles of colored blocks; the second group,[1] noisier and more reckless, are also anxious to build, but only after they have demolished the pretty palaces others have constructed for them.

In ten years, the social and intellectual forces outlined in the two preceding chapters had changed the illiterate Negro from a solitary and ingenuous individual to a member of a great tacit society. Through that society-his race-the Negro had grown, by the end of the 18th century, into an awareness of his own position. He could take consolation, if he were enslaved and mistreated, that there were millions of others like him, all looking toward their place in the future; if he were free, he still realized the plight of his brothers, and swore that he would work for their deliverance from bondage. Negroes had become

aware of their place, of their numbers, and, to some extent, of their future. They know, at least, that they had the power to fight, and that, joined as one army, it would be difficult to keep them from their final goal.

The fundamental changes in Negro literature will be immediately apparent in the present chapter. First, we will treat three important Negro leaders, Richard Allen, David Ruggles and David Walker, men of fire and confidence who, unlike Benjamin Banneker or Gustavus Vassa, devoted their entire energies to the fight for amelioration and freedom. Next, we will turn our attention to the slave narratives of the first half of the nineteenth century, which we will see to be unlike those of Vassa and Briton Hammon in that the central idea of oppression is always made clearly apparent to the reader. Finally, we shall find in the poetry of the periods, a cry for liberty which was always found to be lacking in the work of our first Negro authors.

The writers of the first literary period were distinguished primarily by their separateness; what is noteworthy in the work of the present group is the blossoming feeling of co-operation, of "belonging," which was to reach its eventual culmination in the work of the Negro abolitionists.

1. Three Racial Pioneers-Richard Allen, David Ruggles, and David Walker.

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Richard Allen's vigorous endeavors to unite the Negro people by helping them to form their own church, the A. M. E., were sufficient to insure his reputation in the annals of his race. Nevertheless, although his work as an organizer must be recognized as his most important contribution, it is only proper that we also note his role in the developing body of Negro literature.

Allen's literary position rests on two works, his autobiography and a pamphlet written with Absalom Jones in 1794. The pamphlet, A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia; and A Refutation of Some Censure Thrown upon them in Some Late Publications, provides us with a vigorous instance of Allen's spirited defense of his people's reputation.

During 1792 and 1793 a severe epidemic of yellow fever had raged through the city of Philadelphia, cutting great swathes through the population. It was superstitiously believed that Negroes were less susceptible to the disease than the whites, and it was this belief that eventually led to a bitter exchange between the white and Negro segments of the city.

In A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Matthew Carey had charged, with some vituperation, that the Negroes, although in physical condition to do so, had failed to help sufficiently

in the nursing of the critically sick. He added further insult by claiming, without proof, that the colored population had converted the tragic situation to their own uses by demanding excessive wages for whatever labors they performed during the epidemic, and that they had spent most their time in plundering from the homes of the sick.

Carey's carelessly constructed account of the incident served to goad irresponsible white elements into act of "revange" against the Negroes, and it was apparent that a defense must be presented immediately. A few years earlier such a reply might have been expected to be marked primarily by a spirit of submission and apology. But Richard Allen was not Jupiter Hammon. Sure of his own resources and the co-operation of his own people, Allen answered the charges with courage, with resourcefulness, and, most important for the occasion, with facts.

By using statistics and eye-witness reports, Allen made it clear that Negroes were affected as adversely by the disease as were the whites, and that there were innumerable cases in which masters directly attributed their recoveries to the help given them by their slaves and servants. As for Carey's charge of plundering, Allen lost no time in pointing out his pamphleteering adversary had fled the city at the first signs of the epidemic, and had constructed his villifications completely from hearsay evidence.

In concluding his refutation, Allen turned from his opponent to give praise to the Negroes who had labored to stop the spread of the epidemic:

> We shall now conclude with the following old proverb, which we think applicable to those of our colour who exposed their lives in the late afflicting dispensation--
>
> "God and a soldier, all men do adore,
> In time of war, and none before;
> When the war is over, and all things righted,
> God is forgotten, and soldier slighted."[1]

Although never a "man of letters" in the formal sense of the term, Allen's honesty, sincerity, and moral stamina make up in large part for his apparent lack of literary training. The effectiveness of his work is all the more remarkable when we realize that he only learned to read and write at the time of his conversion to Methodism.

However limited in education he may have been, his work hears the stamp of the sincere and zealous crusader, a crusader for his race as much as for his religion. He always seems to be bursting with enthusiasm and hope, qualities which to be found reflected in any sampling of his prose style:

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1. Richard Allen, <u>A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia: and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications</u>, 1794, Philadelphia, p. 24.

> One night I thought hell would be my portion. I cried unto Him who delighteth in the prayers of a poor sinner, and all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and Glory to God ! I cried.[2]

Although he was sometimes perhaps over-zealous in his crusades, Allen, in the final analysis, was always a practical man of action. He voiced strong doubts about the prevalent place for African colonization, for instance, on the grounds that such "plans" were in reality mere fantasy, and that it would be much saner to consider a move to Canada, if colonization actually was called for.[3]

One other important fact about Allen's writings is brought out by Vernon Loggins:

> It can be accepted with safety that the publication to which he gave his name is undoubtedly the product of an American Negro mind during the period when the free blacks in the United States were emerging as a self-sustaining social unit. His temperament, even though undeniably African, did not admit of that skillful imitation of the whites which has characterized the work of so many American Negro writers.[4]

If for no other reason, Allen is important to us because of the fact that he marks a definite end to the Negro's lack of self-reliance. In many ways, both through his acts and his writings, he convinced his people that it was possible to

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2. Richard Allen, The Life, Experience and Gospel Labors the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen, to which is Annexed the Rise and Progress n. p., n. p. 14.
3. Freedom's Journal, Nov. 2, 1827.
4. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, New York, 1931, p. 61.

speak out the strength of their convictions and to work for gradual social advancement. His work serves as an important link with the later and more involved activities of the Negro abolitionists.

David Ruggles in New York served much the same purpose as Bishop Allen in Philadelphia. Fiery and outspoken, both Ruggles and Allen served as leaders for their Negro communities, directing the emotional energies which necessarily emanated from the distasteful position in which the colored man found himself, even in the relatively liberal Northern society.

Of Ruggles' life we know almost nothing. A man of obvious culture and charm, it seems apparent that his education progressed much further than that of Allen, but it has been impossible to trace the formative years of his career. We know only that sometime prior to 1834, the year of his first publication, he had served as a minister, and that he spent part of 1833 on a lecture tour in Pennsylvania and western New York.

When Ruggles did appear on the literary scene, however, he appeared with a loud explosion, publishing in 1834 the inflammatory pamphlet, The Extinguisher Extinguished, or David M. Reese, M.D., Used Up.[5]

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5. David Ruggles, The "Extinguisher" Extinguished, or David M. Reese, M.D., Used Up, New York, 1834.

This bitter little book was in direct answer to two attacks on the growth of antislavery organization: A Brief Review of the First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society, by Dr. David M. Reese; and An Address on Slavery and against Immediate Emancipation, by Herman Howlett. Although Ruggles is primarily interested in combatting individual views of Reese and Howlett, he frequently turns to blast the very American system which instituted and perpetuated slavery:

> History cannot point us to a colony so well calculated to christianize the heathen as the colony of Puritans which landed upon the rock of Plymouth in 1620. And where are the pious Indians that can refer to the Puritans as their spiritual father in Christ Jesus ? The soil that was once peaceably pressed with their footsteps, has been trenched with their blood; they are hunted down and driven from mont to mount like the beast of the forest.[6]

Ruggles reserved his strongest language for a second diatribe against Dr. Reese in 1838. Seemingly without any substantial proof, Ruggles suspected the physician of being the author of another attack, unsigned, on the American Anti-Slavery Society. This work, An Appeal to the Reason and Religion of American Christians, goaded Ruggles into immediate response, with An Antidote for a Poisonous Combination Recently a "Citizen of New York." alias Dr. Reese.

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6. Ibid., p. 8.

> This pamphlet--with scurrility, abuse, and falsehood, is, I suspect, and emanation from old friend, Dr. Reese. I may be pardoned this surmise when I declare that the thing is so like him, that is either his own or a Counterfeit--and who would conterfeit Dr. Reese?[7]

Such sarcasm, when written by a Negro about a white man, is surprising to find at such an early date, but illustrates the complete change that had taken place in the group psychology. The Negro felt at last that he could throw off his inibitions and fight back when he felt his rights were being questioned. In this instance, it is Reese who provides the target, but we feel that Ruggles is aiming his denunciation indirectly at all proponents of narrow, prejudiced, anti-Negro sentiments.

> It is extremely shallow, unspeakably low, and abusive, and so illogical and absurd in its pretended arguments as to remind the reader forcibly, that the author was exemplifying the words of the poet which he quotes, "When God wishes to destroy he first makes insane![8]

As in the case of Bishop Allen, much of Ruggles' important work was of a social, rather than literary, sort. In the important post of Secretary of the Committee of Vigilance, and as editor of the short-lived magazine, Mirror

7. David Ruggles, An Antidote for a Poisonous Combination Recently Prepared by a "Citizen of New York." alias Dr. Reese, Entitled, "An Appeal to the Reason and Religion of American Christians," c., Also David Meredith Reese's "Humbugs" Dissected, New York, 1838, p.2.

8. Ibid., p. 3.

of Liberty, Ruggles proved that he had abilities as an organizer as well as an effective pamphleteer. The Committee seems to have had some nebulous connection with the formation of the Underground Railroad, as its credo intimates. It had as its aims

> to protect unoffending, defenceless, and endangered persons of color, by securing their rights as far as possible, by obtaining for them when arrested, under the pretext of being fugitive slaves, such protection as the law will afford.[9]

From his connection with this group, and later exploits which included giving assistance to Frederick Douglass on his way through New York, Ruggles became known as the "first promoter of the Underground Railroad."

The Mirror of Liberty, as far as we can ascertain, published only two issues, in August of 1838 and January of 1839. It is important, however, as the first Negro periodical, predating the National Reformer primarily as a voice for his work with the Committee of Vigilance.

After a strenuous life of devotion to his race, Ruggles began to lose his sight in 1842 and was forced to retire to Northampton, Massachusetts, where he continued to work for the slave's freedom until his death in 1849.

If the statements of Ruggles seem violent when compared

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9. Quoted in National Anti-Slavery Standard, Aug. 13, 1840.

with the quieter, more logical approach of Bishop Allen, there is an even greater step in outspoken outrage to the work of David Walker, calling directly for the revolt of the slaves against their masters, who provides a direct link with the important works of the Negro abolitionists, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Alexander Crummell.

The reputation of David Walker rests almost solely on his inflammatory Appeal, a work unique in its importance to the Negro's drive toward independence. It literally brought about a panic in the South, where possession of a copy could mean death; its call to violence caused a serious split within the very ranks of the abolitionists; it had a direct bearing on slave uprisings, undoubtedly contributing to Nat Turner's insurrection; and, most important of all, it convinced the Negro that he was strong enough to frighten an entire nation with the publication of one small book. If he had doubted it before, David Walker's appeal was all the proof any Negro needed as to the effectiveness of the written work in matters of social change.

A "free" Negro in North Carolina, Walker drifted north as a youth, bringing a permanent baggage a vitriolic hatred for slavery and for the social system which, with blind hypocrisy, could continue to enforce bondage upon his people. Somewhat he managed to earn enough money to purchase a small second-hand clothing store in Boston, and learned how to read and write.

These few facts are almost all we know about David Walker, except for the important fact that he found time and words enough to pour forth his anger in the seventy-page Appeal.

Although the full title of Walker's work may sound pretentious- Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of American, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, Sept. 28, 1829; the text itself is simple and to the point. Without artifice, Walker opens the work with a direct and unsophisticated statement of the problem as it appears to him:

> Having travelled over a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they exist-the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States), are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began; and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.[10]

This is quiet and remarkable prose, personal and yet fully controlled, working with precision toward the emotional impact of "and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more."

Walker's range, however, was not limited to such subtle and undemonstrative effects. When he was able to launch into boisterous and

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10. David Walker, Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Boston 1829, p. 3.

biting oratorical perorations. Here is Walker in anger:

> Are we men!! I ask you....are we MEN? Did our creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are they not dying worms as well as we?...How we could be so submissive to a gang of men, who we cannot tell whether they are as good as ourselves or not, I never conceive....America is more our country than it is the whites-we have enriched it with our blood and tears. The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears: And they will drive us from our property and homes which we have earned with our blood.[11]

There are occasional passages constructed mainly of literary and political cliches:

> But against all accusations which may or can be preferred against me, I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing-who knows that my object is, if possible, to awaken in the hearts of my afflicted, degraded, and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in the _Republican Land of Liberty_![12]

-but the body of the work seems to have been poured out with a minimum of intellectual restraint. The language is fresh, occasionally daring, and the thoughts are always intensely personal, although bearing on group problems. The following passage seems to show more clearly than any other the mixture of the colloquial and the rhetorical which distinguishes the _Appeal_:

> I would wish, candidly, before the Lord, to be understood, that I would not give _pinch_

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11. _Ibid_., p. 37.

12. _Ibid_., p. 4.

> of snuff to be married to any white woman I ever saw in all the days of my life. And I do say it, that the black man, or man of colour, who will leave his own colour (provided he can get one, who is good for anything) and marry a white woman, to be a double slave to her, just because she is white, ought to be treated by her, as he surely will be, viz: as a NIGER! ! ![13]

Although Walker has imposed a crude form upon his work by dividing it into four "Articles," it succeeds in making its points by emotion rather than logic. His plan is to speak of the general evils of slavery, the need for education, the failure of Christianity in the slavery crisis, and his arguments against African colonization, but he never allows his preconceived outline to deter him from occasional diatribes against injustice. In short, it is a chaotic and sprawling work which achieves its effect through honesty, enthusiasm and timeliness.

The general usefulness of the Appeal as a rallying-cry for the Negro was enhanced, shortly after its publication, by the sudden death of Walker in 1830. He had, as matter of fact, written that "I expect some will try to put me to death, to strike terror to others," and the Negro population of Boston was quick to pick up the cry of "Murder!" Since South Carolina and several other Southern States had posted rewards for Walker, it is perhaps possible to lend some credence to the assasination view, although there has never been any actual proof. Never

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13. Ibid., p. 53.

theless, the Appeal, when coupled with the dramatic death of its author, provided another spark for the spreading fires of the abolitionists.

We have seen then, in the works of Bishop Allen, David Ruggles, and David Walker, that a movement of cohesion had begun among the Negroes, and that the time was obviously becoming ripe for the Negroes to use that cohesiveness as a form of action. From the formation of the first Negro churches, through the fearless statements of Ruggles, to the outspoken call to arms by David Walker, the path toward a resolution of the "infamous paradox," has been clearly delineated in the early years of the 1800's.

2. The Slave-Narrative

Although it is difficult to assess the value of slave-narratives as literature, it is immediately apparent that the form served a useful purpose in social documentation. Relating, as they almost invariably did, the trials of plantation life and the injustice of the slave system, these naive "memoirs" became grist for the abolitionist mill. It is even highly probable that many of the accounts were directly "contracted for" by abolitionist groups, and the authorship of only a few may be assigned with certainty. Whether genuine or not, they served as showcases for slavery, exhibits which were to transform quiet humanitarianism into a loud crusade.

It is interesting to note that the slave-narratives achieved their greatest popularity at a time when Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne were laying the groundwork for the American novel. The Negro, still too involved in his major problems to devote his energies to the artistic approach, utilized with some success many of the devices of the novel in his memoirs. But it was apparent to the Negro that climax was at hand in the slavery problem, and he was more than willing to sacrifice aesthetic ends for the expediency of strong racial protest.

It is this very obvious element of propagandizing which causes the slave-narratives of the early 1800's to differ considerably from the "curious" and exotic" stories of the preceding century. The earlier works in this form had been primarily of two types. They were popular either as surprising instances of "a black man's" ability to master the language, as in the case of Briton Hammon; or as adventurous and pathetic tales of capture, slave ships, and eventual escape from bondage, as in the case of Gustavus Vassa.

Although the bizarre and the adventurous still proved popular ingredients in Negro biography of the pre-Civil War period, something new was added to the form by the Abolitionists like Isaac Hopper began to collect tales from fugitive slaves as they passed by on the Underground Railroad, and published them in Northern periodicals.

William Still and Harriet Beecher Stowe were later to make full use of this material. Works such as Slavery in the U. S.: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man,[14] convinced the abolitionists that this was the incendiary material they had been looking for.

Naturally, the primary critical question in handling the slave narratives is how much of their works was actually composed by the Negro autobiographers and how much by their abolitionist prompters. The authenticity of certain of the works may be considered extremely doubtful. The Narrative of James Williams[15] for instance, utilized the important service of John Greenleaf Whittier as editor, and is obviously rife with distortions. The great majority of the narratives, however, were altered only to correct spelling and pronunciation. The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, Written By Himself,[16] for which the editor claimed that his job was probably typical of the extent of the author-abolitionist cooperation.

Bibb's work is full of the feeling and color of the antebellum South, and he never permits his resentment against the slaveholding whites to diminish his interest in the ordinary life of the plantation slave. Especially full treatment is given to the prevalence of slave superstitions. Typical of the vignettes which caught up the interest of Northern readers is Bibb's description of his relations with "conjurers."

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14. Mr. Fisher, Slavery in the United States; A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Lewiston, Pa., 1836.

15. James Williams, Narrative of James Williams, An American Slave, New York, 1838.

16. Henry Bibb, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb An American Slave, Written by Himself, New York, 1849.

> After I had paid him, he told me to get a bull frog, and to take a certain bone out of the frog, dry it, and when I got a chance I must step up to any girl whom I wished to make love me, and scratch her somewhere on her naked skin with this bone, and she would be certain to love me, and would follow me in spite of herself; no matter who she might be engaged to, nor who she might be walking with.[17]

Although Bibb's work is probably superior to that of Josiah Henson in providing us with an accurate picture of slavery in practice, Henson unwittingly served as a more vital force in the abolitionist crusade. When The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself[18] was published in 1849, the little pamphlet received no undue attention. But the fact that Harriet Beecher Stowe purportedly used Henson as her model for Uncle Tom led to an adulation which far outdid the literary or sociological value of the Negro's work. Henson's Life is a wandering, poorly constructed account of forty years of slavery, an escape from the New Orleans slave market, and his flight to Canada. It is far less impressive than Bibb's Narrative, and its popularity was almost certainly due to the identification of its author with Mrs. Stowe's protagonist. Trading on the vogue of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Henson published Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life[19] in 1858, and, after a trip to England in

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17. Ibid., p. 41.
18. Josiah Henson, The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself, Boston, 1849.
19. Josiah Henson, Father Henson's Story of His Life, London, 1858.

1876, An Autobiography of Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom"), from 1789-1878.[20]

3. The Poetic Cry For Freedom

The changes which had taken place in the social milieu and the new self-reliance which had been gained by the Negro in the eighteenth century is immediately apparent when one reads the poetry of the period. To compare it with the earlier work of Phillis Wheatley is to recognize that the Negro had at last become aware of his position and the impossibility of continuing in that state any longer. Here are the opening lines of a poem by Daniel Alexander Payne:

> Rise, God of Freedom! From thy throne of light,
> Stretch forth thy arm of uncreated might;
> In dire confusion cause thy foes to fly,
> Chased by the lightning of thy frowning eye.
> Long have they scorned and mocked thy regal crown,
> Despised thy laws, and cast thine image down:
> O, hasten then, in thine appointed hour;
> And crush to nought the proud oppressor's power.[21]

This is general, perhaps, but vigorous in its entreaty. Furthermore, it has little of the obvious abolitionist cant which marred so much of the literature of the period.

As a matter of fact, the poetry written by Negroes in the first half of the eighteenth century is of a generally high degree of excellence. One poet in particular, George Moses Horton, given a few more opportunities in education and

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20. Josiah Henson, Father Henson's Story of His Life, London, 1876.

21. Daniel Alexander Payne, An Original Poem Composed for the Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia, Liberator, May 28, 1841.

occupation, might well have become a major figure in American literature.

Born as a slave in North Carolina in 1797, Horton grew up as a plantation worker, but under a master who allowed him to "hire out his time" at the near-by University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. It was in the student circles at the University that Horton made his living and his reputation. For twenty-five or fifty cents per poem Horton composed romantic pieces for the undergraduates, and at the same time found an opportunity for writing at his own volition. His first volume, Hope of Liberty,[22] failed to be profitable enough to secure his liberty, but it did win him an appreciative audience. His next collection, Naked Genius,[23] did not appear until 1865, when he was able to escape to the lines of the Union forces when they occupied Raleigh. Little is known of Horton's life after this point, but it has been presumed that he died in Philadelphia in 1883.

It seems quite likely that Horton has yet to receive the attention which his poetry seems to us to deserve. Vernon Loggins, however, believes that Horton had only a limited talent and that his poems "are certainly not of a merit to be considered suitable for publication in a magazine of Artistic standards."[24]

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22. George Moses Horton, Hopes of Liberty, Raleigh, N. C., 1829
23. George Moses Horton, Naked Genius, Raleigh, N. C., 1865.
24. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, New York, 1931, p. 117.

The editors of The Negro Caravan concur in Loggin's estimate of Horton. "By Nature," they say, "he was probably better fitted to play the 'campus' poet than to write antislavery poetry."[25] Nevertheless, there is in some of his poems a sense of irony which might have proved useful as an antislavery instrument. This forceful stanza is from "The Slave":

> Because the brood-sow's left side pigs were black,
> Whose sable tincture was by nature struck,
> Were you by justice bound to pull them back,
> And leave the sandy colored pigs to suck?[26]

It is in his work that we find the first forceful poetic complaint against slavery, the infamy which he cried out against time and again. Although it is bothersomely general and perhaps somewhat trite in phrasing, "On Liberty and Slavery," is typical of his poems of protest:

> Alas! and am I born for this
> To wear this slavish chain?
> Deprived of all created bliss,
> Through hardship, toil and pain!
>
> How long have I in bondage lain,
> And languished to be free!
> Alas and must I still complain---
> Deprived of liberty.[27]

It is probably true, that Horton was never completely successful as an antislavery propagandist. His lyrics, however, are definitely of a high order, no doubt due to Horton's practice of writing love songs on consignment for

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25. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, editors, The Negro Caravan, New York, 1941, p. 275.
26. Naked Genius, op. cit., p. 122.
27. Hope of Liberty, op. cit., p. 15.

the students at Chapel Hill. The wit and technical polish of the lyric, "To Eliza" reveal Horton's success in the form:

> Eliza, tell thy lover why
> Or what induced thee to deceive me?
> Fare thee well---away I fly---
> I shun the lass who thus will grieve me.
>
> Eliza, still thou art my song,
> Although by force I may forsake thee;
> Fare thee well! for I was wrong
> To woo thee while another take thee.
>
> Eliza, pause and think awhile---
> Sweet lass! I shall forget thee never
> Fare thee well! although I smile,
> I grieve to give thee up for ever.
>
> Eliza, I shall think of thee---
> My heart shall ever twine about thee;
> Fare thee well---but think of me,
> Compell'd to live and die without thee.
> "Fare thee well! and if for ever,
> Still for ever fare thee well!"[28]

It might be well for contemporary Negro writers to look back for guidance to the work of Horton, for here was an author who, while aware of the injustices done his race and willing to fight for their abolition, was still able to operate objectively as an individual, an artist, irregardless of color. But he was, after all, enabled to write as he did only because of the social changes which had taken place, the consolidation of the Negroes, their sharp recognition of their degraded position, and their growing belief that something concrete could be achieved to better their social status.

