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SECOND WORLD BLACK AND AFRICAN FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND CULTURE

LAGOS, NIGERIA

15 JANUARY - 12 FEBRUARY, 1977

COLLOQUIUM

MAIN THEME: BLACK CIVILIZATION AND EDUCATION

SUB-THEME : BLACK CIVILIZATION AND LITERATURE

NOTES IN CHAOS: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN INTERPRETING AND

EVALUATING LITERATURE BY AFRO-AMERICANS

by Darwin T. Turner

University of Iowa, U.S.A.

English original

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Notes in Chaos:

Issues and Problems in Interpreting and  
Evaluating Literature by Afro-Americans

by  
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During the past decade, literature by black American writers has become one of the most popular commodities of the American literary marketplace. Seeming to have discovered it for the first time, critics and literary historians have swarmed over it in numbers which threaten to suffocate the best known writers. In one sense the increased attention contrasts pleasantly with the previous neglect of black American writers. In another sense, the attention is disquieting. As any student of literature knows, quantity of criticism does not necessarily prove the existence of quality. This truism seems especially significant in respect to Afro-American literature, which is currently being explored and claimed by some critics, who, prior to 1965, would have been hard pressed even to name four black American writers. Therefore, as the volumes of criticism increase, it becomes important -- even essential -- to evaluate the existing critical practices and to suggest guidelines for future approaches.

Three questions, I believe, summarize the need: 1) Who is competent to interpret and judge literature by Afro-Americans? 2) How is that literature to be judged -- according to criteria used for other literary works by Americans, or according to special criteria? 3) Which individuals -- past and present -- have been the most competent critics and



historians of the literature of Afro-Americans.

I have attempted to answer the third question both in an article "Afro-American Literary Critics: an Introduction"<sup>1</sup> and in a bibliography, Afro-American Writers.<sup>2</sup> Committees of the College Language Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Modern Language Association are preparing annotated bibliographies, which will evaluate some of the criticism. And in the conclusion of this paper I will identify some of the newer black American critics.

Because of my limited space and the attention already being given in various sources to the identities of competent critics, I wish to concentrate instead on the first and second questions I have raised -- who is competent to analyze and evaluate Afro-American literature, and how shall it be judged? Because the two are interrelated, I will not try to separate my responses as I ask you to meditate with me on these issues and problems in interpreting and evaluating literature by Afro-Americans.

Frank Marshall Davis, a black American poet, has posed a dilemma that has frustrated many black writers:

You ask what happened to Roosevelt Smith

Well . . .

Conscience and the critics got him

<sup>1</sup>Turner, "Afro-American Literary Critics: an Introduction," The Black Aesthetic, A. Gayle, ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 57-74.

<sup>2</sup>Turner, Afro-American Writers (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970). Republished by AHM Publishing Co. Although the Goldentree Bibliography format does not permit annotation, an asterisk following an entry indicates a work of special significance.



Roosevelt Smith was the only dusky child born and bred in the village of Pine City, Nebraska

At college they worshipped the novelty of a black poet and predicted fame

At twenty-three he published his first book . . . the critics said he imitated Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay . . . they raved about a wealth of racial material and the charm of darky dialect

So for two years Roosevelt worked and observed in Dixie

At twenty-five a second book . . . Negroes complained about plantation scenes and said he dragged Aframerica's good name in the mire for gold. . "Europe," they said, "honors Dunbar for his 'Ships That Pass in the Night' and not for his dialect which they don't understand"

For another two years Roosevelt strove for a different medium of expression

At twenty-seven a third book . . . The critics said the density of Gertrude Stein or T. S. Eliot hardly fitted the simple material to which a Negro had access

For another two years Roosevelt worked

At twenty-nine his fourth book . . . the critics said a Negro had no business imitating the classic forms of Keats, Browning and Shakespeare . . . "Roosevelt Smith," they announced, "has nothing original and is merely a black face white. His African heritage is a rich source should he use it"

So for another two years Roosevelt went into the interior of Africa

At thirty-one his fifth book . . . interesting enough, the critics said, but since it followed nothing done by any white poet it was probably just a new kind of prose

Day after the reviews came out Roosevelt traded conscience and critics for the leather pouch and bunions of a mail carrier and read in the papers until his death how little the American Negro had contributed to his nation's literature. . . .<sup>1</sup>

As Davis implies, black writers have known that, regardless of

<sup>1</sup>Frank M. Davis, "Roosevelt Smith," Black Insights, Nich Aaron Ford, ed. (Waltham: Ginn, 1971), p. 162.

their subjects or styles, they would be condemned by someone. For the past century and one-half any literary work about black Americans has evoked discussion of the nature of blacks and of their position in American society. Correspondingly, any literary work by an author identifiable as black American has elicited discussion either about the writer's responsibility in relation to the needs of his people or about the writer's attitude concerning the relationship of black people to American society. Insisting that literary evaluation must derive from the work itself, some high-minded critics may identify such concerns as "sociological," "political," or "nonliterary." The purists' disdain, however, does not mitigate the fact that, in America, such matters have affected, do affect, and will continue to affect the reception and the judging of literature by and about blacks. Therefore, it is naive to presume that anyone can interpret or evaluate the body of literature by Afro-Americans unless that individual comprehends Afro-America. On the other hand, because black American writers frequently have employed styles, forms, techniques, and allusions derived from Euro-American culture, the critic of Afro