The early racial leaders, the writers of the slave-narratives, and the poets of the pre-Civil War period were,

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28. <u>Naked Genius</u>, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 91.

however, only on the fringes of the actual fight for freedom. In the two chapters which follow we shall attempt to trace the development of the abolitionist movement, and the part which Negro writers were able to play in enhancing their campaign.

Chapter VIII

Abolitionist Crusade

The vague humanitarianism of the eighteenth century, which had provided Phillis Wheatley with a voice and which later crystallized into the quiet antislavery endeavors of the Quakers, developed in the early 1800's into something clear, concrete and well-defined: the abolitionist crusade. The "crusaders," a boisterous and dedicated band, were to prove that intellectual co-operation, when inflated with fervour and determination, could prove instrumental in hastening the course of history.

Actually, between the passage by Congress of an act against the slave trade in 1807 and the appearance of the first issue of Garrison's Liberator, little tangible effort had been made in the direction of freedom for the slaves. The Quakers still attempted to bring about a change by unobstrusive enlightenment; a handful of Southerners, aware of the powder-keg on which they were sitting, warned of an eventual explosion; the American Colonization Society worked with little actual success-and with small support from the Negroes themselves-for their project of emigrating great masses of Negroes to Liberia. But, by and large, the beginning of the third decade of the century found the general humanitarian trend toward freedom in the doldrums.

Then, on New Year's Day in 1831, the simmering pot suddenly, and without warning, boiled over. A small paper, badly printed and poorly inked, loudly proclaimed on its first page:

> I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population... I will be as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject I do not want to think or speak or write with moderation. No ! No ! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen---but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present.
> I am in earnest-I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch-and I WILL BE HEARD ![1]

Temperate Bostonians blanched and tried to look the other way, but William Lloyd Garrison would not be silenced or ignored. A fight had been started which would see no ending until the nation had been split and wrenehed by a civil war.

Garrison had begun his career as an assistant to the Ohio abolitionist, Benjamin Lundy, had worked with Lundy on the journal, The Genius of Universal Emancipation, and had seen at first-hand the slave-pens, the auctions, the ships bearing their human cargoes from Baltimore and Boston to the slave markets of New Oleans. He had been jailed for his outspoken condemnation; he had been ostracized by the calmer antislavery groups, but he would not be silenced.

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1. Liberator, Boston, Jan., 1931.

The principles upon which Garrison based his stand were simple. In short, his arguments were as follows: first of all, Garrison insisted, slavery was contrary to the teachings of Christianity; it was, in addition, contrary to the fundamental ideas of freedom in the American way of life; third, slavery as a system was held to be economically unsound, for the Negro could never work with initiative while in bondage, and the culture of the South was crumbling due to the brutality of the master-slave relationship; finally, since the South found it necessary to operate as an armed camp against the constant threat of uprising, slavery was a definite menace to the peace and security of the nation as a whole.

Armed with these principles, Garrison gathered a small band of followers into the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1831. Immediate emancipation was Garrison's fiery demand, and it soon became apparent that his flamboyant spirit would split the ranks of the previously allied workers against slavery. "Garrisonism" became a synonym for hasty, inconoclastic action. Morison and Commager have met in his attempts to force antislavery sentiment into his own mold:

> The workman, especially the Irish laborers, broke up abolition meetings, with the warm approval of the respectable press...One abolitionist was murdered in Illinois. Northern

> gentlemen like Wendell Phillips who joined the cause were black-balled at clubs and forsaken by their friends. Northern ministers who showed sympathy with them lost their pulpits...Yet the sect grew, and throve on opposition. In 1836 there were more than five hundred abolition societies in the Northern states, and by 1840 their membership was over 150,000.[2]

Finally, in 1839, Garrison and his followers were able to gain control of the national organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, a move which completed the split among the abolitionists. Nevertheless. Garrison's group as well as state and local organizations worked toward a more-or-less common end, sending agents over the countryside and flooding both North and South with antislavery literature.

The split-up groups also worked in co-operation to further the effectiveness of the nebulous "Underground Railroad." If a slave could hide out in swamps and eventually make his way to the Mason-Dixon Line, he would be met by a "conductor" of the "U. G." and set on his way toward Canada. Although the total number of slaves rescued from bondage by means of the "U. G." was probably never very large, the drama of disguise and escape added to the fervor of the abolitionist cause and converted many Northerners to the fight for emancipation.

The violence of abolitionist activities turned much of the north against the movement. When Garrison openly praised

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2. Samuel Blood Morison and Henry Steele Commager, _The Growth of the American Republic_, New York, Vol. 1. 1942, p. 527.

the shedding of Blood in Nat Turner's insurrection, all but the most avid workers believed that abolitionism had taken a definite and irrevocable turn toward complete anarchy. It was necessary to convince the general public that emancipation of the slaves would not mean a continuation of this violence, and it is to the labors of the Negro abolitionists that we must attribute the winning over of a large segment of the population to abolitionist sentiment. We shall see in the following chapter how integral a part Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Alexander Crummell played in convincing the north that the Negro, although fighting for his rights, could still be a cultured citizen who desired nothing more than to live in peace and freedom.

Chapter IX

Literature-Negro Abolitionists

It is a remarkable fact that the Negroes who worked in the abolitionist movement just prior to the Civil War were able to conduct themselves temperately and without malice in the most tempestuous of situations. Since it was their grievances which were at the core of the dispute, one might have thought that the movement would have been built on Negro fire and abolitionist direction. Such was never the case. Negro abolition workers not only provided much of the logical framework for the "crusade," but also demonstrated themselves as cultured and controlled human beings, completely worthy of "first-class" citizenship. If the bull-in-a-china-shop techniques of William Lloyd Garrison had been accompanied by violent Negro actions it is almost certain that the public would have been frightened away from supporting the slave's fight for freedom. But men like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Alexander Crummell used their literary abilities to convince America of their strength and intelligence.

It will be our purpose in this chapter to view the work of Douglass, Brown and Crummell in two distinctly separate categories: their spirited efforts for freedom, while working as abolitionists; and their less publicized activities as men of letters. Although their reputations are based primarily on the leadership which they provided for their race in the fight

for independence, we shall find that their literary output is also of great merit, especially when one considers the excessive social and political demands which were made upon them.

The events in the life of Frederick Douglass have been so fully recounted, both in his own remeniscences and in the works of later biographers, that it is unnecessary to trace in detail his rise from slavery to national prominence. A few facts will suffice. A slave in Maryland, a fugitive, and then a laborer in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the twenty-four-year-old, Douglass seemed destined for no important role in his race's history. Then, in 1841, the abolitionists held a meeting at nearby Nantucket, and, since the young Negro had had recent contact with the institution against which they were inveighing, Douglass was invited to make a brief address. This was the result, as chronicled by Parker Pillsbury, one of the participants in the meeting:

> When the young man closed, late in the evening though none seemed to know nor to care for the hour, Mr. Garrison rose to make the concluding address. I think he never before nor afterwards felt more profoundly the sacredness of his mission...I surely never saw him more deeply, more divinely inspired. His last question was this: "Shall such a man ever be sent back to slavery from the soil of old Massachusetts ? -this time uttered with all the power of voice of which Garrison was capable....Almost the whole assembly sprang with one accord to their feet, and the walls and roof of the Athenaeum seemed to shudder with the "No. No!" loud and long-continued....[1]

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1. Frederick Douglass, <u>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</u>, Hartford, 1881, p. 25.

Garrison, of course, saw immediately the effect which the young orator could have while serving as his lieutenant. So, from 1841 to 1865, Douglass traveled with Garrison throughout the North, serving as an exhibition piece for the abolition - ist arguments. The year, 1845, marked a turning point in Douglass' career, however, for at that time he left Garrison's wing and took off on his own for England. Here, while delivering almost daily lectures for three years, he studied assiduously and began to think out his race's problems in his own way. When he returned to the United States in 1846, he was able to complete the break with the rabid Garrison contingent. He founded his Journal, the North Star, took an active part in political compaigning for the Liberty Party, vigorously as a writer and lecturer. When he died in 1895, he left behind him a small mountain of writings, most of them still uncollected due to their fragmentary nature.

Although there is a marked development in the literary and logical skill of Douglass throughout his career, it is the pervading and insistent dedication to the antislavery cause which provides his work with unity. Whether in letters, newspaper articles, stories, orations, or personal narrative, Douglass's first concern is always the expression of racial complaint. Naturally, the demands of producing "propaganda" as abolitionist ammunition diluted the sincerity of Douglass' work, but it must be remembered that he was writing at a time when propaganda was of the utmost necessity-and the cause was most certainly a just one.

The number of media in which Douglass worked makes it difficult to give him treatment as full as he deserves. A cursory examination of his efforts in several literary fields will, however, enable us to see how Douglass, the man of letters, used his craft to express the thoughts of Douglass, an American Negro.

The twin aspects of the man, literary and political, are best exemplified in Douglass' four works of autobiography. The first, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,, published in 1845, is typical of the man and his work: quiet, unemotional, objective; yet, at the same time, forceful in its ability to convince the reader of slavery's unspeakable evil. Simply, and with masterly understatement, Douglass charts his life from infancy up to his association with Garrison. His method of evoking an emotional response is apparent in this selection about his mother:

> She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field han, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary.[2]

The effect which his Narrative had in winning over converts to the cause of abolitionism induced Douglass to continue and expand upon the story of his life. My Bondage and My Free-

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2. Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Hartford, 1881, p. 27.

dom came out in 1855, the Life and Times of Frederick Douglass in 1881 and a substantially enlarged edition of the latter book in 1892. In all of these works Douglass was able to score with propaganda-loaded punches without sacrificing his artistic integrity. It is interesting to conjecture just how great he might have been as a writer if he had not been forced to subjugate his literary talents to his social crusade.

As we have stated previously, the "fugitive" nature of Douglass' work makes it difficult to discover, and difficult to assess. We have it on good authority, however, that Douglass was at his best in letters, short newspaper articles and orations, most of which are still uncollected. The speeches which we do have show Douglass at his political best. Blatantly emotional, and yet logical, they hammer away at the Negro's claim for a place in the sun. One sample will suffice to show Douglass' rhetorical powers:

> There is, in the world's government, a force which has in all ages been recognized, sometimes as Nemesis, sometimes as the judgment of God, and sometimes as retributive justice; but under whatever name, all history asserts the wisdom and beneficence of its chastisements, and men become reconciled to the agents through whom it operates, and have extilled them as heroes, benefactors, and demi-gods. That startling cry of alarm on the banks of the Potomac was but the answering back of the avenging angel to the midnight invasions of Christian slave-traders on the sleeping hamlets of Africa. The history of the African slave-trade furnished many illustrations far more cruel and bloody.[3]

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3. Frederick Douglass, John Brown, An Address, Dover, N. H., 1881, p. 10.

His orations, when reprinted, were certainly valuable as abolitionist documents; but it was the delivery of the man who was most impressive, as Thomas Wentworth Higginson attests:

> I have hardly heard his equal, in grasp upon an audience, in dramatic presentation, in striking at the pith of an ethical question, and in single illustrations and images, as "For the Negro the Republican party is the deck; all else is the sea."[4]

As a man of letters, then, Douglass must be judged almost solely on his autobiographies and a few reprinted speeches. His importance, however, must never be underestimated, for he provided his race with an individual of immense stature to whom they could point with pride and look up to for inspiration. His strength, his unwavering devotion to communal, rather than personal, ends, assures him a revered spot in the hearts of all Americans, Negro and whitew.

Like Douglass, William Wells Brown also followed the coupled careers of political organizer and man of letters, but unlike his predecessor was able to keep his endeavors from lapping over one another. On the one hand, he was an abolitionist speech-maker and organizer; on the other hand, he was the first American Negro novelist.

Brown's attempts at fiction were the direct result of success he had achieved with works of a factual nature. His autobiography[5] was extremely popular as "protest" literature, and a journal of his trip through Europe[6] was equally well

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4. Frederick May Holland, Frederick Douglass: the Colored Orator, 1891, p. 313

5. William Wells Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave, London, 1849.

6. William Wells Brown, Three Years in Europe, London, 1852.

received. Therefore, in 1853, Brown came forth with Clotel; or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States. This first attempt at a novel by an American is a hodgepodge of incident and personality. It was obviously intended to serve as a shocking indictment slavery, but its sensationalism only succeeds in making the book "cheap." Making use of a Southern legend which pointed to Thomas Jefferson as the father of uncounted numbers of mulatto children, Brown leads his characters through a jumble of ill-constructed episodes. Even Brown himself must have recognized the impropriety of his novel in time, for when the American edition appeared in 1864, he had changed the title to Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States, and had excerpted from the text all mention of Clotelle's ancestry. Needless to say, the textual excisions were of no artistic help to an already poorly put-together work of fiction.

The sensationalism of Brown's work would have found little support from Alexander Crummell, the third Negro author of considerable stature in the abolition movement. Cultured and refined, and well-educated at Queen's College, Cambridge, Crummell managed to work for the "cause" without in the least endangering his awesome respectability. Although his works-almost entirely of an oratorical nature,never achieve the force and directness of Douglass', his style alone impressed his contemporaries with the "shocking" fact that a Negro could write so well. He exhorts the Liberian Negroes, in the following oration, to throw off the despondencies which had afflicted them in America.

> For the truth must needs be confessed by us all, that our natures have been dwarded and our souls shrivelled by the dread ordeal of caste and oppression through which our fathees, and some of ourselves have passed.... It is the fruit of that old system, which tracks even freemen to freedom's own domain. It is the remembrance of that old death, which retains vitality and generates agony even in the region of life and blessedness.[7]

Although his work has been largely neglected, Crummell provided for his race an instance of how a Negro could live out a full life simply as a human being.

Unlike Douglass and Brown, who always seem to be asserting that they are as good as their neighbors, Crummell took this fact for granted. When he fought, he never lost his sense of objectivity, but demonstrated his equality with action as well as words. In many ways, in fact, Crummell seems to point to a future when the Negro author will be able to forget the infamy of racial labelling and take his rightful place in our nation's literature.

We have seen, then, in the works of men as diverse in personality and education as Douglass, Brown and Crummell, the effect which the abolitionist movement had in unifying the Negro in his march toward freedom. Although their methods of attack differed, each of the three was willing to sacrifice his personal ambitions for the good of the cause. Their work, perhaps, is ephemeral, due to its propagandistic nature, but propaganda was called for by the times. If they failed as men of letters, it is only because, as leaders, they were called upon to exercise more than literary talents.

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7. Alexander Crummell, The Duty of a Rising Christian State to Contribute to the World's Well-Being, London, 1856, p. 7.

Education for a New Tomorrow

(1865-1900)

Chapter X

General Backgronnd

The years from 1865 to 1900 were chaotic ones for the Negro, much too involved and turbulent to summarize in a few pages. Now "free," he was beset by innumerable problems which he was ill-prepared to resolve. In the South, he was duped by the invading "carpetbaggers" and frustrated at every turn by "white supremacy;" in the North, he was forced into the most menial of occupations and discriminated against on all sides.

In the first half of the century, as we have seen,[1] the Negro had been aided by strong groups of white supporters, primarily the abolitionist campaigners. Unprepared for life as a "free" man, he necessarily floundered for a while before he got his sense of direction. Suddenly, however, he was left to his own devices.

Aware of his plight, and recognizing the fact that he must educate himself for his new role as citizen rather than slave, the Negro made his strongest efforts in the field of education. With millions of colored people in the South alone unable to read or write, it was imperative that a broad teaching program be initiated. Religious organizations and philanthropic individuals were called upon to help erase the illiteracy which threatened to block the Negro's advancement.

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1. Chapter VIII.

A study by Monroe Work reveals that the period from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the century saw the establishment of over sixty colleges and universities for Negroes alone.[2] The same study contains these revealing figures on the number of Negroes who were graduated from colleges in the last years of the nineteenth century: 313, from 1870 to 1879; 736, from 1880 to 1889; and 1,126, from 1890 to the end of the century.[3] Although accurate records are not available, it is safe to assume that comparable strides were being made in primary and secondary schools, as well as in the large number of vocational institutes.

Much of the credit for this educational crusade must go to the Negro church, which provided funds and leadership for citizenship-training. Expanding enormously throughout this period of great crisis, the church gave to the Negro the faith and feeling of communion which he made to carry on while working against great odds. The trust which was placed in religion is manifest in the statistics showing the growth of only one Negro church, the African Methodist Episcopal: from a membership of 172,806 in 1876, the AME Church had grown almost fourfold by 1901, when it could count 688,352.[4] Other denominations underwent similar expansions. The Negro Baptists,

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2. Monroe N. Work, The Negro Year Book, 1925, pp. 325-341.
3. Ibid., p. 299.
4. The Negro Church, "Atlanta University Publications," No. 8. ed. W. E. Burghardt DuBois, 1903, p. 126.

for instance, were more than a million-and-a half strong by the end of the century.[5]

The desire and the concerted movement for education among the Negro people, while aided to a large extent by the actions of organizations such as the church, was, by and large, the product of individual endeavor. In the chapters which follow we shall see the following developments taking place: The formation of two opposing camps, behind the leadership of Booker T. Washington and William E. Burghardt DuBois, debating the goals of education for the Negro; a sudden flowering of racial pride, manifested in the great number of biographies, histories and sociological studies dealing with Negro men and problems; the reflection of the Negro's nature self-consciousness in the works of the period's novelists, led by Charles Waddell Chesnutt; and the culmination of the Negro's striving for literary recognition in the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

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5. Ibid., p. III. Carter G. Woodson, The History of The Negro Church, 1921, also has a full treatment of the church's role in helping to educate the Negro during the post-war period.

Chapter XI

Intellectual Background (1865-1900)

Before the Civil War, "progress" had meant only one thing to the Negro: the slow and painful path upward to freedom; and "freedom" to the slave had become synononomous with "heaven," with the future. But now that emancipation had become generally effective throughout the nation, the Negro's future had caught up with him. He wasn't sure where to turn next, how to find his place in the bustling economy of industrialization, expansion and competition. For a brief period, in fact, the Negro did not even know what his problems were, what he should be fighting for.

It soon became clear, however, callous disfranchisement, race riots, Jim Crow, that the achieving of this quasi-freedom was only part of the fight, and that freedom and equality were never the same word. Once the new goal had been sighted, Negro leaders immediately recognized that their people were, at present, in no position to storm the bulwarks of prejudice. After centuries of having his choices made for him, the Negro, for the first time, had to discover his rights and potentialities as a free human being. It was almost universally recognized, that the years immediately following the Civil War could best be utilized in preparation in re-education for a new future.

The importance of this concept of education as a strong progressive force in the Negro's development is

so well exemplified in the opposing camps of two of the important colored leaders, that we shall devote this chapter primarily to a survey of their debate-a debate, by the way which is still being carried on among contemporary Negroes. It is fortunate for our purposes that this argument on the methods by which the Negro should attempt to secure equal rights is so well-defined, so black and white. The protagonists, Booker T. Washington and William E. Burghardt DuBois, though bound together by the common aim of helping their people to help themselves, formulated theories which may be tied up neatly as paired opposites: gradual vs. immediate social improvement, conservatism vs. liberalism, sacrifice vs. pride, limited vs. completely unlimited gains, and so forth.

1. Booker T. Washington

Booker T. Washington's life,[1] at all turns, seems strictly modeled after the principles which he enunciated for the development of his race. He served as his own best example of what a Negro could achieve by dedication, hard work and a conciliatory attitude which recognized the limi-

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1. See Emmett J. Scott and Lyman B. Stowe, Booker T. Washington, Builder of a Civilization, Garden City, 1916.

tation of his "place" in society. The product of a slave environment, he carved for himself an education which was to enable him to bring enlightenment-of a "vocational" sort to the colored youth of an entire generation.

Born of a white father and a slave mother in 1856, Washington was fortunate enough to attend an elementary school in Virginia, and then, hearing of Hampton Institute, a free academy for Negroes and Indians, proceeded to walk the 500 miles in order to enroll there. Under the direction of General Samuel Armstrong, who practiced what Washington was later to preach- a strictly "practical" education- the young Negro learned the trade of bricklaying while soaking up the ideals of the General. Then, with Armstrong's blessing, he actively initiated his career by taking over as principal of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. It was largely by Washington's personal efforts that Tuskegee, at first only a few shacks and 40 students, was elevated to its present prominence, with a $2,000,000 endowment and a fine campus of 2,000 acres. It was at Tuskegee that Washington began to put his plans for the Negro into action. Realizing that this experiment was being watched carefully by the Tuskegee white community in particular and by the entire South as well, Washington called for the strictest propriety among his students. Every effort was made by the Institute to build up its reputation and to serve as a useful adjunct of the town.

Although he was not adamantly opposed to classical learning, Washington felt that his prime purpose was to turn his students into "efficient workers" who would have a secure foothold in the economic structure of the community. It was as a useful cog in the business life of the nation. Washington felt, that the Negro had his best chance of ultimate success. He was for no quick remedies; progress, he was certain, would come slowly, and only after the Negro had proved his usefulness to his white neighbors.

> To those of my race who depend upon bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man... I would say 'Cast down your bucket where you are' cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service and in the professions.[2]

Although, as we shall see very shortly, all Negroes were not willing to subscribe to Washington's limited cultivation of one's own garden, whites, especially in the South, were more than happy at this social turn of events. He convinced even the most intemperate of Southerners that they had nothing to fear from his policies.

> Any movement for the elevation of the Southern Negro, in order to be successful, must have to a certain extent the cooperation of the Southern whites...The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly,

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2. "The Cotton States Exposition Address," delivered Sept. 17, 1895. Quoted in Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery, New York, 1901 p. 220.

> and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. The Negro race lays too much stress on its grievances and not enough on its opportunities. While many wrongs have been perpetrated upon us in the South, still it is recognized by all colored people that the black man has far better opportunity to rise in business in the South than in the North.

Serving as a mediator between black and white-"The race has produced no more adroit diplomatist than he," says Paul Laurence Dunbar-Washington eventually proved politically valuable. Any Negro, in the nineteenth century, who could lunch with a president (Theodore Roosevelt) and serve in an important advisory post in his "Kitchen Cabinet," was an individual peculiarly able to influence the fortunes of those who won or lost his friendship.

Northerners, says John Hope Franklin,

> with an eye on markets and labor supply in the South, applauded Washington's stand, because it would perhaps make possible the greater economic development of the South. Southerners, on the other hand, like Washington's relative disinterest in political and civil rights for Negroes. They liked the way in which he placed confidence in the Southern whites regarding their good treatment of Negroes who proved themselves tobe useful, law-abiding citizens. They agreed with his advocacy of a type of education which they believe would consign Negroes to an inferior economic and social status in Southern life.[4]

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3. Ibid., p. 223.

4. John Hope Franklin, From Slavery To Freedom, New York, 1947. p. 386.

Washington is remembered most likely as he would have liked to have been remembered- as a man of action, a man whose actions brought about certain concrete gains for the Negro. His literary reputation rests almost solely on his social achievements, but his essays, speeches, and his autobiography, Up From Slavery, so serve to intensify his views, and should not be overlooked completely.

Although it is perhaps the best-known work of any Negro author, Up From Slavery is scarcely noteworthy in the long line of personal remeniscences by Negroes, Written simply, with an almost intentional lack of style, the book is used by Washington primarily as a pamphlet on the success of the Tuskegee experiment. Vernon Loggins has a tidy critical summary of the work, an estimate which seems just to us: "Few who read it realize that it is only one of many Negro autobiographies and that it is by no means the best among them.[5]

Washington's speeches and essays, though facile and adequate to their own ends, very rarely approach either the sociological insight of DuBois or the oratorical flourish of Douglass. They are important mainly because they are documents of a man who achieved during his life great importance as a leader of his race.[6]

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5. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, New York, 1931, p. 267.

6. Important essays by Washington are "The Awakening of the Negro," Atlantic Monthly, LXXVIII, 322-328; "The Case of the Negro," Atlantic Monthly, LXXXIV, 577-587; The Future of the American Negro, New York, 1899; The Successful Training of the Negro, New York, 1903. Many of Washington's speeches have been reprinted in Up From Slavery, op. cit., and The Story of My Life and Work, New York, 1900.

He was important, and he was, to a large extent, effective in bringing about improved conditions for the Negro. But Washington's calm and cautious method failed to impress many of the South's well-entrenched bigots, men like J. K. Vardaman of Mississippi, who could say:

> I am just as opposed to Booker Washington as a voter, with all his Anglo-Saxon re-enforcements, as I am to the coconut-headed, chocolate colored, typical little coon, Andy Dotson, who blacks my shoes every morning. Neither is fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship.[7]

2. William E. Burghardt DuBois

As Booker T. Washington climbed to the peak of his popularity and prestige, other Negroes began to express their dissatisfaction with his precepts of industrial education and compromise. The most vocal of these dissenters, led by a young social historian, W. E. DuBois, were members of a new generation, and most of their work was to be accomplished in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, men like DuBois had made it clear that they would not be satisfied to hope for advancement by maintaining silence and confining themselves to menial tasks.

DuBois' background was entirely antithetical to that of Washington, an environment broad and cultured, compared to the older man's confined and isolated conditioning. Born in

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7. Quoted by Roi Ottley, Black Odyssey, New York, 1948, p. 216.

Massachusetts and educated at Harvard, Heidelberg and Fisk, almost all of DuBois' early life was spent in academic pursuits. It was through his learning and insight, expressed in many admirable sociological studies, that DuBois achieved his reputation, and it was due to his studies of Negro conditions that he became an effective and self-informed reformer.

DuBois' opposition to the views of Washington on education are expressed most clearly in his essay, "The Talented Tenth." DuBois believed in the Negro's advancement by means of the leadership provided by the race's most exceptional members. He insisted that "the best and most capable of the youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land...enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses, to raise the talented tenth to leadership."[8] Speaking out against Washington's "gospel of Work and Money," DuBois insisted:

> If we make money the object of man-training we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools - intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of that Higher Education which must underlie true life.[9]

Anxious to bring about immediate changes in the Negro's social status, DuBois called a conference of eminent colored leaders at Buffalo, New York, in 1903, and launched the

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8. W. E. Burghardt DuBois, <u>The Souls of Black Folk</u>, New York, 1903.

9. <u>Ibid</u>.

Niagara Movement for the abolishment of all racial and class distinctions. Although the Movement did not last long, its effect soon became evident in the newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the importance of which will be discussed in a later chapter. Speaking of DuBois' work with the N.A.A.C.P., Ottley says that his

> almost fanatical belief in his cause and indefatigable work in advancing it explain much of the association's early success. He became a towering figure in Negro life, even to dominating his white and Negro colleages. But he never was a popular mass leader....he led a life removed from the rank-and-file.[10]

The literary work which DuBois accomplished in the nineteenth century was predominantly of a scholarly nature, and his academic studies still stand as definitive works in their fields. His <u>Suppression of the African Slave Trade</u>,[11] for instance, is still the fullest treatment of the subject, while <u>The Philadelphia Negro</u>[12] served as a forerunner of the many excellent sociological treatises undertaken by Negroes.

Proponents of strongly opposed views, though they were, DuBois and Washington make it emphatically clear that the Negro of the latter half of the nineteenth century realized that if he was to be delivered from a state of partial citi-

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10. Ottley, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 221.
11. William E. Burghardt DuBois, <u>The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America</u>, 1638-1870, New York, 1896.
12. William E. Burghardt DuBois, <u>The Philadelphia Negro, a Social Study</u>, Philadelphia, 1899.

zenship it was education which would serve as his instrument of deliverance. And, as we have said, the merits of each side in this important debate are still being argued as a vital and absorbing topic.

Chapter XII

Literature (1865-1900)

It was pointed out in the preceding chapter that the period immediately following the Civil War was noteworthy for its attention to education in general, and, in the Negro's case, to education for a new future in particular. The educational trend of the times is also reflected in the great number of works dealing with the Negro's past, his important leaders, and the current sociological problems which beset him.

As in earlier periods, the years from 1865 to 1900 saw the publication of many works of an autobiographical nature. In general, the well-established formula was continued: the trials of slavery, escape, the new life of freedom. The better autobiographical publications of the period, however, are marked by their attention to unusual achievement or occupation. Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery, for instance, although it was intended by its author primarily as autobiography, is important essentially for its discussions of the author's educational aims and methods, and their application at Tuskegee Institute.

Elizabeth Keckley's Behind the Scenes; or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House and Henry Ossian Flipper's The Colored Cadet at West Point are also instances of the attempt to subdue autobiographical elements to an unusual or illuminating situation.

The Colored Cadet[1] is typical of many of the works of the period, recounting the pioneering endeavors of Negroes in fields which had been closed to them prior to emancipation. Flipper's distinction-he was the first colored youth to receive a commission at the Academy-serves well as a background for the tale of loneliness which he has to tell. Flipper frequently warned other members of his race that success in the white man's domain was not easily achieved.

> Alas ! What a trial it is to be socially ostracized, to live in the very midst of life and yet to be lonely, to pass day after day without saying perhaps a single word other than those used in the section-room during a recitation. How hard it is to live month after month without even speaking to woman, without knowing or feeling the refining influence of her presence ! What a miserable existence.[2]

Flipper's record at West Point is no more remarkable than his ability to document facts painlessly and to create for his readers the melancholy which afflicted him along his path. Vernon Loggins points acutely to the fact that "the military precision with which he told his story shows that courage was the keynote of his character rather than a sentimental brooding over his outcast state."[3]

A more colorful work than Flipper's Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years, and Four Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House[4] by Elizabeth Keckley.

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1. Henry Ossian Flipper, The Colored Cadet At West Point New York, 1878.
2. Ibid., 268.
3. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, New York, 1931, p. 263.
4. Elizabeth Keckley, Behind the Scenes; or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House, New York, 1868.

The President and Mary Todd Lincoln appear in the book as ordinary human beings when portrayed by Elizabeth Keckley, and the quality of gossip which pervades the account adds immeasurably to its charm and reality. Although we are informed quite explicitly that Mrs.Keckley had some help in composing her account,[5] her editor must have been an understanding one, for he has altered little of the author's natural, rambling style.

The first section of Behind the Scenes, devoted to Mrs. Keckley's life prior to her appointment at the White House, is standard stuff. When Mrs. Keckley turns to her illustrious mistress, however, the tone of the book changes. Almost no other work of the period approaches Elizabeth Keckley's ability to portray a "personage" as a human being. Mary Todd Lincoln is shown by her "modiste and friend" as the pitiable and neurotic individual which she probably was.

Like Mrs. Keckley, with her view of the Lincoln house-hold, and Henry Flipper, discussing the problems of a Negro in a white military environment, the first Negro legislators of the Reconstruction period also felt the need to get into print with their experiences. The most prominent Negro Congressman, John Mercer Langston, compiled his experiences in the over-long and somewhat dull From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol.[6] As an example of autobiography, Langston's book lacks color and interest; as a study in current history, however, it stands as

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5. Ibid., p. 320.

6. John Mercer Langston, From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol; or The First and only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion, Hartford, 1894.

an important document, giving an authoritative resume of the colored man's attempt to obviate prejudice while serving his people.

As part of the general educational trend of the times, Negro historians after 1865 produced numerous works dealing with their race's past. Two of the best Negro histories, A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion[7] and History of the Negro in America,[8] were the works of George Washington William, whose reasons for writing are typical of the best works done in the field.

> I became convinced that a history of the Colored people in America was required, because of the ample historically trustworthy material at hand; because the Colored people themselves had been the most vexatious problem in North America... and because such a history would give the world more correct ideas of the Colored people, and incite the latter to greater effort in the struggle of citizenship and manhood.[9]

Other notable historical works of the period, generally of less scholarly nature than Williams', were written by Joseph T. Wilson,[10] Booker T. Washington,[11] and William Still.[12] Only Williams' two books and the previously cited historical studies of W. E. B. DuBois[13] have managed to withstand the challenges of

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7. George Washington Williams, A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion- 1861-1865, New York, 1888.

8. George Washington Williams, A History of the Negro Race in America, from 1619-1880, New York, 1883.

9. Williams, op. cit., "Preface."

10. Joseph Thomas Wilson, Black Phalanx; a History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1776-1812, 1861-1865, Hartford, 1888.

11. Booker T. Washington, The Story of the Negro;the Rise of the Race from Slavery, New York, 1909.

12. William Still, The Underground Rail Road, Philadelphia, 1892.

13. See Chapter XI of this work.

time, however.

In sociology as well as history, DuBois served in the academic vanguard. The Philadelphia Negro[14] served as the model for any number of similar studies of racial conditions in certain cities, indisturies or social groups. Probably the most important of the Negro sociologists of the nineteenth century, after DuBois, was T. Thomas Fortune, whose Black and White, provides us with our sharpest picture of the Negro's view of the Southern post-war economy. Fortune, rather than seeking objectivity in his work, has strong recommendations for his race, recommendations which point to the "action" groups of the twentieth century, and especially to the role of labor in helping the Negro toward a better economic position. He begins Black and White by explaning that he intends

> to show that poverty and misfortune make no invidious distinctions of "race, color, or previous condition," but that wealth unduly centralized oppresses all alike; therefore, that the labor elements of the whole United States should sympathize with the same elements in the South, and in some favorable contingency effect some unity of organization and action, which shall subserve the common interest of the common class.[15]

It was men like Williams, DuBois, Washington and Fortune who helped to turn the Negro to a study of his own past and his own problems. In addition, these same men were instrumental in convincing still-doubting whites of the efficacy of education in

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14. William E. Burghardt DuBois, The Philadelphia Negro a Social Study, Philadelphia, 1899.

15. T. Thomas Fortune, Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South, New York, 1884.

preparing the colored people for a general equality of status.

Chapter XIII

Literature-Fiction (1865-1900)

Although the Negro after the Civil War could not look around him and say loudly that this was "the best of all possible world," his literature reflects, at least, the great release which emancipation and provided. There were battles still to be fought, of course, but the Negro author no longer had to feel himself an "escapist" if he neglected to direct his writing toward some propagandistic end. It suddenly became sufficient to be only a writer, if he could prove himself a good one.

With the gaining of literary, as well as political, freedom, the Negro writer of fiction began to feel his way around in a completely new field. It would be unjust to expect that his first efforts would produce masterpieces. At least two Negro novelists of the period, however, managed to prove their abilities as craftsmen in the field of fiction. Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar provided for future writers of their race a substantial framework from which to develop.

Of the colored writers of fiction who emerged after the War, Chesnutt is easily the most important, and the one most worthy of a place in the general history of American letters. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858, he received most of his education in North Carolina, where he eventually taught for nine years. Later, however, he returned to Ohio and was admitted to the bar in Cleveland in 1887. In addition to his teaching experience, he had also worked on some New York newspapers before returning to Ohio.

His legal, pedagogical and journalistic contacts all found ample and consummate expression in his literary works.

Chesnutt's writing career began in 1887 when Thomas Bailey Aldrich, as editor of the Atlantic Monthly accepted Chesnutt's short story, "The Goophered Grapevine." It is in this story that Chesnutt introduces one of the most fully-developed characters in Negro literature, Uncle Julius, the aged colored man who was to appear later as the chief narrator of the tales appearing in Chesnutt's first published collection of short stories, The Conjure Woman (1899). A gentleman from the North, interested in buying a plantation in North Carolina and restoring its vineyards, listens to Uncle Julius' tale of how the grapevines had been "goophered" (bewitched, or conjured) many years ago. Uncle Julius, who serves as a connecting link for the stories in The Conjure Woman, is distinctly remeniscent of Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus, especially in his use as a literary device. Julius, however, is presented with touches of realism which were lacking in Harris' sugar-sweet, "minstrelizes" portrait of Uncle Remus.

It has been pointed out[1] that the Negro dialect of Uncle Julius, and that of other colored characters in Chesnutt's works, does not seem as easy and natural as that captured by later Negro writers-undoubtedly a clear indication of the author's comparative lack of familiarity with the speech of the Southern Negro. However, no one can deny his wide acquaintance with Negro

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1. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, New York, 1931, p. 312.

superstitions and folk tales, for all of the stories in the Conjure Woman are concerned with some instance of "gooperhing" or bewitching.

It is also apparent in this early short story that Chesnutt was in sharp disagreement with those white writers of the Reconstruction period who sought to prove that the old plantation system was far better for the Negro than freedom. Plantation life is only a memory for Uncle Julius when we meet him in "The Goophered Grapevine," but it is clear, in many rather subtle phrases, that time has not cast a false flow on the old life of slavery.

Chesnutt's second collection of short stories, The Wife of His Youth (1899), has as its unifying theme the effect of racial prejudice on the life of the Negro. Many of the stories deal with the problems presented by mixed blood, a favorite subject of Chesnutt's. Chesnutt felt that this problem was

> in the main the same as those of the true Negro in some instances, and in some respects much more complex and difficult of treatment.[2]

In one such story, "The Sheriff's Children," a sheriff in a Southern town learns that the mulatto prisoner he had protected from lynchers is his own son, whom he had sold, along with the boy's mother, many years ago. Now, too late, he saw

> that he had owned some duty to this son of his...that neither law nor custom could destroy a responsibility inherent in the nature of mankind.[3]

A tragic and moving story, it is written skilfully and power-

2. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, editors, The Negro Caravan, New York, 1941, p. 27.
3. Ibid., p. 40.

fully, yet with that detachment that Chesnutt achieved when at his best.

It is this ability to write with comparative objectivity that makes Chesnutt an important figure in the history of Negro literature in America. His point of view often seems to be that of any man, white or colored; in fact, most reviewers never suspected that the writer was a Negro.[4] Here was simply a writer, a man of letters, telling a story. The tale might, and probably did, contain an important truth which the author wished to make clear, but this "message" was carefully and artistically woven into the fabric of the work, so that what emerged was an artistic whole rather than a piece of propaganda. Chesmutt was one of the first, says one critic, to indicate that

> there was finally to be no such thing as a separate Negro literature, in the sense that there is a separate Negro church or a separate Negro journalism.[5]

The three novels which followed The Conjure Woman and The Wife of His Youth fall considerably below the standards set by the short stories. They are valuable chiefly as social studies.

His first novel, The House Behind The Cedars (1900), deals with one of Chesnutt's favorite themes, the problems arising from mixed blood. The heroine, Rena, is an octoroon, and hence does not feel at home with whites, Negroes, or mulattos. A true Negro finally proves to be her most loyal friend, in the novel's moral conclusion, but in time to save her.

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4. Ibid., p. 27.
5. Loggins, op. cit., p. 313.

The Morrow of Tradition (1913) is a good example of the clear vision and wide understanding that Chesnutt brought to the whole race problem. Here was no completely evil, cruel white man, on the one hand, and a good, up-standing Negro, on the other hand, with no shading between them. The white characters include people of widely divergent views, while Dr. Miller, the mild, cultured Negro physician, is in sharp contrast to Josh Green the colored man who, urging rebellion against the whites, swore that "I'd rather be a dead nigger any day dan a live dog !"[6]

One of Chesnutt's weakness is, unhappily, very apparent in this work-his tendency to put phrases far too "literary" and correct into the mouth of those he wishes to portray as belonging to the "better classes." Innumerable examples of this practice can be found in the speeches of Watson, the Negro lawyer, especially in his conversation before the riot scene (which was based on the race riots of 1898 in Washington, North Carolina).

Chesnutt's final novel, The Colonel's Dream, ends his writing career on a definite note of discouragement, but whether this was meant intentionally as a reflection of his real feelings about the Negro problem, we cannot know. Colonel French, a Southerner who returns to his native North Carolina after many years of absence, determines to reform the town in which he lives and to instill greater tolerance and social understanding into its residents.

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6. The Negro Caravan, op., p. 168.

His attempts fail, completely and irrevocably, and the reader faces, with Chesnutt, the hard fact that tolerance and enlightened views are not easily come by in the South.

After a long life of devotion to literature, Chesnutt, in 1927, was awarded the Spingarn Medal for his "pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the life and struggle of American Negro descent." He was, said Joel Spingarn,

> ...true pioneer, but we should be underestimating his achievement if we thought of it merely in terms of its subject matter or material....What is important is not that Mr. Chesnutt was the first to discover or deal with the material, but that he was the first to give it life.7

Although Paul Laurence Dunbar was to adhieve a firmer reputation than Chesnutt because of his impressive poetical works-which will be discussed in the next chapter-it is doubtful if his novels or short stories reach the high level of excellence of Chesnutt's.

Like Chesnutt, Dunbar found it possible in the period of Reconstruction to write without regard to the fact that he was a Negro. As a matter of fact, his stories and novels deal as much with problems indigenous to whites as to Negroes. His first novel, The Uncalled (1898), for instance, although obviously autobiographical, deals with the mental anguish of a young white man who, against his stronger desires, is somehow forced into the ministry. Unlike his collections of stories, Dunbar's novel was extremely unsuccessful, lacking the spontaniety which marks his portrayal of the Negro and his environment.

7. The Negro Caravan, op. cit., p. 140.

Nevertheless, Dunbar's second and third novels, The Love of Landry (1900), and The Fanatics (1901), also were constructed exclusively around white characters. They, too, must be judged literary failures.

Dunbar was far more successful in the short story, expecially in those dealing with Negroes. He had a fine sense of dialect and his poetical insight led him into deep and incisive studies of the Negro working and playing under the plantation system. A few of his tales are used as frameworks for sociological digressions, such as "The Argument at Mt. Hope," an appeal for industrial education for the Negro, and "The Ordeal at Shaft II," an anti-labor sermon; but most of his shorter works are simple and pathetic narratives of the pre-War South.

In reading back over the works of Chesnutt and Dunbar, the critic of the 1950's is prone to discover flaws of an almost monumental nature, both in style and construction. It is obvious that the new literary freedom which had been granted to the Negro after the Civil War had not yet been put to its most effective use. The pioneering of these two authors in the field of fiction, however, led inexorably to the accomplishments of the twentieth-century Negro realists.

Chapter XIV

Literature from (1865-1900)

Prior to the last decades of the nineteenth century it was an almost invariable practice to introduce Negro writers to their audience with some form of apology. One should not expect too much from a Jupiter Hammon, for, after all, he was an uneducated slave. Bishop Allen was a religious leader, first of all, and only a writer secondarilly. Even Frederick Douglass' reputation, it was said, rested on the fact that he had slid into public view on the coat-tails of the abolitionists. But with the appearance of men like Washington and DuBois and Chesnutt, excuses were no longer needed, nor called for.

Finally, with the publication of Lyrics of Lowly Life[1] by Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1896, the American Negro could at last look forward to a literature of which he could feel justly proud, a literature, which though racially set apart at the moment, would surely become merged in the near future with the general trend of American letters. Here was a book which Vernon Loggins could call "the greatest single event in the history of American Negro literature."[2] And William Dean Howells, the foremost critic of the period, used the work to illustrate his belief that a piece of literature should be judged solely on the merits of its contents and not by any interesting biographical facts which might surround it.

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1. Paul Laurence Dunbar, Lyrics of Lowly Life, 1896.
2. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, 1931, p. 344.

> I think I should trouble the reader with a special appeal behalf of this book, if it had not specially appeal to me for reasons apart from the author's race, origin, and condition. The world is too old now, and I find myself too much of its mood, to care for the work of a poet because he is black, because his father and mother were slaves, because he was, before and after he began to write poems, an elevator-boy. These facts would certainly attract me to him as a man, if I knew him to have literary ambition, but when it came to his literary art, I must judge it irrespective of these facts, and enjoy or endure it for what it was in itself."[3]

Howells, through his vigorous championing of Dunbar's poems, helped to push him to the forefront of Negro writers. In addition, he provided for all Negroes a literary credo to which they could adhere with honor.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, who was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872, wrote his first poems while running a passenger elevator. After the publication of Lyrics of Lowly Life, however, he was able to devote most of his time to writing, although he did hold a position at the Library of Congress for a short while in 1899. It is possible that the need for making money drove Dunbar from the writing of poetry, where his genius is most evident, to the construction of several novels which are little more than "potboilers."

Even Dunbar's early poetical forays, adolescent and too lyrically rapturous, show marked creative genius. "The Poet and His Song," one of Dunbar's immature efforts, although somewhat

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3. William Dean Howells, introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life, op. cit.

unsatisfactory in its looseness, at least serves to convince the reader of its author's talent. One stanza will serve to reveal the natural lyricism of the almost wholly uneducated young poet.

> A song is but a little thing,
>   And yet what joy it is to sing!
> In hours of toil it gives me zest;
>   And when at eve I long for rest,
> When cows come home along the bars,
>   And in the fold I hear the bell,
> As night, the shepherd, herds his stars,
>   I sing my song, and all is well.

If Dunbar had continued to mine this vein of completely uninvolved, spontaneous verse, his literary achievement would have been a strictly limited one, entitling him to no more than minor mention in this study. If his output had yielded only poems like "The Poet and His Song" or "The Debt," we could dismiss him lightly. "The Debt," quoted here in its entirety, shows the severe limitations of this type of over-simple, trite, though "singing" verse.

> This is the debt I pay
> Just for one riotous day,
> Years of regret and grief,
> Sorrow without relief;
>
> Pay it I will to the end---
> Until the grave, my friend,
> Gives me a true release---
> Gives me the clasp of peace.
>
> Slight was the thing I bought,
> Small was the debt I thought,
> Poor was the loan at best---
> God! but the interest.

To realize the importance of Dunbar, however, it is necessary to bypass these weak efforts, turning instead to the poems in dialect which firmly support the poet's literary reputation. Dunbar's gift was not only a lyrical one, but a social one as well, for he was able to depict vividly in a short poem the passing manners and morals of the American Negro. Of even greater importance, he was able to capture the authenticity and flavor of Southern Negro speech. Without resorting to sentimentality, Dunbar used dialect to extract pathos from the most ordinary of events. In "Little Brown Baby," for instance, the simple situation of a laborer coming home from work is transmuted into a touching and believable psychological portrait. The poem begins:

> Little brown baby wif spa'klin eyes,
> Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee.
> What you been doin', suh---makin' san' pies?
> Look at dat bib---you's ez du'ty ez me.
>
> Look at dat mouf---dat's merlasses, I bet:
> Come hyeah, Maria, an' wipe off his han's.
> Bees gwine to ketch you an' eat you up yit.
> Bein' so sticky an' sweet---goodness lan's!

It is probably true that Dunbar used James Whitcomb Riley and Joel Chandler Harris as models for much of his verse in dialect,[4] but it is doubtful if he relied on them too heavily. What is most noticeable in these poems is their freedom and naturalness, and anyone closely acquainted with older Southern Negroes will quickly recognize the indigenous pronunciations and speech--pattern.

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4. Lida Kock Wiggins, The Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1907, p. 29.

It was necessary for Riley to compound his dialect by artificial methods and with sentimental effects; Dunbar, however, could write from experience and with personal emotional involvement.

Even his love poems take on added strength and beauty when presented in Negro dialect. The first and last stanzas of "A Negro Love Song" show how effective dialect can be in adding a note of bubbling good-humour to the standard of romantic elements of the ordinary "love song."

Seen my lady home las' night,
    Jump back, honey, jump back.
Mel' huh han' an sque'z it tight,
    Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hyeah huh sigh a little sigh,
Seen a light gleam f'om huh eve,
An' a smile go flittin' by---
    Jump back, honey, jump back.

*** *** ***

Put my ahm aroun' huh wais'
    Jump back, honey, jump back,
Raised huh lips an' took a tase,
    Jump back, honey, jump back,
Love me, honey, love me true?
Love me well ez I love you?
An' she answe'd, "Cose I do"---
    Jump back, honey, jump back.

It is probably true of Dunbar, as Vernon Loggins has said, that "if he had in the first place made poets of the soil such as Burns and Riley his exclusive masters... his career would possibly be one of the most singular which American literature has to record." When he strayed in his writing from the life and manners of the Negro, Dunbar too often wrote tritely and without obvious conviction. His novels attest to this in their weakness, as do many of his ineffective non-dialect poems.

The lure of being able to have his fiction published in periodicals of national reputation---Century, Harper's, Outlook, The Atlantic Monthly, to name only a few in which Dunbar was published----led the poet from devotion to what should have been his most important work, the poems in dialect.

As an illustration of the marked difference which exists between Dunbar's dialect and non-dialect poems, it is only necessary to read selections from two poems, both philosophical in appreach, but we feel that the failure of the first poem---not in dialect ---is due to its obviously imitative style, while the only shortcoming of the second selection is its over-enthusiastic approach.

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
Which all the day with ceaseless care have sought
The magic gold which from the seeker flies;
Ere dreams put on the gown and cap of thought,
And make the waking world a world of lies,---
Of lies most palpable, uncouth, forlorn,
That says life's full of aches and tears and sighs;
Oh, how with more than dreams the soul is torn,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe weary eyes.

....

Dey is times in life when Nature
    Seems to slip a cog an' go,
Jes' a-rattlin' down creation,
    Lak an ocean's overflow;
When de worl' jes' stahts a-spinnin'
    Lak a picaninny's top,
An' yo' cup o' joy is brimmin'
    'Twell it seems about to slop,
An' you feel jes' lak a racah,
    Dat is trainin' fu to trot---
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
    An' de co'n pone's hot.

....

What is most important about the case of Paul Laurence Dunbar, however, is the fact that finally, at the end of the nineteenth century, it had become possible for a Negro to make a name for himself by means of literature alone. Whether he wrote in dialect or not, poetry or fiction, Dunbar was able to command a public, and, in addition, to win the respect of the most objective critics. By achieving this literary stature, Dunbar helped to move Negro literature in America past another mile-stone. He had made his mark as a <u>poet</u>, not as a <u>Negro</u>-poet. He smoothed the path for Negroes who would follow him, men who wanted to consider their works as part of <u>American</u> literature, not <u>Negro</u> literature.

Into the American Mainstream

Chapter XV

General Background

The story of the Negro in the States during the first half-century is the story of a slow and gradual integration into the main stream of American society. That story is as yet only told, but the theme is already obvious; the American Negro becomes an American citizen.

In order to provide a setting for that story, we must first examine the important social forces which were at work during the last fifty years, and see how they affected the Negro's social and economic position. With that setting in mind, we can better understand the themes and styles of contemporary Negro authors.

The westward movement, so great a force in the general development of American democracy, actually played very little direct part in Negro life. After the Civil War, only a small number of Negroes participated in the further settling of the sparsely populated West. However, the social freedoms which were a natural development of rough-and ready frontier life undoubtedly had some effect in preparing the American mind for the realization that race was no indication of human character and ability. In addition, the final completion of the westward movement (about 1920) shut off the safety valves of the social machinery, and forced our social and political engineers to consider carefully the pressures of our national policy. Since there were no new places to go, we were forced to find out how to live together as we were.

As Robert Frost says, "we had to discover how to be kind though crowded." Among other things, that meant trying to eliminate lynchings.and race-riots.

Although several historians contend that the country's increasing industrialization was a potent force in channeling the Negro's development,[1] it is doubtful if a direct results can be discovered until after 1917. This is largely due to the fact that before the first World War, most factory employers considered the Negroes unsuitable for anything but heavy physical labor. Furthermore, the tremendous flood of immigrant workers from Europe gave the manufacturers a seemingly inexhaustible supply of manpower. The Negro was not needed, and was therefore generally overlooked.

However, the mere possibility of jobs in the rapidly expanding American factories drew thousands and thousands of Negroes to the city. Not only the chance of a job, but a chance to live entirely among their own kind, enticed them to leave profitless share-cropping, and seek a new life in the dreary tenements of some northern Harlem. Misery loves company; among thousands of others a Negro could almost forget that he was considered inferior, that his country was not his.

By 1900 this city-ward movement was already of vast proportions. John Hope Franklin, in From Slavery to Freedom, summarizes the conditions as follows:

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1. For a vigorous defense of this view, see A. Clayton Powell, Against the Tide, 1938.

> Coincident with the rise of the city in American life was the rise of the Negro community within the city, a kind of imperium in imperio so far as the social aspects of their existence were concerned. In 1900 there were 72 cities with more than 5,000 Negroes. Washington had more than 86,000, Baltimore 79,000, and New Orleans 77,000; Philadelphia, New York and Memphis each had more than 50,000. The Negro populations of these cities were growing rapidly. Negroes outnumbered whites in Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Jacksonville, Shreveport, Vicksburg, Baton Rouge, and several other Southern cities. More than half of the Negro population of Missouri lived in towns and cities, while one-third of that of Kentucky lived in urban areas. If cities afforded larger opportunities, Negroes hoped to benefit from them.[2]

City concentration brought about not only the general evils of overcrowding; it brought about special evils for the Negro in particular. The white inhabitants established zoning laws and other restrictions to "keep the Negro in his place." Meanwhile the Negroes, with an increased sense of their combined and co-operative power, made strong demands for some of the equalities of American democracy. The crowded conditions, the fears of Negro encroachment on the part of whites, the resentment of white oppression on the part of the Negroes, naturally erupted into race-riots. But even this evil has, perhaps, had its compensation. Granted that it has been paid for with the lives of men; nevertheless, the race-riot has brought forcefully to the attention of that segment of the public not directly involved the critical necessity of solving race problems.

The greatest benefit of the urban centralization of great numbers of Negroes was the assimilation of Negro as a part of the

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2. John Hope Franklin, <u>From Slavery to Freedom</u>, 1947, p. 429.

famous American "melting-pot." In a city like New York, where so many other racial and religious and national minorities existed, the Negro tended to become no more and no less than another contributing element in the great confluence of race and cultures. And his search for justice gradually became at least partly associated with the search for justice on the part of other minority populations. In the city, the Negro found that his oppression was not unique, that he could make common cause against all kinds of discrimination. Of course, inter-marriages between Negroes and whites were nowhere nearly as common as inter-marriages between members of different religions and nationalities, but the social relationships and cultural exchanges could not help but increase under the influence of metropolitan conditions.

The rapid growth of labor unions was of little benefit to the Negro until after 1935:[3] Before that time, only the United Mine Workers had consistently encouraged Negro membership. The other labor unions had explicitly or implicitly discouraged it. Nevertheless, the labor union movement encouraged Negroes to organize their own industrial workers' organizations, and to use the same methods for achieving better wages and working conditions. Naturally, since their numbers were comparatively small, and since color counted against them, they made only limited gains. After 1935, when the C.I.O. came into being, Negro labor made more progress, for the C.I.O. openly encouraged membership. Although the Negro worker is still denied an equal footing, he has gradually bettered his position.

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3. Bucklin Moon, The High Cost of Prejudice, 1947, pp., 174-177.

As John Hope Franklin concludes, in his chapter on Negro labor; "The stand of the C.I.O. committee to abolish racial discrimination and the liberal program of the Political Action Committee have given new hope to many Negroes. They are no longer suspicious of labor organizations and are inclined to join in the program of strikes and the like with as much enthusiasm as other workers. There has developed a feeling of security and belonging among Negro workers during the last decade that has been one of the most significant developments in the direction of their more complete integration into American life.[4]

Probably the agitation for votes for women during the pre-World War I period had some beneficial effects on the Negro's political position. The question of female suffrage would naturally lead to the question of Negro suffrage. And the women who were fighting for their votes would naturally feel sympathetic toward the Negroes who were fighting for theirs.

Still and all, in the period before the first World War, the main brunt of the struggle for integration into American life was borne by the Negro himself, with the assistance of a few far-seeing white people. In 1905 a group of young Negroes, led by W. E. B. DuBois, organized to fight for the political and civil liberty of their race. Five years later, a number of white people, shocked by recent race-riots, planned to establish a permanent organization to work for the Negro's complete emancipation. These two groups were brought together through the efforts of Dr. DuBois and such public spirited leaders as Jane Addams, William Dean Howells, and John Dewey.

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4. Franklin, op. cit., p. 533.

They established the organization which was later to be known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. One of the principal instruments of their program for improvement was their magazine, The Crisis. The movement grew rapidly during the next twenty years. It publicized the facts of the social and political injustices to the Negro race; it established groups of social workers to ameliorate conditions in Negro slum areas; it organized groups of lawyers to fight for political equality in the local, state and national courts.

The first World War was of the greatest importance in promoting the further integration of the Negro into American society. The war made it evident that the Negro was needed, both as a soldier and a worker, in carrying out the vast commitments of the United States as a great international power. And during the war the Negro publicly proved his willingness and ability to serve the nation, even though the nation treated him unjustly. When a man sacrifices his life for his country, his countrymen are forced to recognize his importance.

Moreover, the demands of American industry in war production, particularly in the industrial North, made it possible and desirable for many more Negroes to migrate to Northern cities, find jobs, and settle down. This movement grew rapidly in extent and importance. John Hope says:

> In 1916 the movement spread like wild fire among Negroes. By the summer of that year the migration had reached flood tide in the states of the deep South. The Pennsylvania Railroad brought 12,000 to work in its yards

> and on its tracks; all but 2,000 came from Florida and Georgia. Even Negro professional men moved North to continue to serve their clientele. The South was alarmed. Officials of Jacksonville, Florida, passed an ordinance requiring migration agents to pay a license fee of $1,000. White citizens of many Southern towns threatened Negroes, while the white press urged Negroes to remain in the South. Homes were without servants, farms were without laborers, churches were empty, and houses were deserted. It was estimated that that by the end of 1918 more than one million Negroes had left the South. This estimate seems too generous, for the Bureau of the Census reported that the states of the North and West showed a net gain of 330,000 Negroes for the decade ending in 1920.[5]

The "melting-pot" process naturally went forward more rapidly after this great Negro migration into cities and industries. As always, however, there were adverse reactions. Just at the end of the first World War, a revived and newly militant Ku Klux Klan came forth with an extensive plan for asserting white supremacy. It took advantage of the reaction against the progress made by Negroes and other minority groups during the war, and attracted many sympathizers to its black flag of discrimination. Race-riots and lynching broke out all over the country.

But the Ku Klux Klan, and other forces of discrimination, declared themselves as opposed not only to Negroes, but also to Jews, Catholics, and orientals. This naturally influenced all oppressed minorities to band together in a cooperative effort to work for justice. And the obviously rabid fascism of the Klan gave new and stronger arguments to such organizations as the N.A.A.C.P. The N.A.A.C.P. showed increasing strength all during

5. John Hope Franklin, op. cit., p. 465.

the twenties and thirties.

One of the more commendable acts of the N.A.A.C.P. was its opposition to the Garvey movement. Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican Negro, had organized and promoted in the United States a society which asserted, not only the equality of the black race, but the supremacy of his kind. His society was called the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Its particular aim was to establish a Negro empire in Africa, and it promoted the emigration of American Negroes to Africa for that purpose. The Association had tremendous influence during the twenties, but its aims were obviously counter to those of the N.A.A.C.P. Its emigration policy worked against the orientation of the Negro in American life, and its "supremacy" propaganda was just as dangerous in fermenting distrust and rioting as the "white supremacy" it opposed. The N.A.A.C.P., by pointing out the impracticability and adverse effects of the Garvey scheme, gave further proof to the rationality and realism of its own approach to the complex problems facing the American Negro.

Of course, the general social improvements during the first part of this century brought benefits to the Negro, and further emphasized his importance as a citizen. The increasing numbers of public libraries and public hospitals, for instance, which were built by the entire public, for the use of the entire public, pointed up the fact that the Negro should be allowed to share in the public benefits which he was partly responsible for creating.

Naturally, the great expansion of free public education was the most significant of these developments.

In the free public school, which he was required to attend, the Negro had a chance to show his mental and physical abilities, and to prove that with an equal opportunity for education, he could easily stand on an equal footing with any other people. Southern states still operated separate schools, but even there the forces of Negro education helped to give the Negro a feeling of belonging, of being important, in the scheme of American life. As Jefferson had long ago pointed out, democracy must find its broad basis and its vital force in a constantly expanding educational system. In the long run, the main hope for the American Negro and for American democracy still lies in the public school's capacity for developing an intelligent and cooperative body of citizens.

The story of the social and political orientation of the American Negro during the last fifty years has been told briefly and sketchily, and we have not yet examined the effects of the depression and the second World War, which will be discussed in a later chapter. But we have noted the constant reiteration of the main theme: the Negro becomes an American citizen. The human right to citizenship was always his; the political right was his since the Civil War; but the actual right he has had to fight for. The validity of his fight for justice has been recognized by more and more people during the last fifty years. More significantly, the Negro has come to recognize himself as a valuable American citizen.

Granted that he is still forced to accept unequal justice in many cases, but he is not forced to accept unequal self-respect.

In the next chapter, we will turn from the social forces to the intellectual and philosophical forces which increased the Negro's self-respect and the respect of others for him.

Chapter XVI

Intellectual Background (1900-1950)

In discussing the intellectual forces which contributed to the Negroes progressive integration into American life, we must begin with nineteenth century Romanticism, and its various manifestations. The nineteenth century watch-words of humanitarianism, progress and democracy were bound to create an atmosphere, an intellectual climate, favorable to the complete liberation of the American Negro. Humanitarianism meant that everyone should be kind to everyone else; progress meant that everyone and everything was getting better all the time; democracy meant that everyone should have a part in government. Such all-inclusive ideals inevitably lead to a consideration of the Negro's problems. In England, one of the earliest Romantics, William Blake, considered the Negro's plight from a religious and humanitarian point of view. His profoundly moving poem, The Little Black Boy, begins:

> "My mother bore me in the southern wild,
> And I am black, but O ! my soul is white;
> White as an angel is the English child,
> But I am black, as if bereav'd of light."

American Romantics, particularly the Concord and Boston transcendentalists, were especially sympathetic to the Negro's problems, and played a large part in the abolition movement. Men like Theodore Parker, the minister who carried a gun to defend himself against anti-abolitionists, Henry Thoreau, who wrote so movingly of John Brown's raid, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, convincingly demonstrated the intellectual liberalism of the Romantic movement.

After the Civil War, they continued their efforts in behalf of the Negro. Bronson Alcott suffered his private school in Boston to disintegrate, rather than succumb to his clients' demands that a Negro boy be excluded. The acts and writings of these men undoubtedly had a profound, though untraceable, subsequent effect on the Negro's place in American society.

Walt Whitman shared the high transcendental ideals for American life and government, and wrote frequently of the social injustice committed against the Negro. Also evident in Whitman's writing was the nascent spirit of realism which carried over into the twentieth century and played a large part in focussing the country's attention on its social problems. William Dean Howells, one of the first professed realists of American fiction, demonstrated his interest in the Negro problem by taking part in the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Realism is sometimes erroneously seen as a revolt against Romanticism. In some of its minor aspects it was, but in its main intention it was a natural outgrowth of the Romantic spirit. Realism represented an attempt to give an earthly underpinning to the Romantic superstructure. As Henry Thoreau said, "Have you built castles in the air ? Then all you need to do is to put foundations under them." In the works of Whitman and Howells, in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, in Stephen Crane's The Red Badge of Courage, in Frank Norris's The Octopus, the realism always serves as the basis for considering and approving ideals as love, honor, courage, and human compassion.

What realism contributed was a determination to do away with misleading preconceptions and examine carefully the immediate facts. When applied to the Negro problem it would indicate two things: that the view of the Negro as a natural slave and an ignorant field-hand was a misleading preconception, and that the Negro was, in fact, the victim of oppressive circumstances. This was the main intention of Mark Twain's magnificent portrait of the Negro, Jim, in Huckleberry Finn. As we read the book and follow Huck's changing attitude toward Jim, we discover a Negro whose intelligence is greater than his opportunities, and whose human sympathies are warmer than our own. The central purpose of that exciting voyage down the Mississippi on a raft is to bring Jim to a place where he can act as the free and responsible human being he is, and to bring us to a place where we can see him as he is.

Naturalism was another intellectual current which, during the early years of the century, strongly influenced the trends of American thought. Unlike realism, naturalism carried with it the force of a concrete and particular philosophy of life. Naturalism developed out of social Darwinianism, the scientific study of human beings as biological organisms. The naturalist considered the individual as the sum total of his environmental influences. It is easy to see how this point of view would affect the consideration of the Negro problem. If the Negro is at the mercy of his environment, which is obviously detrimental to his best interests, how then can we hold him responsible for whatever shortcomings he may have? The familiar ring of that last sentence indicates that the naturalistic view still influences the attitude of many American whites.

Strangely enough, the influence of naturalism did not produce any important fictional studies of the American Negro, at least until the nineteenth-thirties, when the Negro writers themselves were affected by it. If a powerful writer could have made a study of the Negro in the same vein as Dreiser's An American Tragedy, if the environmental influences determining the Negro's half-abased, half-bellious attitude toward American life could have received the pain-taking analysis devoted to the study of Clyde Griffiths, the Negro problem might have been more thoroughly and generally understood. Moreover, such a study would have shown that a Negro was subject to the same feeling of inferiority, the same desire for status and prestige, the same obstacles to a greater degree, as Clyde Griffiths. In other words, the study would have shown the Negro as a human being.

But such a study was not made during the early part of the century. Many writers among the whites, such as Vachel Lindsay in The Congo and Sherwood Anderson in Dark Laughter, still considered the Negro as a strong, happy, extroverted lover of life, in close touch with the vital forces of primitive instinct, unhampered by the enervating inhibitions of the white race. Then, too, there were probably only a very few writers who had the fund of personal experience with Negro life which had enabled Mark Twain to draw the compelling portrait of Jim. And the Negro writers were not at that time conscious of such intellectual currents; they were too busy establishing their own native heritage.

The influence of pragmatism on all fields of twentieth-century endeavor has been profound.

In philosophy, education, law, literature, science, and social relationships, pragmatism has brought about vast changes. Probably most Americans, even those who never heard the term, would recognize the principles of pragmatism as their own beliefs. Pragmatism means the evaluation of an idea or act through an analysis of its practical consequences. Applied to the Negro problem, pragmatism would exclude the discussion of theoretical questions as to the Negro's ancestry and psychology. Pragmatism would ask, "What beliefs and acts in regard to the Negro, and on the part of the Negro, will lead to better social conditions?" Whatever the answer, it would have to take the direction of giving the Negro more freedom and responsibility as an American citizen. Interestingly enough, John Dewey, successor to William James as the foremost exponent of pragmatism, was one of the leaders in organizing the N.A.A.C.P. In so doing, Dewey was merely following out the implications of his philosophy.

Marxism has many elements which would naturally interest the American Negro. A Philosophy which explicitly rules out race discrimination, which advocates revolution by the masses in order to bring about an equitable distribution of goods, and praises the laborer in opposition to the capitalist, ought to have attractions for large numbers of unjustly treated people. However, it never has been particularly attractive to the Negro. For one thing, his strong sense of religion could never fit into a philosophy which denies the supernatural. For another thing, the Negro knows that his fundamental rights are available under the present federal government.

All he desires is that these rights be put into practice. Therefore the Negro until recently has generally voted Republican, for the party of Lincoln, wherever he has been granted privilege.

Of course, there have been many exceptions, of which Paul Robeson is one. Richard Wright, like many other American intellectuals of his generation, was interested in Communism until recent events indicated that Soviet policy was not liberal as it had formerly seemed to be. So by and large, the influences of Marxism and Communism on Negro thought have been indirect. The challenge of Communism to American democracy, Communist propaganda concerning the treatment of the American Negro, both encouraged the Negro to demand the benefits of his legal rights, and influenced other Americans to condemn the violations of those rights.

The new magazines, particularly those which flourished during the twenties, played a large part in spreading the influence of the liberalizing intellectual currents, and in applying the new ideas to social problems. Almost all of these magazines recognized the Negro problem as one of the most important issues of their time. They not only publicized the problem and suggested remedies, but they printed the works of Negro authors. Some of these magazines, like the _New Republic_, are still in existence; others, such as _The Masses_, _The Liberator_, and _The Seven Arts_, have now disappeared. They disappeared only because their work was completed. The older magazines and the prominent newspapers have now taken up the same issues. The Negro problem is given full and usually sympathetic treatment, at least in the North.

And the Negro writer has about the same chance as anyone else for getting his work printed.

Also during the twenties, many writers other than Negroes began to use Negro materials in their works. Although some of these works were based on already familiar views of Negro life--the Negro as the simple, happy child of God--other works, such as Paul Green's In Abraham Bosom, Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones, Stephen Vincent Benet's John Brown's Body, and Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven, presented a deeper insight into the Negro's nature and his problems.

Modern science, especially in the form of biology and anthropology was another intellectual force which worked toward the integration of the Negro in American society. Biology and anthropology demonstrated conclusively that there was no reason whatsoever to consider the Negro inferior in natural endowments. These conclusions, combined with the naturalistic theories of environmental influence, focussed public attention on the Negro's social conditions and the need for education, rather than the Negro's ancestry and former position.

It is perhaps superflous to mention the importance of Negro music, both as a contribution to American culture, and as an ever-present proof of the Negro's artistic powers. His spirituals and his jazz have been heard in almost every American home. Not only that; these types of music have been presented throughout the world as "American" music. Even prominent university professors have succumbed to the powers of jazz rhythms and have collected the records made by Lois Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and others. Outstanding scholars have studied jazz as a significant aesthetic and histori-

ical phenomenon. The effects of the popularity of jazz in diminishing the Negro's feelings of inferiority can hardly be overrated. The wide-spread interest in jazz during the twenties was probably the greatest force in making that period a significant turning-point in the history of Negro in America.

On the higher intellectual levels, there was actually very little opposition to the idea that the Negro must eventually receive full and responsible citizenship. There were some strong expounders of an anti-democratic view of American life , such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and H. L. Mencken, who lashed out against what they called the "levelling" and "standarization" of American thought, but these men tended to look with favor on the Negro's demand for democratic rights. H. L. Mencken, in particular, believed that the Negro might contribute something culturally unique, in contrast to the "mass-output" he hated so much. In any case, Mencken would have said, the Negro's contribution would certainly be more significant than the contribution of Southern whites.

At least, that's what Mencken would have said in 1920, when he characterized the South as the "Sahara of Bozart." Ten years later, Mencken could not have written a similar essay. For during the twenties the South revived in cultural importance. The most prominent group of Southern writers during that decade(perhaps during any decade) were the so-called "Nashville Fugitives," gathered at Vanderbilt University. This group included John Crowe Ranson, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren,

and others. It not only cultivated the "Sahara of Bozart," but also took a definite stand on the question of Northern interferance in South practices in regard to the Negro. In <u>I'll Take My Stand</u>, a symposium published in 1930, these Southern writers declared, among other things, that the South would need "Jim Crow" laws for some time to come, in order to prevent widespread lynchings and riots. At the same time, they asserted their willingness and determination to improve conditions for the South. In other words, they asked that the South be given time to work out its own problems in its own way, and they backed up their statements with carefully-reasoned arguments. This book had two important influences: it gave Northerners who read it a better understanding of the Southern whites' position, and it showed Southerners that they would have to do something for the Negro or else admit the weakness of their viewpoint.

The only real opposition to the improvement of the Negro's status came from fascistic tendencies on lower cultural levels. It came from the directors of admissions of certain colleges and universities; it came from the governing councils of many college fraternities; it came from newspaper editors in the South, timid politicians in the North. On an even lower level, it came from small groups of rabid fascists in the form of mimeographed pamphlets mailed to various sections of the country.

But probably the greatest force working against the Negro was the force of inertia. Traditions and customs change slowly, no matter what reason and human sympathy may say. However, once the change begins, it gathers force as time goes on.

We have noted the overwhelmingly positive influences working towards the Negro's integration into American society. During the last fifty years , these influences, both social and cultural, converged and gathered momentum. When we turn to consider the literature of the American Negro during this period, as we will in the following chapters, we will expect to observe the same trends. Our theme of social and cultural change was this: the American Negro becomes an American citizen. The theme we will follow through in discussing the literary changes will be: Negro literature becomes part of American literature.

Chapter XVII

Fiction (1900-1917)

As we pointed out in the previous chapter, the realistic movement in American fiction was well under way at the turn of the century. Writers were presenting more convincing portraits of Negro characters and were exploring some of the social implications of the Negro's social position. Stephen Crane, in a short story called "The Monster" (1897), and Upton Sinclair, in The Jungle (1905), portrayed the Negro not as a happy banjo-player but as a human being faced with economic poverty and social discrimination.

There were counter-influences, however. Thomas Nelson Page was still expressing nostalgia for the ante-bellum South, and Irving Cobb was arousing laughter, and making money, by expressing in dialect the jovial Negro's simple comments and amusing difficulties. Thomas Dixon, inspired by hate rather than nostalgia or humor, made his Negro characters as vicious as present-day comic-book villains. In two novels, The Leopard's Spots (1902) and The Clansman (1905), Dixon lashes out at all influences which tend to undermine the domination of the Southern white. Interfering Northerners are treated as scurrilously as the Negroes themselves. Only when the Ku Klux Klan repels the alien forces from the North, and lyches a few Negroes, is law and order restored at the end of a Dixon novel.

The Negro novelists who attempted to controvert the misleading presentations of Page and Cobb, and the false presentations of Dixon, accomplished almost nothing before 1912.

They had neither the ability nor the tradition upon which to base portrayals as striking as those depicted by Crane and Sinclair. Sutton Griggs, one of the Negro novelists of the period, is hampered by his melodramatic exaggeration and his inflated prose style. In such works as Unfettered (1902) and The Hindered Hand (1905), he discusses the terrible problems faced by the Negro in the South, but his fantastic exaggeration turns our pity into laughter. His plots are so improbable that we cannot believe that he is talking about the world we live in.

J. W. Grant, another Negro novelist of the time, is hampered by his perverse insistence on considering only Negroes of the well-to-do classes. In Out of the Darkness he pleads for recognition of the abilities and moral standards of some Negroes; he considers the others not worth pleading for. His writing also tends to become inflated and melodramatic. In fact, both Griggs and Grant seem to be caught between new themes and old methods. They recognize the problems of their race and their times, but they are handcuffed by the conventions of third-rate Romanticism. They may even have been influenced by the Nick Carter stories in the "penny-dreadfuls."

Another novelist of the same stamp, but one who used his Romantic materials with much greater ability and taste, was W. E. B. DuBois, who played so important a part in the founding of the N.A.A.C.P. As a novelist, DuBois tries to express his social convictions through the medium of fantasy. The fantasy is wildly imaginative, but amusing enough to get by; the characters are entirely unrealistic, but they fit in with the plots,

and they serve as adequate mouth-piece for the author's ideas. His ideas are the central elements of his works; he discusses Negro education, Northern exploitation of the Negro, the race-treachery of certain politically-minded Negroes, and many other aspects of the social scene. He has one great fault, however. He often let his fantasy run away with him. He gets so interested in symbolish and Romantic derring-do, that he forgets his main purpose. In The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911), the title itself shows this melodramatic tendency, and the beautiful Zora and noble Bles, the ideal heroine and hero, demonstrate it in their heavenly romance.

DuBois' Darkwater (1919), a collection of five stories, shows the same tendency, especially in a story called "The Comet." In this fantasy, only two people, a Negro bank messenger and a rich and beautiful white girl, are still alive after New York has been levelled by the gases of a comet. They are all set to found a new and magnificent race, when they are rescued and brought back to "civilization."

Even in 1928, in Dark Princess, DuBois has the same excellences and the same difficulties. The narrative thread of the novel concerns the romance of an American Negro and an Indian princess. Their romance covers three continents, and concludes with their marriage, after the birth of their son, symbolizing the vision of a united resurgence of all the dark-skinned peoples of the world.[1]

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1. W. E. Borghardt DuBois, The Dark Princess, New York, 1928, p., 310.

The plot and characters are as implausible as ever, but the analysis of social conditions, education, and politics in regard to the Negro is thorough and intelligent.

We may conclude that the Negro authors of the first decade of the century, and W. E. B. DuBois through all his creative-writing career, recognized the forces against which they were contending, and recognized the necessity for getting away from the earlier stereotypes of their race. However, they were all trying to deal with new themes and characters according to outmoded methods. They tended merely to substitute Romanticised abstractions for characters, and exaggerated melodrama for substance. Finally, they were all prone to tell about Negro problems rather than showing those problems in dramatic terms. They were often writing tracts rather than novels.

However, there appeared in 1912 a novel which, while it frequently demonstrated its tractarian purpose, integrated its purpose and its plot so skillfully that it was an effective work of art. This novel was _The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man_, by James Weldon Johnson, who later became noted for his poetry, and whose life and character we will treat more fully in a later chapter.

Johnson had some precedent in Charles W. Chesnutt's novel concerning "passing"--_The House Behind the Cedars_, published in 1900--but Johnson analyzes more completely and realistically the entire range of the social milieu of the Negro. Carl Van Vechten, in his preface to the 1927 edition of the book, points out that it is just as pertinent in 1927 as in 1912.[2]

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2. James Weldon Johnson, _The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man_

It is certainly no less pertinent in 1950, for it has recently been reissued as a pocket-book. In order to emphasize the ground-breaking importance of this novel, and its relationship to the literature and life of its time, we can do no better than turn to the preface prepared for the original edition by its publishers, Sherman, French and Co. The following is the first paragraph of that preface:

> This vivid and startlingly new picture of conditions brought about by the race question in the United States makes no special plea for the Negro, but shows in a dispassionate, though sympathetic, manner conditions as they actually exist between the whites and blacks today. Special pleas have already been made for and against the Negro in hundreds of books, but in these books either his virtues or his vices have been exaggerated. This is because writers, in nearly every instance, have treated the coloured American as a whole; each has taken some one group of the race to prove his case. Not before has a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites, been made.[4]

The preface calls this novel "dispassionate." Probably a better word would be "objective." For the author is not only sympathetic, but also emotionally aroused. It is his style which makes his book seem dispassionate. The following passage is a good example; the hero of the novel (who is able to "pass as a white man) is pondering the implications of a conversation concerning the race problem:

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3. Ibid., preface from original edition included.

> Here I had before me the bald, raw, naked, aspects of the race question in the South; and, in consideration of the step I was just taking, it was far from encouraging. The sentiments of the Texan--and he expressed the sentiments of the South--fell upon me like a chill. I was sick at heart. Yet I must confess that underneath it all I felt a certain sort of admiration for the man who could not be swayed from what he held as his principles. Contrasted with him, the young Ohio Professor was indeed a pitiable character. And all along, in spite of myself, I have been compelled to accord the same kind of admiration to the Southern white man for the manner in which he defends not only his virtues, but his vices. He knows that, judged by a high standard, he is narrow and prejudiced, that he is guilty of unfairness, oppression, and cruelty, but this he defends as stoutly as he would his better qualities. This same spirit obtains in a great degree among the blacks; they, too, defend their faults and failings.[4]

The same calm, realistic, yet persuasive tone continues throughout the book. Perhaps it shows some influence of Howells, at least in its clarity and directness of statement and its consideration of realistic details. However, the book seldom departs from simple narrative; dialogue is infrequent, and dialect never appears at all, except in some examples of Negro hymns. Nor is there any real characterization. The hero of the book (and supposedly the writer) is complex and interesting, but his observations and his reasoning concerning his own problem and the problems of Negroes in general comprise so much of the substance of the book that we never really know him as a person.

In its comments on the social conditions of the Negro at the time it was written, it substantiates much of what had been said in the two previous chapters of this dissertation. It indicates the growing consciousness of the Negro's struggle, and it recognizes the various stages of that struggle.

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4. Ibid., p. 165.

> It is a struggle; for though the black man fights passively, he nevertheless fights; and his passive resistance is more effective at present than active resistance could possibly be. He bears the fury of the storm as does the willow-tree. And how the scene of the struggle has shifted! The battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning; and today it is being fought out over his social recognition.[5]

The hero of the novel describes the attraction of the city, New York in particular. The greatness of its extent and activity, the vast numbers of his own race, and the relatively large amounts of money available for those with the talents and shrewdness to get it are some of the important factors in drawing Negroes to the metropolis.

Ragtime music is already of great influence, and the author foresees that it will have an even more wide spread popularity. The hero of the novel, through his ability at the piano, soon becomes a center of attraction in the activities of his own race, and later creates a sensation when he plays at the home of a white millionaire. Not only that, his musical ability gains him the friendship and assistance of the millionaire. This is a prophetic parallel to the part that ragtime would soon play in the whole history of the Negro race.

The narrator describes the increasing numbers of white people who go "slumming" in the Negro night clubs of New York. He also mentions the white women who hire Negro gigolos.

Of course, the central problem of the book, as the title indicates, is that of "passing," or leaving the race and living as a white person.

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5. Ibid., p. 75.

The obvious advantages of getting away from "Jim Crow" are pointed out. The narrator-hero of the book, in "passing" and marrying a white woman, has to renounce his hopes of doing something for his race through Negro music. So the book closes on a note of regret.

> My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.[6]

The author, however, certainly did not sell his birthright; he has been consistently true to his ideals for himself and his race, and has been remarkably successful in carrying out those ideals. Even in this first book he made a significant contribution to the writings of his race and his country. He proved that the Negro could be completely realistic and completely aware of his own position, and yet at the same time take an objective and reasonable point of view toward the problem and its solution. He also showed that the Negro writer could deal more effectively with his themes by using a direct, clear, simple style, unimpeded by Romantic elaboration and fantasy.

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6. Ibid., p. 211.

Chapter XVIII

Fiction (1917-1950)

It was not until after the first World War that the factors noted so prophetically by Johnson came to have their full effects. We have already spoken of the influences of realism and naturalism. The War tended to spread these influences, for it brought with it a wave of disillusionment concerning the nineteenth century watch-words of democracy, progress, and humanitarianism, and emphasized the necessity of facing the pressing problems of the time. Its effect on Negro literature is described by John Hope Franklin.

> American writers interested themselves in numerous social and economic problems. Labor problems received considerable attention, as did housing, crime, social planning, and disarmament. Novelists, dramatists, publicists, and other writers also turned to the problem of the Negro. Perhaps no other subject lent itself to such a variety of treatments, and the writers made the most of it. In 1919 Robert Kerlin collected the points of view of Negro newspapers in his Voice of the Negro. Shortly thereafter Moorfield Storey pricked the conscience of America with regard to the Negro in his Problems of Today; and in 1924 Frank Tannenbaum described the plight of the Southern Negro in Darker Phases of the South...Carl Van Vechten, Victor F. Calverton, H. L. Mencken, Joel Spingarn, and others were lending their pens to the encouragement of Negroes and the use of Negro materials. With such a profusion of writing about the Negro; America became conscious of the Negro problem and was willing to listen to what the Negro had to say about it.[1]

Also very important, of course, was the growth of industrial and commercial cities hastened by the War, and the particular-

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1. John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, New York, 1947, pp. 489-490.

ly large migration of Negroes to these cities. It was this migration which brought about the creation of New York's Harlem, and provided the environment in which the "Harlem Renaissance" took place. Langston Hughes, one of the young writers of that movement, tells about the social and literary activities of the period in his autobiography, The Big Sea. He mentions the many parties which both white and Negro writers and actors and artists attended.[2] He also demonstrates the influences of white writers in getting Negroes accepted by the reading public. Hughes himself was discovered, in the literary sense, by Vachel Lindsay, who persuaded the newspapers to write about Hughes' poems.[3]

Thus the Negro became more conscious than ever of his importance and of the injustices being done to him. Defiance was a major aspect of his attitude and his writings during this period. Typical of this defiance is the often-quoted poem by Claude McKay, "If We Must Die."

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honor us though dead !
> O kinsmen ! we must meet the common foe !
> Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow !
> What though before us lies the open grave ?
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

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2. Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, New York, 1940, pp. 249 ff.
3. Ibid. p. 212-13.
4. James Weldon Johnson, ed., The Book of American Negro Poetry, New York, 1931, p. 168.

Of course, one of these attitudes could have taken effective forms without the increased Negro education which gave more and more Negro writers the ability to express themselves. Besides that, Negro literature was gaining itself a tradition, both in prose and poetry, which was adequate basis for expressing contemporary manner. And there were now Negro newspapers and magazines furnishing easier outlets for the writings of the race. Langston Hughes was given his first publication in The Crisis, the official organ of the N.A.A,C.P.[5]

James Weldon Johnson, whose first book we have already discussed, was of great importance in the "Harlem Renaissance" movement. His poems and anthologies, his extremely perceptive literary and musical criticism, and his personal enthusiasm popularized the movement all over the country.

Claude McKay, one of whose poems has been quoted, was a West Indian Negro who came to this country in 1912. After the war, his poems were printed in such magazines as the The Liberator, The Messenger, and The Seven Arts, But after the publication of one volume of poems, called Harlem Shadows (1922), present a realistic view of city life. However, McKay is more interested in the personal life than in the social problem. There is less protest here than in his poems; there is more sex, love, and exultation. The author seems to believe that any Negro who so desires can have a life of gay indegence, at least for a while. Perhaps McKay's prose writing was influenced by Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (1925).

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5. Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, New York, 1940, p. 60.

In any case, their pictures of Harlem are about the same; both depict speakeasies, gambling houses, love affairs, the wild enthusiasm for jazz, and all-night parties. As one would expect, Van Vechten's style and plot structure is more polished, but McKay's characters are more realistic.

Jean Toomer, with a single book, made a significant contribution to the Harlem literary movement. He collected a series of stories concerning rural Georgia and urban Washington, and published them in 1923 under the title Cane. Toomer was more interested in a polished literary style than some of his predecessors; he captures subtle effects of color and sound in delicate phrases and quiet rhythms. His striving for literary effects is particularly noticeable in the passages of poetry which he inserts among his stories.

Toomer is also interested in the subtle evocation of psychological states of feeling. He tries to depict his characters from the inside rather than the outside. In both style and substance, then, he demonstrates the influence of the psychological naturalism already explored by such writers as Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank.

Walter White, the present director of the N.A.A.C.P., contributed two novels to the "Harlem Renaissance"--The Fire in the Flint (1925) and Flight (1926). In the first of these, White portrays the tragedy of the educated Negro in the South, and of the stupid narrowmindedness of the Southern white. In the second, he develops the theme of "passing."

The experiences of his heroine are roughly parallel to those of the hero of Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, except that White's heroine finally gives up her life as a white woman and returns to her race. The protest and the sociological realism characteristic of most Negro writing of this period are strongly exemplified in White's work.

A more prolific novelist of the period was Jessie Fauset, who wrote There is Confusion (1924), Plum Bun (1929), The Chinaberry Tree (1931), and Comedy, American Style (1933). Miss Fauset's novels have a wider range than Walter White's, but much less of the spirit of protest. They are almost entirely concerned with the personal problems of well-to-do Negroes, and, while they praise the aspirations of the race, they do not face realistically the economic and political problems of the average Negro. Her style and her characters are often sentimental; her plots are resolved by clever devices rather than human insight.

This brief summary of some of the Negro fiction of the twenties indicates the principal forces at work. Certainly Negro writers were much more prolific than before, and their writings covered a much larger range of American life. They became more interested in city life and city problems, but the Negro in the rural South was still an important subject. They had more consciousness of their own importance, and made a stronger protest against the injustices they suffered. But at the same time, as he gained in self-respect, the Negro tended to bring his writings, both in subject and style, into closer parallel with the writings of his white contemporaries.

This meant that he had to maintain a more objective and less impassioned point of view. His growing sense of importance, therefore, could lead him into a dilemma: should he use it in making a closer identification with the white writers of his time? Probably that dilemma was the reason for the frequent recurrence of the theme of "passing," the Negro writer was merely restating in other terms his own problem as a literary artist. This problem still faces the Negro writer, of course. During the thirties, the tones of defiance seemed to be winning out, but since the second World War, the trend has gone the other way, toward an increasing identification with American life in general.

During the thirties, the theme "passing" tended to disappear, for it was too unusual to meet the demands of the realism and naturalism which were influencing the younger writers. Partly because of the depression, American writing in general was going through a revival of interest in the realistic and naturalistic approaches. And the Negro writer of the early part of the century, was prepared to appreciate these methods.

Langston Hughes' novel, Not Without Laughter, published in 1930, is a forceful example of sociological realism. The obvious purpose of the book is to show the influences of the environment on the characters. Hughes describes in Aunt Hager the more conservative Negro of a previous generation who accepts the superior position of the whites, and prays for their deliverance from their sins.

In the character of younger Aunt Harriet, Hughes shows how Negro jazz and the attractions of money and city life lead to a desire for advancement and a defiant attitude toward white oppression. The quarrels between these two, with Aunt Hager willing to bear anything as long as she keeps her sense of righteousness, and Aunt Harriet defiant of everything which keeps her from having money and a good time, emphasize the changes going on in Negro life. In the character of Sandy, the small boy who is the central character, Hughes envisions a still further change. While Harriet has had to become a prostitute and later a cabaret singer in order to get the money and freedom she wants, Sandy will be able to get a good education with the money Aunt Harriet and others of the family will provide. On his education, it will be expended all the efforts of a growing desire to do something for the race as a whole.

The environmental background for the novel is a small town in Kansas and the city of Chicago. Unlike them, he concentrates on the typical aspects of Negro life, rather than the highly dramatic themes of "passing" and lynching. Unlike Jesse Fauset and Walter White, Hughes considers the lower classes rather than the well-to-do. Poverty and hard work, prostitution and love, ignorance and education, these are the themes of Hughes' novel. Except for the ever-present obstacle of race discrimination, which imposes its barriers on the lives of all the characters, this novel treats material which appeared in hundred of novels by the white writers.

There is a great deal of color and vitality in Hughes' style. His descriptive passages are crowded (but not overcrowded) with the realistic detail which makes a scene live. The following description of a Negro red-light district is particularly effective:

> At night in the Bottoms victrolas moaned and banjos cried ecstatically in the darkness. Summer evenings little yellow and brown and black girls in pink or blue, bungalow aprons laughed invitingly in doorways, and dice rattled with the staccato gaiety of jazz music on long tables in rear rooms. Pimps played pool; boot-leggers lounged in big red cars; children ran in the streets until midnight, with no voice of parental authority forcing them to an early sleep; young blacks fought like cocks and enjoyed it; white boys walked through the streets winking at colored girls; men came in autos; old women ate pigs' feet and watermelon and drank beer; whiskey flowed; gin was like water; soft indolent laughter didn't care about anything; and deep nigger-throated voices that had long ago stopped rebelling against the ways of this world rose in song.[6]

Hughes makes a notable advance over his predecessors in the use of dialogue and dialect. For one thing, he seldom uses description except for the sake of background. Even the narrative passages are brief. The author brings his characters to life by making them act and talk. They play out their drama on the stage of life without interference from tractarian sermons of moralizing comments. The meaning of the novel is not imposed on the characters; it grows out of their actions and speech.

Hughes is very successful at catching the speech habits and the tones of voice of his characters. The oldest character, Aunt Hager, has the slow, heavy drawl traditionally associated with the Negro.

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6. Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter, New York, 1930, p. 232.

Aunt Harriet talks with the more rapid, more nervous speech of youth and the age of jazz, while Sandy, the boy, who is introspective and bookish, speaks in a thoughtful, almost absent-minded way.

Hughes demonstrates the same abilities at character creation in his volume of short stories, The Ways of White Folks (1934). As the title shows, this book is mainly concerned with the problem of race discrimination. But his method is satire rather than sermonizing; he merely lets the characters show themselves for what they are. He satirizes the whites who expect that Negro girls are going to fall in love with them; he satirizes the members of his race who compromise with whites.

On the other hand, there were some Negro writers of the thirties who were more interested in depicting local color than in urban realism or race problems. Zora Neale Thurston was the formost of these. Her studies in anthropology at Columbia University led to a consuming interest in Negro folk-lore. The collected folk-tales of Mules and Men (1936) are amusing, and they help explain certain aspects of the Negro character. But even in her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Miss Thurston shows almost no consciousness of the pressing problems of her race. The story is concerned with a Southern Negro woman's life-long process of learning to love. This process is not complicated by the restrictions of poverty or race discrimination. The Negroes in the novel seem to have little trouble in acquiring whatever money they need.

White people seldom appear in the book; when they do, they are either indifferent or sympathetic. However, Miss Thurston has a good deal of sympathy and understanding for her characters, and she vivifies her story with apt descriptions and amusing dialogue.[7]

But the most important Negro writer who emerged during the thirties was Richard Wright, whose Native Son is the most profound and moving condemnation of race prejudice ever written. It is more than that; it is a profound study of human nature. Its human truths are larger than its racial truths. The author had been able to rise above race prejudice and see it in perspective rather than in isolation. While previous Negro writers, even Langston Hughes, were bound by the limits of their problem, Wright has fitted that problem into its place in the whole pattern of society.

It would not be enough to say merely that Richard Wright is a greater novelist than his predecessors in Negro fiction. Whether he is or not, our question would still be this: how did he acquire the broad understanding which makes his work so effective? We can trace at least three main sources: the experiences of his early life, his capacity for analyzing those experiences, and the influences of white writers of the previous generation, such as Lewis and Dreiser.

Wright has written of his early life in a very revealing book called Black Boy, which was completed in 1937. He was born in

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7. Zora Neale Thurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, New York 1937.

Mississippi, but by the time he was fifteen he had lived in a dozen different towns in that state and Arkansas and Tennessee. His family was constantly on the move, and lived in constant poverty. Wright became well acquainted with all the sordid conditions of slum life. He also became acquainted with "Jim Crow," first from hearsay and then from practical experience. He presents a typical dialogue among Negro boys, with his perceptive comments.

> "Man, what makes white folks so mean?" Returning to grapple with the old problem.
> "Whenever I see one, I spit." Emotional rejection of white.
> "Man, ain't they ugly?" Increased emotional rejection.
> "Man, you ever get right close to a white man, close enough to smell 'im?" Anticipation of statement.
> They say we stink. But my ma says white folks smell like dead folks." Wishing the enemy was dead.
> "Niggers smell from sweat. But white folks smell all the time."
> The enemy is an animal to be killed on sight.[8]

The author's former education was sporadic, because of his family's peregrimations. And his descriptions of school life are mainly concerned with fights with other boys and quarrles with teachers. However, he had a sense (acquired, he says, from his mother) of the imaginative, which led to early experiments with story writing. His first story was entitled "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," and it was printed in the local newspaper. He discovered that he faced a double isolation, as a Negro and as a writer.[9]

He also discovered the difficulties of finding and keeping a job. There were only certain types of work a Negro could get. And

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8. Richard Wright, Black Boy, New York, 1943, p. 64.

9. Ibid., p. 128.

the slightest disagreement with a white person could mean the loss of his job. He had to overlook, or even laugh at, the cruelties committed against others of his race. And if he tried to learn about any work other than the physical labor to which he was assigned, he was immediately suspected of being "uppity", and was dismissed.

Wright even had great difficulty in getting books from a library. He had to ask assistance of a Roman Catholic, who was suspected by Southerners almost as much as a Negro. But he got the books, and he started by reading H. L. Mencken. After that, he read Main Street and Jennie Gerhardt and Sister Carrie.[10]

These books and others like them had a tremendous effect on Wright's spirit and his subsequent career. They spoke to him of a larger world, a larger viewpoint, a greater understanding. With their guidance and their justification, he could begin to appreciate American life as a whole, and see himself and his race in broad perspective. Near the end of Black Boy he wrote:

> It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities. Of course, I had never seen or met the men who wrote the books I read, and the kind of world in which they lived as alien to me as the moon. But what enabled me to overcome my chronic distrust was that these books-written by men like Dreiser, Masters, Mencken, Anderson, and Lewis---seemed defensively critical of the straitened American environment. These writers seemed to feel that America could be shaped nearer to the hearts of those who lived in it. And it was out of these novels and stories and articles, out of the emotional impact of imaginative constructions of heroic or tragic deeds, that I felt touching my face a

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10. Ibid., pp. 186-187.

> tinge of warmth from an unseen light; and in my leaving I was groping toward that invisible light, always trying to keep my face so set and turned that I would not lose the hope of its faint promise, using it as my justification for action.[11]

With this "faint promise" as a guide, Wright decided to leave the South, and see if in the North he could follow the path laid down by the great writers he admired so much. He concluded that his attempt could mean a great deal, not only to himself and his race, but also to the Southern whites who had kept him for the fulfillment of his aims and ideals.

> So, in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom...And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that southern swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even out of the blackest of the southern night. I would know that the South, too, could overcome its fear, its cowardice, its heritage of guilt and blood, its burden of anxiety and compulsive cruelty.[12]

The fact that Wright could speak of the South in these terms, less than a decade after leaving it, indicates that he himself had emerged from "despair and violence." For he was speaking as an American citizen, interested not only in his race but also in American society as a whole. He was resentful, but he understood his resentment and those who had caused it. He was faced with a tremendous task, but in Lewis and Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson he had found a tradition greater and broader than his own particular work. This is what any writer needs; it was what the Negro writer generally lacked until Richard Wright set the example.

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11. Ibid., p. 193.

His first book was a collection of short stories called _Uncle Tom's Children_, which appeared in 1938. They demonstrate his great ability at portraying violent emotions through rapidly paced narrative and concise dialogue. But they do not demonstrate the deep understanding of _Native Son_. They lack the central core of meaning which makes a story memorable. Perhaps the author was consciously working off his pent-up resentment against the South. Only a writer under strong personal compulsion could have written about the torture described in "Bright and Morning Star," one of the stories in the revised edition of _Uncle Tom's Children_.

Native Son is a different matter. Unlike the short stories, it has a strong central theme, and it develops to greater advantage the lessons Wright had learned from his reading. In general outline and in point of view, his novel is obviously based on Dreiser's _An American Tragedy_. Like Dreiser, Wright studies the mentality of a murderer, and the social forces which have created that mentality.

In regard to style, however, the two novels are quite different. Wright was probably well aware that Dreiser's novel often seems tiresomely long-winded. In any case, Wright had already developed a facility for handling rapid dramatic action. So, instead of piling details upon details, Wright used a sequence of brief, tense, telling scenes. Thus he renounced some powerful and immediate impact. This difference extends even to individual sentences and choice of words. Dreiser's sentences are often long and tremendously involved; his diction is elaborately descriptive.

Wright's sentences are short and staccato; his diction is extremely simple.

But in regard to point of view, the influence of Dreiser's naturalism is unmistakeable. Both Bigger Thomas and Clyde Griffiths are no more and no less than what their environmental experiences have made them. Both of them are completely selfish, completely lacking in any sense of human dignity and human sympathy. Both of them have one essential drive, the need to feel powerful and important.

Bigger Thomas poses an even greater artistic problem than Clyde Griffiths. For Clyde has a better education, a better family background, and therefore has a greater capacity for introspection: He can reveal his motives explicitly. Bigger Thomas, on the other hand, does not have the capacity to express his motives. Wright deserves great praise for conveying these motives entirely through implication.

Bigger's feeling of insecurity and his consequent desire for power and importance are demonstrated immediately in his dominating attitude at home and in the pool room. But it is patronization of the white people he goes to work for, which turns his insecurity to real hate. And it is fear, the fear of being trapped by those he hates, which leads him to murderous violence.

But Bigger, who lacks even the slight inner resources of Clyde Griffiths, collapses completely once he has actually been caught, and he loses all his defiance in the depths of self-pity. For self-pity remains his only means to be self-centered.

And he throws himself entirely on the mercy of others, hoping that they will pity him, too. Even when faced with death, he still can think only in terms of self-justification.

This is the ironic climax to the book. The lawyer who has pleaded so passionately and brilliantly for the Negro's cause, who had pointed out that oppression necessarily leads to violence, cannot make Bigger understand the importance of the case. He cannot get through to any essential humanity in Bigger, for that humanity has never had a chance to grow. The question is thrown wide open again and remains unsolved at the end. Should Bigger be saved, or is he beyond salvation? Granted that oppression has made Bigger what he is, and that that oppression must be stopped. But in Bigger's individual case, what should we do? Pity him, and let him run loose, or fear him and condemn him to death?

Some critics have felt that the lawyer's defense of Bigger is an unnecessarily long and moralistic sermon, which makes the book propaganda rather than art. These critics forget that the theme of the book demands a complete and powerful exposition of the Negro situation; they also forget the ironic and disturbing implications of the ending.

So the book does not really solve any problems; like other great novels, it poses important questions. It raises the question of the Negro's relationship to Communism. There is the Communist lawyer, who not only defends Bigger, but tries to believe in him as a human being.

It raises the whole issue of patronization. Mr. Dalton gives Bigger a job and treats him fairly, but he also conspires to keep Negroes restricted to a particular section of the city. Is this reasonable?

But the most important questions it raises are greater than any problem of race or creed. This novel asks two universally disturbing questions: first, how can we make up for the injustices we have committed? Second, do we care about the soul of the man we hurt, or are we merely afraid that he will strike back?

We will not pretend to try to solve these questions. Suffice it to say that the novel has the power to make us worry about them. It has the power to make us see Bigger Thomas, not only as a Negro, but as a fellow human being whose terrible mold we ourselves have made.

That is why Richard Wright is more than Negro writer. He is an American writer who is a Negro. For he uses to good advantage the entire tradition of the American novel. And he sees the problems of his race as a symbol for the more inclusive problems of American society and human nature in general.

It is certainly importantto have Negro writers who limit themselves to the racial problem. Their work is badly needed, and will be needed for decades to come. But we all hope that there will be a time when the justice done to the Negro will make such work seem "dated." Then, if that paradise ever comes, Richard Wright's <u>Native Son</u> should still have an audience. It is more

than a plea for justice; it is a valuable document concerning human nature.

There are a few more paragraphs to add to this discussion of Negro Fiction. Perhaps they will seem anti-climatic; perhaps they are. But they raise a significant question; can the Negro writer go too far in becoming "an American writer who is a Negro?"

It may be a long time before this question can be answered. Right now we can only examine a case in point. Most of the readers of Frank Yerby's novels do not know that he is a Negro. During the last six years he has written three historical novels, all of them best-sellers. Two of them sold over half-a-million copies each. Yerby's work is on a par with that of Thomas B. Costain, though perhaps Yerby is not quite as thorough in historical research.

Perhaps his work would have sold just as well if it were known that Yerby is a Negro. But that is not the question. The question is this: will the temptation to follow in Mr. Yerby's footsteps entice many promising young Negro writers away from the important themes and purposes in their racial background?

The temptation to make money has already hurt American writing and American writers in general. It will be too bad if the Negro writer, in becoming an American writer who is a Negro succumbs to the temptation.

Chapter XIX

Poetry (1900-1917)

Like American Negro prose, Negro poetry during the last fifty years follows a trend of gradual confluence with the main stream of American literature. At the beginning of the century, it is distinctively Negro poetry. Now it is very often American poetry written by a Negro.

Curiously enough, the first Negro poets in America wrote verse which scarcely ever showed internally that it was written by a Negro. As we have already seen, the poems of Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon could seldom be distinguished by thought or style from other American poetry of the eighteenth century. But, as we also noted, these poets had been given social and educational advantages far different from what the rest of their race enjoyed, or rather suffered.

Our examination of the social trends in Negro life clearly indicated that such is not the case with modern Negro poetry. Many other Negroes today enjoy the same advantages as their poets ; modern Negro poets face the same obstacles as other members of their race. So the state of Negro literature today serves as a real barometer of the Negro social and intellectual climate. We will now go on to follow the changes that climate in the last fifty years, as indicated by Negro poetry.

However, in order to see Negro poetry in perspective, it will be nedessary to review briefly the main trends in American poetry in general during the same period.

We must survey the forest before considering the separate trees.

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, the stage seemed to be set for significant developments in American verse. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (whose volumes were then being published) had made unique contributions to American literature, contributions which opened up many new possibilities. Whitman's free, cadenced verse form, his attention to the realistic detail of contemporary life, his great consciousness of the United States as a geography and a nation, was the first cultivation of areas which should be productive of a full harvest. Miss Dickinson's compact and incisive use of diction and metaphor, her use of half-rhyme, her spontaneous directness of feeling, gave evidence of the values of greater freedom in poetry. And the ruggedly colloquial verse of Westerners like Bret Harte proved that the United States had speech tones and subjects scarcely suspected before.

But the United States had to wait until 1912 before these foreshadowings produced much significant further development. William Vaughn Moody and Edwin Markham at the time were almost the only poets who refused to escape into the literary "Vagbondia" of Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman. Moody and Markham, though they made no novel contributions in style, did continue with strong traditional accents the social-consciousness theme which Whitman had initiated. Granted that Frost and Robinson and Lindsay were writing at that time, but their poetry either had not yet been published or was largely ignored.

Then, in the few years between 1912 and 1918, American poetry burst into full flower. Ezra Pound, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, John Gould Fletcher, Conrad Aiken, Carl Sandburg, and Edward Arlington Robinson all became important poets during that brief period. And even the general public took an interest; the sales of poetry were unprecedented in American history.

The Prominent "school" of the period was the Imagist program, headed by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. Its influence lasted down into the thirties. Its principal characteristics, as practiced in the poems, were:

(1) the use of specific details, rather than broad generalization;

(2) the "language of common speech," rather than "poetic diction;"

(3) the presentation of an "image," that is, the precise rendition of a picture-mood, without any intellectual comment or philosophical discussion.

The classic example is Pound's "in a Station of the Metro":

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

Much of the time, the Imagist poets worked in free verse, as in the poem just quoted, and when they did use traditional meters, they often experimented with wide range of forms.

During the twenties, there were two main influential trends in poetry. The first was the "burn the candle at both ends" exemplified in the poems in Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dorothy Parker. The second trend was more important and lasting in its

effects. It was the complex idiom used by T. S. Eliot and his followers to express the complexity of the modern world and the sterility of modern life.

Increasingly evident in the works of most American poets after the first World War, and receiving special prominence during the thirties because of the depression, was a strong interest in social conditions. Sometimes it was expressed in the form of Marxism or Socialism; more typical and more influential was the call to social and political action exemplified by Archibald MacLeish's essay, "The Irresponsibles," and his radio plays.

More important than all these "period" developments are the combined characteristics which distinguish the American poetry of the last fifty years from the poetry of previous centuries. The following list is a broad summary of these characteristics.

1. A growing concern with modern science and the machine age, as exemplified in the works of Frost, Crane, Jeffers, and others.

2. Penetrating psychological studies, producing many memorable characters such as T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, and E. A. Robinson's Miniver Cheevy.

3. A concern with social distress, as shown in the works of Archibald MacLeish, Robinson Jeffers, and Kenneth Fearing.

4. A strong skepticism, healthy in the work of Frost, grim in the earlier work of T. S. Eliot.

5. A search for faith, in or beyond skeptical doubt, as shown by Frost's recent masques, and Eliot's Four Quartets.

6. In style, the use of specific details rather than vague generalizations, the use of precise diction for compact expression that they left out the connecting links of grammar and logic, and merely piled erudite references and startling metaphors, one on top of another. The use of erudite references was motivated partly by the desire to recreate for modern time the evocative powers of ancient myth.

Except for the theme of social distress, Negro poetry does not exemplify these general characteristics until relatively late. The Negro poet had special problems to cope with--and his social position was the most important--before he could begin to take into account the broader trends in American culture.

His first problem was to come to a full recognition of his social position and its implications. That meant that he had to dispense with the concept of himself as a simple, happy, primitive lover of life. Paul Laurence Dunbar had popularized this view, had written some enjoyable dialect poems based on the themes, but it was, at best, a small part of the truth. After 1900, the only Negro poet who did his best work in this tradition was John Wesley Holloway, a follower of Dunbar's.

Other poets who followed in the Dunbar tradition added a note of bitterness to the dialect poems which caught more truthfully the Negro's sense of injustice. James David Corrothers was one of the first of these. His two volumes of poetry, Selected Poems (1907) and The Dream and the Song (1914), show strong influences

of Dunbar, to whom he wrote a poem of praise. But such a poem as "An Indignation Dinner" demonstrates what he added of his own, an ironic twist that questions all sentimentality. Corrothers simply tells the story of a group of poor Negroes who managed a good Christmas dinner by stealing the necessary victuals from white people. The poem concludes: "Not beca'se we was dishonest, but indignant, sah. Dat's all."[1]

In non-dialect poems, Corrothers modified the Dunbar tradition in the same way. Dunbar had written many laments for the condition of his race, but most of them were written in the spirit of sorrowful acceptance of earthly misery, with a hope for better things in a life to come. Corrothers, on the other hand, puts in a tone of strong resentment:

At the Closed Gate of Justice

To be a Negro in a day like this
   Demands forgiveness. Bruised with blow on blow,
Betrayed, like him whose woe-dimmed eyes gave bliss,
   Still must one succer those who brought one low,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

To be a Negro in a day like this
   Demands rare patience--patience that can wait
In utter darkness. 'Tis the path to miss,
   And knock, unheeded, at an iron gate,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

To be a Negro in a day like this
   Demands strange loyalty. We serve a flag
Ah! one must love when Truth and Justice lag,
   To be a Negro in a day like this.

To be a Negro in a day like this--
   Alas! Lord God, what evil have we done?
Still shines the gate, all gold and amethyst,
   But I pass by, the glorious goal unwon,
'Merely a Negro'--in a day like this![2]

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1. James Weldon Johnson, Ed., The Book of American Negro Poetry New York, 1931, p. 79.
2. Ibid., p. 73.

It is easy to critize such verse, to say that the vast generalizations, such as "Truth" and "Justice," and the "glorious goal," interfere with the expression of deep sorrow. But the sincerity of the feeling is unquestionable, and one phrase--"strange loyalty"--has the real overtone needed to express that feeling.

This same element of resentment, combined with a determination to win out, to achieve justice here on earth, comes through even more clearly and strongly in a non-dialect poem by Corrothers, called "In the Matter of Two Men." The last verse will be sufficient to indicate the tenor of the whole poem.

> The white man votes for his color's sake,
> While the black, for his is barred;
> (Though "ignorance" is the charge they make),
> But the black man studies hard.
> And it's oh, for the white man's sad neglect,
> For the power of his light let go!
> So, I know which man must win at last,
> I know! Ah, friend, I know![3]

Certainly it is evident that early in the century, the Negro poet was beginning to grapple seriously with his central theme. He was leaving his own literary "Vagbondia" behind him; his own escapist caricature of himself as a simple child of nature would soon be a thing of the past. If Corrothers can not be compared to Moody and Markham in poetic power, he can be compared to them in seriousness of subject.

George Marion McClellan, who published a volume called <u>The Path of Dreams</u> in 1916, illustrates other aspects of the changing themes. A strong consciousness of religion has been evident in American Negro poetry from first to last. It often took the form of identification with the suffering of Christ, stressing the Easter crucifixion rather than the Christmas birth.

3. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 76.

But in the poems of Dunbar this suffering was expressed with sorrowful acceptance, while in the poems of McClellan and other later poets, it was expressed with a note of determined righteousness. "The Feet of Judas," by McClellan, is a typical example. The author emphasizes the treachery of Judas and identifies it with the treachery committed against the Negro by the white race. However, he concludes, Negroes should remember that "Christ washed the feet of Judas."[4]

Both Corrothers and McClellan were strongly influenced by the English poets of the Romantic period. Perhaps the idea of "intellectual beauty" offered a pleasant escape from their natural feeling of bitterness. Whatever the case, their works in this vein were only third-rate imitations of Keats and Shelley. A single stanza from Corrothers' poem Dream and the Song will suffice to show the lack of quality.

> The lilting wichery, the unrest
> Of winged dreams, is in our breast;
> But ever dear Fulfillment's eyes
> Gaze otherward. The long-sought prize,
> My lute, must to the gods belong.
> The dream is lovelier than the song.[5]

There is nothing here except a vague and rather awkward progression of sounds; the meaning is almost non-existent. "Intellectual beauty," whatever its attractions, was not the forte of these poets. Their real themes were much closer home--in their righteously resentful hearts. But their reading of the poets of the past did develop a consciousness of varied metrical effects, varied forms and stanzas, and the values of history and scholorship.

4. Ibid., p. 97.
5. Ibid., p. 79.

Although these poets were not eliminating Romantic vagueness, they were getting away from a retarding element in their own heritage. We already noted that Corrothers had added a note of bitterness to the Dunbar dialect; George McClellan refused to write in dialect at all. In order to bring out clearly what this means to the history of Negro poetry, let us turn to the admirable analysis of this problem presented by James Weldon Johnson in his American Negro Poetry:

> The Negro in the United States has achieved or been placed in a certain artistic niche...The picture of him is in a log cabin amid fields of cotton or along the levees. Negro dialect is naturally and by long association the exact instrument for voicing this phase of Negro life; and by that very exactness it is an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos. So even when he confines himself to purely racial themes, the Aframerican poet realizes that there are phases of Negro life in the United States which cannot be treated in the dialect either adaquately or artistically. Take, for example, the phases rising out of life in Harlem, that most wonderful Negro city in the world. I do not deny that a Negro in a log cabin is more picturesque than a Negro in a Harlem flat, but the Negro in the Harlem flat is here, and he is but part of a group growing everywhere in the country, a group whose ideals are becoming increasingly more vital than those of the traditionally artistic group, even if its members are less picturesque.[6]

In his preface to the revised edition of the same volume, published in 1931, Johnson elaborated on the same subject, stressing the important distinction between the traditional Negro dialect mentioned above, and a new kind of dialect developed during the twenties.

> Several of the poets of the younger group, notable Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown, do use a dialect; but it is not the dialect of the comic minstrel tradition or of the sentimental plan of the Negro in certain phases of real life.[7]

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6. James Weldon Johnson, ed., <u>The Book of American Negro Poetry</u>, New York, 1931, p. 41.
7. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 4.

George McClellan was not able to develop any "racy, living, authentic Speech," but he did see the great limitations of traditional dialect, and both McClellan and Corrothers got away from the stereotyped picture of the "log-cabin Negro." In these respects they made real and lasting contributions.

Before going on to see the further development of these contributions, let us note the work of another Negro poet of the early part of the century, who added considerably to the range of Negro poetry by writing satirical verse. George Reginald Margetson, originally a West Indian, arrived in the United States in 1897. Between that time and 1916, he published four volumes of poetry, the last of which has the intriguing title, The Fledgling Bard and the Poetry Society. This volume contains a single poem one hundred pages long. Most of the poem is written in a-b-a-b-b-c-c stamza, pentameter in the first six lines, and hexameter in the last line. Lyrical passages of other meters are interspersed at random intervals throughout the poem.

The quality of this work varies considerably; sometimes the meter and rhymes are sharp and concise, sometimes they are awkward and flat. But the subject and the point of view are highly original; sometimes the satire is trenchant and points, sometimes it is trite and dull. One is amazed that a Negro poet of this period can demonstrate a full consciousness of the social obstacles and injustices faced by himself and his race, and yet maintain the objective and witty attitude necessary for satire.

Also notable in the work of this poet is a straight-forward, modern, colloquial diction. Margetson confesses to the strong

influence of Byron, but unlike Corrothers and McClellan, Margetson has largely assimilated the lessons of his Romantic model and applied them to his own original material. Only at times, therefore, does Margetson imitate an outmoded diction. Thus the study of the whole heritage of English verse begins to take on real meaning for the Negro poet. He can use this heritage without being dominated by it.

The following stanza shows, besides the elements mentioned above, the poet's human sympathy and social consciousness. The character described is certainly from the modern city, not the Civil War South.

> There goes a wench, a poor live human scrag,
> Half crushed beneath the freight of seventy years,
> With pail and scrub-brush, soapine and a rag,
> To polish marble halls and dirty stairs.
> I believe most times she cleans them with her tears;
> Ah me, that's civilization at its height.
> Democracy's full moon, obscured in darkest night.[8]

Like all good satirists, the poet can turn on himself, and does it with his tongue in his cheek.

> Of course I soak the booze once in a while,
> But I don't wake the town to sing and shout it;
> I love the girls, they win me with a smile,
> But no one knows, for I won't write about it.
> When I declare I am a moral man,
> As gifted, yet as good as God did ever plan.[9]

In fact, Margetson can direct his barbs even at his own race.

> Some look to Booker Washington to lead them,
> Some yell for Trotter, some for Kelly Miller,
> Some want DuBois with fat ideas to feed them,
> Some want Jack Johnson, the big white hope killer.

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8. Ibid., p. 109.
9. Ibid., p. 113.

> Perhaps some want Carranza, some want Villa,
> I guess they want social equality,
> To marry and to mix in white society.[10]

He didn't spare President Woodrow Wilson either.

> Come, Woody, quit your honeymooning;
>   The Austrians have sunk a boat;
> Cut out your wooing and your spooning,
>   Get busy, write another note![11]

In fact, Margetson's satire covered the whole range of his society, from war and the class struggle to the church and religion. As his title implies, he had a particular antipathy toward the meaningless chit-chat and the superficial values of poetry societies.

In the range and objectivity of his view of life, in his use of the great tradition of English poetry without being dominated by it, in his direct, colloquial idiom, in his human sympathy and social consciousness, Margetson gave his successors in Negro poetry a much broader field and more effective means than they had ever had before. He is the first American Negro poet to cope, not only in subject but also in style, with the whole area of American society, as it was in his own times. Though his work does not set the consistently high poetic standards of some of his contemporaries, though he does not give evidence of the deep insight and tremendous power often achieved by Edward Arlington Robinson, for instance, he was preparing the way for a Negro poetry which would be a significant part of American poetry.

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10. Ibid., p. 112.

11. Ibid., p. 110.

Margetson seems not to have been affected by the flourishing revival in American poetry which took place shortly before the publication of his last volume. Nor did he have effect on it. The one Negro poet who played a part in that significant evolution was William Stanley Braithwaite, and his anthologies, rather than his poems, were responsible for his influence. In 1906 he brought out The Book of Elizabethan Verse; in 1908, The Book of Georgian Verse, and in 1909, The Book of Restoration Verse. Then, in 1913, he brought out the first in a number of yearly collections of magazine verse.

Braithwaite's own poems were influenced by the movement he helped to publicize. Particularly evident in his verse is the precise diction, the psychological interest, and the restrained irony which are associated with the work of Edward Arlington Robinson.

Chapter XX

Poetry (1917-1950)

The pre-war revival of American poetry did not influence Negro poetry to any profound extent until after the first World War was over. Furthermore, these effects were so intermingled with the effects of the World War itself and the particular problems of the Negro that separating the strands of development is extremely difficult. James Weldon Johnson sums up some of the main strands of the post-war Negro poetry as follows:

> The rise of the World War group involved a revolt against the traditions of Negro dialect poetry, against stereotyped humorous-pathetic patterns, against sentimental and supplicatory moods; it involved an attempt to express the feelings of disillusionment and bitterness the American Negro was then experiencing, and out of it there came poetry of protest, rebellion, and despair. The rise of a younger group (beginning about 1925) involved a revolt against 'propaganda', an effort to get away from 'race problem' poetry, an attempt to break through racial barriers that hedge in even art in the United States, a desire to be simply poets.[1]

Johnson himself was the principal poet of the World War group. In order to analyze the characteristics of the Negro poetry of this era, we must first turn to Johnson's own life and work. He was born in 1871, in Jacksonville, Florida, and was able to get a college education at Atlanta University. Before 1900 he had established himself as a Negro educator and a lawyer. In 1901, however, he abandonned his career in the South and went to New York as a writer of plays and songs. Thus he was a part of the migration of the Negro into the city.

Between 1906 and 1913 he was serving the United States government as a consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua.

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1. James Weldon Johnson, ed., The Book of American Negro Poetry, New York, 1931, p. 5.

During this period he launched his writing career with a novel, _The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man_, and some poems printed in various magazines. Poetry became more and more his primary artistic expression. In 1917 he published _Fifty Years and Other Poems_, containing an introduction by Brander Matthews, who had given Johnson consistent advice and encouragement. In 1927 he published _God's Trombones_, and in 1930, he brought out _Black Manhattan_ and _Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day_. He edited _The Book of American Negro Spirituals_ and a _Second Book of American Negro Spirituals_, which were brought in 1925 and 1926, respectively, with the collaboration of his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson.

But the duties of editor and the demands of his own poetry did not take all his time and energy. During most of his fifteen years of literary work, he was also serving the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in an official capacity. His infectious enthusiasm, his driving spirit, his tremendous capacity for getting things done, above all, his unswerving faith in himself and the task he was called upon to perform for his race, made him a strong influence in many fields at once. His death in 1938 was a great loss for his people and his country.

His poetry demonstrates his broad interests, his varied background. It includes almost the themes we have touched upon in regard to Negro poetry. In his earlier work, Johnson even went back to the outmoded Dunbar tradition once in a while. The last section of his _Fifty Years and Other Poems_, called "Jingles and Croons," includes some work which is definitely reminiscent of

the stereotyped picture of the plantation Negro talking in synthetic dialect. The conclusion to the poem, "A Plantation Bacchanal," is a pertinent example.

> Jes lay away ole Trouble
> An' dry up all yo' tears;
> Yo' pleasure sho' double;
> An' you bound to lose yo' keers.
> Jes lay away ole Sorrer
> High upon de shelf;
> And never mind to-morrer,
> 'Twill take care of itself.[2]

Another element of Johnson's earlier work which harks back to an outmoded tradition without re-vitalizing that tradition is the expression of the Romantic dream-world. Like Corrothers, and for the same reasons, Johnson was never able to produce more than a third-rate imitation in this vein. The first stanza of his poem, "A Mid-Day Dreamer," will clearly demonstrate the triteness of his attempts.

> I love to sit alone, and dream,
> And dream, and dream;
> In fancy's boat to softly glide
> Along some stream
> Where fairy palaces of gold
> And crystal bright
> Stand all along the glistening shore:
> A wondrous sight.[3]

The strong religious consciousness, and the indentification of the Negro's cause with God's final justice, is a much more important element in Johnson's work. In a poem simply entitled "Fragment," Johnson declares that the white people of the South have "fought and died for what was wrong." The unjust treatment of the Negro, says the poet, has divided the power of the nation

2. James Weldon Johnson, Fifty Years and Other Poems, Boston, 1917, p. 72.
3. Ibid., p. 40.

and still lies cankering in the wound." He concludes that the "eternal laws" will exact full expiation from the "unborn children" of those who have committed the terrible sin.[4]

Johnson adds to his religious consciousness a deep sense of the religious and artistic and historical importance of his racial heritage. He feels and declares both the human and Divine significance of his native tradition. This sense of working with God through artistic expression, and historical suffering and achievement, was important in developing the Negro's sense of pride and mitigating his sense of inferiority. Johnson's well-known poem, "O Black and Unknown Bards," although it sometimes repeats Romantic cliches, demonstrates a strong and sincere feeling for the subject. It is perhaps too long to quote in its entirety, but the first two stanzas will show its power.

> O black and unknown bards of long ago,
> How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
> How, in your darkness, did you come to know
> The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
> Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
> Who first from out the still watch, lone and long.
> Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
> Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?
>
> Heart of what slave pured out such melody
> As 'Steal away to Jesus' ? On its strains
> His spirit must have mightly floated free,
> Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
> Who heard great 'Jordan roll'? Whose starward eye
> Saw chariot 'swing low' ? And who was he
> That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
> 'Nobody knows the trouble I see'?[5]

Johnson's interest in the Negro historical past is best indicated by his poem "The Color Sergeant," which concerns a Negro who died in the battle of San Juan Hill.[6]

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4. Ibid., p. 17.
5. Ibid., p. 6.
6. Ibid., p. 11.

Johnson's poems develop still further the theme of resentment and protest which had been introduced by Corrothers early in the century. "Fifty Years," the title poem Johnson's first volume, reviews the history of the Negro in America, particularly since the Civil War, faces squarely the problem of the Negro's position. It pays tribute to those among the whites, namely Garrison and Phillips and Lincoln, who have fought for the Negro's full citizenship, but condemns in lashing terms those who continue to oppress the Negro. It concludes with a summons to courageous action and a faith in God's destiny for the race.[7]

Brander Matthews, in his introduction to the volume, called this poem "one of the noblest commemorative poems yet written by any American--a poem sonorous in its diction, vigorous in its emotion."[8] To a present-day critic, it would seem to be marred here and there by trite phrases, such as "An upward, onward marching host" and "For men to do, for men to die," but in the main Matthews' comments would still retain their pertinence. The poem has a sincerity and strength which rings throughout its twenty-three quartrains despite the weakness of individual lines.

In one poem of his first volume, Johnson showed his recognition of a problem that plays a large part in the poetry of his contemporaries. This problem is the dilemma of science and faith, the machine age and its effects on human and religious values. Johnson treats this problem with a satirical directness unusual in his early work. The last two stanzas of his poem make his

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7. _Ibid._, p. 1.
8. _Ibid._, p. xiv.

ironic point:

> Over the ridge,
> Across the bridge,
> Swung twix the sky and hell,
> On an iron thread
> Spun from the head
> Of the man in a draughtsman's cell.
>
> And so we ride
> Over land and tide,
> Without a thought of fear--
> Man never had
> The faith in God
> That he has in an engineer![9]

In the matter of style, Johnson's first volume shows very little advance, beyond the work of his immediate predecessors. We have noted the deterrent effects of third-rate Romanticism, over in some of the best poems of the volume. In some of the poems, Johnson used the clearer notes of contemporary diction ("The Ghost of Deacon Brown is a good example), but Margetson had already done that with competence. However, we do find in Johnson's work the first influence of free-verse movement. In "Girl of Fifteen" and "The Suicide," the poet dispenses with rhyme and regular meter and catches the varied cadences in a manner reminiscent of Carl Sandburg.

It is in his second volume of poetry that James Weldon Johnson makes his real contribution to the development of style and treatment. In God's Trombones, (1927) he completely breaks away from his former techniques and seeks new power from a more vital heritage. Johnson had already pointed out, in 1922, that the Negro poet needed:

> a form that is freer and larger than dialect,
> but which will still hold the racial flavor;
> a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the

9. James Weldon Johnson, Fifty Years and Other Poems, Boston, 1917, p. 49.

> peculiar turns of thought and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope treatment.[10]

In the preface to God's Trombone, the poet asserted that the desire to establish this new style was a guiding principle. With this in mind, he was prepared to appreciate the poetic possibilities of the idiom of the old-time Negro preacher. As he tells it in the preface, he happened to hear such a preacher in Kansas City, and immediately the ideas for the subject and form of "The Creation" (the first poem in the volume) came to him. The other poem grew naturally from that original impulse.[11]

There is no doubt that the poet accomplished, at least in some sections of the work, exactly what he set out to do. Perhaps he did even more than he expected or hoped. Certainly he supplied for the modern Negro poets who desired it the liberating influences parallel to those of Carl Sandburg. He used the same free but forceful cadences, with some strong metrical effects reinforcing the line now and then. More than that, he combined widely different kinds of diction in a very effective way. For instance, in the poetic prayer which serves as a prelude to the seven sermons of the book, he combined elements from the King James Bible, modern science, and Negro sermonizing. In so doing, he achieved startling conjunctions of mundane and metaphysical imagery, an effect much admired by many modern poets, particularly those influenced by T. S. Eliot. A long

10. James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, New York, 1931, p. 41.
11. James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones, New York, 1927, pp. 1-11.

section of this prayer deserves to be quoted in full.

> And now, O Lord, this man of God,
> Who breaks the bread of life this morning--
> Shadow him in the hollow of thy hand,
> And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.
> Take him, Lord--this morning--
> Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
> Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
> Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
> And make his words sledge hammers of truth--
> Beating on the iron heart of sin.
> Lord God, this morning--
> Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
> And let him look upon the paper walls of time.
> Lord, turpentine his imagination,
> Put perpetual motion in his arms,
> Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power,
> Anoint him all over with the oil of thy salvation,
> And set his tongue on fire.[12]

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that this is extremely effective poetry. There is not a superfluous word or a meaningless phrase in the whole passage. Every figure of speech is clear, appropriate, and loaded with explosive implication. The rhythms are powerful and inevitable. Finally, I would say that this is one of the few modern poems which can contain the word "thy" without seeming trite. A traditional Christianity with all its power is sincerely and deeply felt in this work.

The first sermon following the prayer-prelude is the best of the seven. It has no passage as compact and explosive as the one quoted above, for the narrative form of "The Creation" demands freer rythms and the subject demands a simpler imagery. But it has an easy charm, a quiet grace, and brilliant effects of color and space. Here are two of the stanzas:

> Then he stopped and looked and saw
> That the earth was hot and barren.

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12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the seven seas--
He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed--
He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled--
And the waters above the earth came down,
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around his shoulder.[13]

God's Trombone, then, fully demonstrates that during the twenties Negro poetry became modern poetry in every sense of the word. Perhaps the only important characteristic of modern poetry which is not apparent in this work is the conscious search for faith. It is not apparent in Johnson's work because he takes his faith for granted. But this consciousness of the problem of faith in modern times is definitely apparent in the work of a younger poet whose work was first published during the twenties.

Countee Cullen was one of the younger group described by Johnson as desiring to break away from race-problem poetry and be simply poets. Cullen's background was more conventionally American than that of his predecessors. He was born in New York City 1903; he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from New York University in 1925, and received his master's degree from Harvard in 1926. Naturally he had to face many of the difficulties of being a Negro, but his high intelligence and his precocious artistic abilities

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13. James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones, New York, 1927, p. 18.

which enabled him to avoid some of the long struggle demanded of an earlier writer like Johnson won him an early place among the writers of the "Harlem Renaissance."

So it is easy to understand how Cullen could desire to be simply a poet, and could expressly deny the importance of the African heritage. In an early poem entitled "Heritage" he begins, "What is Africa to me," and concludes that it is of no importance, except, in his blood as a subconscious beating in his blood which has to be controlled.

But Cullen is extremely conscious of the modern Negro's personal situation. Thus conscious of wrongs, and yet desiring to renounce the racial explanation of these wrongs, he is forced to reconsider the problem of God's justice. Where Johnson was able to draw faith from a history of proud suffering, Cullen is forced to analyze faith in strictly contemporary terms. And as soon as he considers the Negro's situation as it is, he naturally finds reason to doubt that God is on the Negro's side. The last two stanzas of his early poem, "Pagan Prayer," make this quite clear.

> Our Father, God, our Brother, Christ--
> So we are taught to pray;
> Their kinship seems a little thing
> Who sorrow all the day.
>
> Our Father, God, our Brother, Christ,
> Or are we bastard kin,
> That to our plaints your ears are closed,
> Your doors barred from within?[14]

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14. Countee Cullen, On These I Stand, New York, 1947, p. 11.

This skepticism, usually grim rather than cheerful, is the starting point for a conscious searchfor a faith based upon present knowledge and experience rather than traditional belief. A long poem among his early work called "The Shroud of Color" describes his feeling of separation from God's grace, and his search through various kinds of experience in trying to regain it. He concludes that only inner experience can provide him with faith he needs.[15]

The trouble with this sort of resolution is that the inner voice won't always speak when we want it to. Cullen's poems from first to last are strongly affected by the presence or absence of the inner voice, the wavering between faith and doubt. From a number of poems concerning this theme directly, let us choose one on the negative side and one on the positive.

> Break me no bread however white it be;
> It cannot fill the emptiness I know;
> No wine can cool this desert thirst in me
> Though it had lain a thousand years in snow;
> No swooning lotus flower's languid juice
> Drips anodyne unto my restlessness,
> And impotent to win me to a truce
> Is every artifice of loveliness.
> Inevitable is the way I go,
> False-faced amid a pageant permeate
> With bliss, yet visioning a higher wave
> Than this weak ripple washing to and fro;
> Then fool still keeps his dreams inviolate
> Till their virginity espouse the grave.

This poem concerns directly what some critics have called "the twentieth century dilemma," the difficulty of having faith

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15. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 16.

16. <u>Ibid</u>., p. 66.

when the symbols of faith have lost their meanings. Cullen explicitly rejects the symbols of Christian Communion and the symbols of the Romantic dream world. He has a vision of something higher than earthly things, but even this vision will end in death. Sometimes, however, his vision ends in Paradise. Interestingly enough, this positive resolution of the dilemma comes when he is considering the racial sufferings of his people. It comes when he is considering the very heritage he consciously sought to escape. The last stanza of his poem, "The Litany of the Dark People," is a good example.

"And if we hunger now and thirst,
Grant our withholders may,
When heaven's constellations burst
Upon thy crowning day,
Be fed by us, and given to see
Thy mercy in our eyes,
When Bethlehem and Calvary
Are merged in Paradise."[17]

But when he again turns to his own times, to modern machinery and the modern city, he again expresses doubt. In the poem "To the Three for Whom the Book," he states:

Hear them cry Holy
To stone and to steel,
See them bend lowly,
Lowly and leal,
Blood rendered and bone,
To steel and to stone.
They have forgot
The stars and the sun,
The grassy plot,
And waters that run
From rock to rock;--
Their only care
Is to grasp a lock
Of Mannon's hair.[18]

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17. Ibid., p. 53.
18. Ibid., p. 78.

In all this mechanistic and materialistic sterility of our world, Cullen finds, in this particular poem, only two consolations--friendship and poetry. This, too, is a familiar modern theme, associated with Robinson Jeffers, E. E. Cummings, and Earnest Hemingway.

In his later work, Cullen finds still another positive force toward the resolution of his faith. In 1928 Cullen went to France where he and other Negroes were received, both as people and artists, with fewer reservations than in this country. The spiritual "lift" of this experience is evident in a number of poems. "The Black Christ," written on January 31, 1929, is the first of these. It is a long poem which narrates with dramatic vigor the story of a lynching and resurrection, a resurrection which resolves the doubts expressed at the beginning of the poem. But there is more than a resurrection; there is a peace in a foreign land which follows it, and which seems to have a good deal of effect in making the ressurection believable.

> The days are mellow for us now;
> We reap full fields; the heavy bough
> Bends to us in another land;
> The ripe fruit falls into our hand.[19]

The concluding passage of this poem is Cullen's moving expression of faith and final peace.

> He will make plain the misty path
> He makes me tread in love and wrath,
> And bending down in peace and grace
> May wear again my brother's face.
> Somewhere the Southland rears a tree,

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19. Ibid., p. 136.

(And many others there may be
Like unto it, that are unknown,
Whereon as costly fruit has grown).
It stands before a hut of wood
In which the Christ himself once stood--
And those who pass it by may see
Nought growing there except a tree,
But there are two to testify
Who hung on it...we saw Him die.
Its roots were fed with priceless blood.
It is the Cross; it is the Rood.[20]

In two subsequent poems, both entitled "To France," explicitly asserts his spiritual debt to the people who made him feel at home. As he concludes in the first of these:

And found across a continent of foam
What was denied my hungry heart at home.[21]

His "hungry heart at home" was the main concern of his early work. Though, as we have seen, he sometimes expresses the suffering. This suffering comes not only from the problem of faith in a mechanistic and materialistic age, but also from the social problems of slum conditions, family dissension, love and sex and prostitution. As Cullen says:

For I was born on Saturday--
'Bad time for planting a seed'
Was all my father had to say,
And, 'One mouth more to feed.'

Death cut the strings that gave me life,
And handed me to Sorrow,
The only kind of middle wife
My folks could beg or borrow.[22]

Frequently Cullen was able to take a more objective viewpoint towards personal and social problems and turn his suffer-

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20. Ibid., p. 137.
21. Ibid., p. 147.
22. Ibid., p. 10.

ing into satire. His satire is more pointed and more bitter than the work of Margetson. He knows how to restrain the full impact of his satirical barb until the very last line. Many of his satirical poems are concerned with disillusionment in love, but the most famous of all is a striking quatrain concerning racial discrimination, called "For a Lady I Know."

> She even thinks that up in heaven
> Her class lies late and snores,
> While poor black cherubs rise at seven
> To do celestial chores.[23]

As far asstyle is concerned, Cullen's work shows little influence of the free verse movement. His earlier work is strictly traditional in its forms, with sonnets and quatrains and iambic pentamenter couplets. His later poems sometimes have varied line-lengths and irregular rythms, but the traditional forms are still there.

However, as to diction and imagery Cullen's later work indicates strong influences from modern poetry. It shows the Eliot influence in making many allusions to ancient myth. For instance, here is the first stanza of "That Bright Chimeric Beast."

> That bright chimeric beast
> Conceived yet never born,
> Save in the poet's breast,
> The white-flanked unicorn,
> Never may be shaken
> From his solitude;
> Never may be taken
> In any earthly wood.[24]

His later work also shows the influence of modern science, with characteristic anatomical and mechanistic imagery. Like

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23. Ibid., p. 33.
24. Ibid., p. 82.

other poets who have tried to gather the metaphors of modern science (Hart Crane is a good example), Cullen uses these metaphors in a compact and elliptical manner, striving to produce the startling effects of "metaphysical" conceits. The first stanza of his sonnet, "The Proud Heart," shows how he does it.

> That lively organ, palpitant and red,
> Enrubied in the staid and sober breast,
> Telling the living man, 'You are not dead
> Until this hammered anvil takes its rest,
> My life's timepiece wound to alarm some day
> The body to its need of box and shroud,
> Was meant till then to beat one haughty way;
> A crimson stroke should be no less than proud.[25]

Cullen's heart took its rest in 1946, when he was forty-three. But his work has established itself as an integral part of the American poetic tradition. Like Richard Wright, Cullen is at his best when he sees his personal and racial problems as symbols of universal human problems. Like Wright, he has brought a broader and deeper tradition into the realm of Negro literature. Cullen is an American writer who is a Negro. If Cullen's example means anything, it means that his followers must be true both to their country and to their race.

Langston Hughes has certainly remained faithful to both. Like Cullen, he has broadened the tradition of American writing and Negro writing. He has fused elements of the American and the racial backgrounds.

He was born in 1901, the year before Cullen's birth. His youth was spent in the Middle West, but after high school he

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25. Ibid., p. 92.

became a traveler, to Mexico, New York City, and then to Africa and Europe. In his late twenties, he returned to this country. After graduating from Lincoln University, he devoted himself to writing, lecturing, and editorial work.

Hughes started writing poetry at an early age, at first in imitation of Paul Dunbar. But in the high school at Cleveland, Ohio, his teachers told him of Sandburg, Lowell, Masters, and Lindsay. The influence of Carl Sandburg was particularly strong.[26] The free-verse rythms seemed natural to the young poet. The delicate Imagist etchings of Amy Lowell were also attractive. Here is one of the many examples of Imagist poetry in Hughes' work. It is called "Winter Moon."

> How thin and sharp is the moon tonight!
> How thin and sharp and ghostly white
> Is the slim curved crook of the moon tonight![27]

The social realism of Sandburg and Masters certainly had an effect on Hughes' poetry, but Hughes treats his realistic details in a tender and lyrical way. "Heaven Dreams" is a good example.

> The dream is a cocktail at Sloppy Joe's--
> (Maybe--nobody knows.)
>
> The dream is the road to Batabano.
> (But nobody knows if that is so).
>
> Perhaps the dream is only her face--
> Perhaps it's fan of silver lace--
> Or maybe the dream's a Vedado rose--
> (Quien Sabe? Who really knows?)

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26. Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, New York, 1940, p. 28.
27. Langston Hughes, The Dream Keeper, New York, 1932, p. 4.
28. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, Eds., The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949, New York, 1949, p. 100.

This tender lyricism comes in part from the influence of the Negro blues songs, and in part from Hughes' natural method of composition. In his autobiography, he says that his poems had to come spontaneously or not at all.[29] Right from the start he was a singer rather than a sayer. His liking for the blues indicates the same sort of thing, and he wrote many poems based on jazz rythms. The following example, called "The Morning After," shows his lyricism, his syncopated meters, and his infectious sense of humor.

> I was so sick last night I
> Didn't hardly know my mind.
> So sick last night I
> Didn't know my mind.
> I drunk some bad licker that
> Almost made me blind.
>
> Had a dream last night I
> Thought I was in hell.
> I drempt last night I
> Thought I was in hell
> Woke up and looked around me
> Babe, your mouth was open like a well.
>
> I said, Baby! Baby!
> Please don't snore so loud.
> Baby! Please!
> Please don't snore so loud.
> You jest a little bit o' woman but you
> Sound like a great big crowd.[30]

This is the kind of "modern dialect" which James Weldon Johnson advocated and practiced. It puts into poetic form an aspect of vital contemporary speech.

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29. Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, New York, 1940, p. 56.

30. Langston Hughes, Shakespeare in Harlem, New York, 1947.

Like Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes was an American writer who never forgot his racial background. The sorrows of his existence as a Negro were the fundamental impulses of his poems, though they might not be explicitly stated. As he said in his autobiography, "My poems were always written when I felt the worst."[31] Even the happiest of poems could have an impulse of sorrow. No one has expressed that realization more vividly than Hughes himself, in the last stanza of a poem called "Trumpet Player: 52nd Street."

> Tne Negro
> With the trumpet at his lips
> Whose jacket
> Has a <u>fine</u> one-button roll,
> Does not know
> Upon what riff the music slops
> Its hypodermic needle
> To his soul--
> But softly
> As the tune comes from his throat
> Trouble
> Mellows to a golden note.[32]

At the same time, Hughes was never bound by a narrow-minded race-chauvinism. He always felt free to criticise or satirize his own race whenever he thought it was deserved. Many Negroes condemned his volume of poems, <u>Fine Clothes to the Jew</u>, published in 1927, because it did not white-wash certain aspects of Negro life. Hughes disagreed with these critics, and pointed out that if the Negro were not self-critical, he would not be led to improve himself.[33]

That is how Langston Hughes resolved the conflict between racial loyalty and artistic loyalty.

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31. Langston Hughes, <u>The Big Sea</u>, New York, 1940, p. 54.
32. Langston Hughes, <u>Fields of Wonder</u>, New York, 1947.
33. Langston Hughes, <u>The Big Sea</u>, New York, 1940, pp. 266-267.

Like Cullen and Richard Wright, he used the valuable theme and styles of his own racial background, but used them to express thoughts and feelings which would pertain to human nature in general. Like all great artists, these writers began with the particulars, but sought for the universal.

During the forties, the work of many young Negro poets appeared in the country's leading magazines. It is too soon to tell which ones will prove the most important during the decades to come. So let us merely choose the outstanding example at the present time, Gwendolyn Brooks.

Miss Brooks (Mrs. Blakely in private life) has spent most of her life in Chicago. Her first volume of poems A Street in Bronzeville, published in 1945, brought her wide recognition. She was selected as one of the women of the year by Mademoiselle, and was presented with an award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In the following year, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Then, in 1949, Harpers brought out her second volume, Annie Allen, which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry that year.

Miss Brooks seldom employs a specifically Negro theme and style in her work. "Of DeWitt Williams on his Way to Lincoln Cemetery," a blues poem reminiscent of Langston Hughes, is one of the few examples of birth, poverty, love, war, age, and death.

She uses a colloquial tone, a contemporary dialect, with vitality and with charm. And perhaps more than any previous Negro poet, she communicates the sense and quality of her unique personality, her particular way of looking at life. Both Countee

Cullen and Langston Hughes, the sayer and the singer, are poets speaking to the world at large; Gwendolyn Brooks, on the other hand, is a person speaking to the reader as a person. She is simple, straight-forward, and warmly human. The following, "Kitchenette Building," is as friendly as ham and eggs.

> We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
> Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
> Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."
>
> But could a dream send up through onion fumes
> Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
> And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
> Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms
>
> Even if we were willing to let it in,
> Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
> Anticipate a message, let it begin?
>
> We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
> Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
> We think of the lukewarm water, hope to get in it.[34]

This is almost off-hand conversational manner, with its many referances to the common details of everyday life, appears more and more frequently now in the works of younger poets. Peter Vierecek, Richard Wilbur and John Ciardi all have their particular ways of using it. It is a speech which is wholly American, drug-store on everybody's corner. It is not learned from Sandburg, or Dunbar, or Frost, or Cullen; it is learned on Main Street, and it is learned at the same time by Peter Viereck in North Hadley, Massachusetts, and Gwendolyn Brooks in Chicago, Illinois.

This sort of speech works just as well in the tightness of a traditional form as it does in the looser form of the poem quoted

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34. Gwendolyn Brooks, _A Street in Bronzeville_, New York, 1945.

above. For instance, consider the sonnet by Miss Brooks called, "Deep Summer."

> By all things planetary, sweet, I sweat,
> Those hands may not possess these hands again
> Until I get me gloves of ice to wear.
> Because you are the headiest of men!
> Your speech is whiskey, and your grin is gin.
> I am well drunken. Is there water near?
> I've need of wintry air to crisp me in.
> --But come here--let me put this in your ear;
> I would not want them now! You gave me this
> Wilderness to gulp. Now water is too pale.
> And now I know deep summer is a bliss
> I have no wish for weathering the gale.
> So when I beg for gloves of ice to wear,
> Laugh at me, I am lying, sweet, I swear![35]

This "get away closer" injunction in regard to love is at least as old as Catullus, probably much older. But it is revitalized by the immediacy of the personal feeling and the directness of the everyday slang. Miss Brooks is not fighting against injustice; she is making friends, which is perhaps the only real way to have justice.

In conclusion, we return to the question raised at the end of the section on Negro fiction. Is the Negro writer, in becoming an American writer who is a Negro, in danger of writing merely for money? Of course he is, like anyone else. When the money is available, there will be many of every race who will put it first. But the Negro writer does not have to succumb to such influences. As Gwendolyn Brooks clearly demonstrates, he can use the common themes and speech of Main Street and the corner drugstore without losing his artistic integrity.

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35. Gwendolyn Brooks, Annie Allen, New York, 1949, p. 55.

The Negro is still fighting for social and political recognition. But during the last fifty years, he has attained in full measure his artistic recognition. The rest of his rights will slowly but assuredly follow. The Negro's extensive contribution to American literature is an example of outright charity. It has not, and cannot be, repaid. But it can be, and is, appreciated.

Chapter XXI

The Negro Drama

The obstacles confronting the Negro dramatist have been even more formidable than those which other colored writers have found blocking their paths to recognition and publication. Access to actual theatrical production, for instance, is an absolute necessity for any playwright who wishes to develop his ability. For the Negro, however, the chances for dramatic production have always been severely limited by discriminatory practices. Naturally, the curtailment of opportunity has resulted in a lack of interest in the drama as a literary form and a general mediocrity in the work which Negro playwrights have found the initiative to undertake.

Nevertheless, although the path to success has been a rocky one, the Negro seems to have in his very nature the elements of which drama are made. Zora Neal Hurston, herself an accomplished novelist and playwright, holds that one of the distinguishing marks of the Negro character is his dramatic and imitative ability. He has, she says, "an eye that tears can on a sudden fill and lips that smile before the tears are gone."[1] Miss Hurston is quick to add, however that the Negro's ability to imitate is definitely an artistic achievement, and that his imitation is not an indication of more subservience.

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1. Zóra Neal Hurston, "Mimicry," Negro Anthology, editor Nancy Cunard, London, 1934, p. 39.

> The contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it....He does it as a mocking bird does it, for the love of it, and not because he likes to be like the one imitated.[2]

The origins of the Negro's association with the drama in America is to be found in a most artificial form, the minstrel show, in which the character of the Negro and his aspirations were parodied without any reference to his very real plight in the slave society. The theatrical distortion of the Negro began at least as early as 1795 with James Murdock's introduction of the character, "Sambo," a bumbling obsequious man-servant, into his comedy, The Triumph of Love.

It is a sad commentary on our society that a parody such as that which existed in The Triumph of Love is still passed off as "the real thing" in our own day. This is the manner in which Sambo is made to speak:

> Dis wool of mine will curl up so Sambo tinks himself handsome. He very 'complished, too. He sing well, he dance well; he play fiddle well; can't tink so pretty well. He berry often tink why he slave to white man.[3]

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2. Ibid., p. 40.

3. Marget G. Mayorga, A Short History of the American Drama, New York, 1932, p. 29.

The distortion of the Negro was milked for even more laughs by Thomas D. (Daddy Jim Crow) Rice, who claimed that his mimicking of a Negro hostler's song and dance was "authentic,"[4] and by 1850 the minstrel shows had conventionalized the stage Negro into a pattern from which he has never fully escaped. Hollywood and the television and radio industries are still content to show nothing more of Negro life than the comic antics of Amos and Andy or of Jack Benny's man Rochester.

Almost all of the minstrel shows restricted their casts to black-faced whites, and it was not until 1921 that the first Negro acting troupe, The African Company, was formed in New York City. This enterprise was shortlived, however, for the city administration forced the closing of their theatre when it became the scene of riots fomented by rowdy gangs of white apprentice-boys. The repertoire of The African Company was, of course, made up almost completely of "white" plays, for, as yet, there were few Negro playwrights, if any. There is a possibility that at least one of the company's productions was the work of a Negro, a cer-

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4. Maude Cuney Hare, Negro Musicians and Their Music, New York, p. 41, has recorded the following lyrics as the source of the term, "Jim Crow." Supposedly, Thomas Rice heard them being sung by a deformed stable-worker behind the Columbia Street Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky.

Wheel about, turn about
Do jis so
An everytime I wheel about
I jump jim crow.

tain "Mr. Brown." There is a playbill in the collection of the late Professor George Odell which contains the following information:

> On June 20, 21, 1823 at the Theatre in Mercer Street, in the rear of 1 Mile Stone, Broadway, the performers of the African Company have kindly consented to give their services in order to contribute a "Benefit" to their manager, Mr. Brown, who for the first time throws himself on the liberality of a generous public.[5]

It seems that the play produced on the advertised occasion, "King Shotaway," was "written from experiences" of Brown during an insurrection on the Island of St. Vincent. Historians of Negro drama have not been able to determine, however, if Brown actually wrote "King Shotaway" or merely provided the facts for someone else's pen.

During the years preceding the Civil War, some impetus was given to the Negro's progress in drama by the reputation of one exceptional colored actor, Ira Aldridge (1807-1867).[6] Although he confined his thespian activities to Europe, Aldridge's reputation drifted back to America and helped to convince people in this country of his race's artistic potentialities. Travelling with Charles Keans's Company, Al-

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5. George C. D. Odell, <u>Annals of the New York Stage</u>, New York, 1928, Vol. III, p. 70.

6. C. B. Andrews, "Ira Aldridge," <u>Crisis</u>, October, 1935, and Laurence Hutton, "The American Stage Negro," <u>Curiosities of the Stage</u>, New York, 1891, p. 96.

dridge played an emotional and well-rounded Othello to Kean's Iago.

The Abolitionists were quick to seize upon the drama as an effective means of propagating their arguments for emancipation. There was Uncle Tom's Cabin, of course, occasionally played by Negro actors, and there was the somewhat less effective Dred, a dramatization of Mrs. Stowe's second novel. Other works prominent in the production-lists of abolitionist groups were Mrs. J. C. Swayze's Ossowatomie Brown (1850), and The Octoroon (1859) by Dion Boucicault. All of the abolitionist plays were of a type: melodramatic, propagandistic, and with cast of characters which seldom varied--the noble Negro, the comic Negro, some most evil whites, and a beautiful octoroon. The stereotype had varied a little from that presented in the minstrel show, but the Negro on the stage was still a stereotype, if a slightly more appealing one.[7]

Not even the first Negro dramatist, William Wells Brown, was able to extricate the Negro character from the standardized mold into which he had been poured by time. Brown, who successful in a variety of literary forms,

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7. Julia Cline, "Rise of the American Stage Negro," Drama Magazine, January, 1931, pp. 9-14.

as we have seen in a previous chapter,[8] seems to have made no attempt at reality in writing his play, The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom (1858). It is perhaps indicative of the state of the Negro drama in general that the first play of any significance written by a Negro should be as inept, as sentimental, and as far from reality as The Escape.

Brown, who should have known better, throws together the old stock character -- the beautiful slave girl, the lustful master, and the heroic Negro lover -- into the old stock plot of hair-breath escape to the sanctuary of Canada with the aid of a crew of Abolitionists who are always fortunately on hand at critical moments in the play's action.

The general tone of The Escape may be surmised from one short extract. Our gentle heroine is speaking:

> Sir, I am your slave, you can do as you please with the avails of my labor, but you shall never tempt me to swerve from the path of virtue.[9]

From such an inception was the Negro drama to develop. But the development was to be painfully slow, and it would be many years before the Negro could point to any

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8. Chapter IX of this work.

9. William Wells Brown, The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom, London, 1858.

thing but the minstrel show as his contribution to the history of the stage. The minstrel show, as a matter of fact, came to be the most popular form of dramatic entertainment in America after the Civil War. In line with this increased popularity, several groups of Negroes were formed into minstrel companies in an attempt to reconquer the native field which had been wrested from them by white comedians.

A slight advance from the format of the minstrel show was achieved by Paul Laurence Dunbar[10] in 1898, when, working with Will Marion Cook, he helped to produce _Clorindy--The Origin of the Cakewalk_, a musical "extravanganza." Built mainly around clog dancers and beautiful cakewalking chorus girls, _Clorindy_ made no attempt whatsoever to improve upon the stereotype into which the Negro had fallen on the stage. The Negro -- if we may borrow the titles of some more of Dunbar's musicals -- was still being presented as _Rufus Rastus_, living a lazy and carefree existence in _Bandana Land_, and providing low comedy by his attempts to act _Jes Lak White Folks_.

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10. See Chapter XIII.

From the turn of the century until the present day, Negro drama in America has followed two separate courses. On the one hand, there has been the extension of the minstrel show into "musicals" like those of Dunbar, continuing into the more contemporary "Carmen Jones" and "Hot Midado." On the other hand, the Negro has continued to make a determined effort toward more serious work, from the founding of his own theatres through the experimental realistic plays now being produced by college dramatic groups throughout the country.

The years between the turn of the century and the first World War were largely formative ones for serious Negro dramatic literature. The Lincoln and Lafayette Theatres, devoted exclusively to colored productions, were opened in New York City, while the Lafayette Players took "to the road" to bring the drama to Negro audiences. Although the latter group limited their repertoire to plays by white dramatists -- "Madame X," "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," "The Count of Monte Cristo," and so forth -- their activities at least served to acquaint their audiences with the achievements and possibilities of dramatic literature.

Eventually, this educational process bore fruit.

Angelina Grime, a Negro, made the first successful attempt at writing an intelligent play out of the material of her race. Rachel, which was produced in New York by the NAACP, is the story of a sensitive young colored girl whose life is brought to eventual ruin by the malevolent force of prejudice and racial intolerance. Here, definitely, is a landmark in the history of Negro drama, for the future has at last come to grips with a real problem in its actual, unsavory environment.

An added impetus to the development of a distinctively Negro drama was the help afforded by white playwrights, who, beginning in the years immediately preceding the first World War, turned to the frustrations of the Negro as fresh dramatic material.[11]

Edward Sheldon was one of the first white authors to realize the wealth in this mine of Negro subject matter. The Nigger, his most impressive play, deals with a young Southerner, Philip Morrow, who works his way into the governor's mansion by his vigorous support of white supremacy. His triumph turns bitter, however, when a blackmailer proves to him that he is the grandson of a Negro slave.

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11. Frederick W. Bond, The Negro and the Drama, Washington D. C., 1940, pp. 64-107, has a complete discussion of the handling of Negro subject matter by white dramatists.

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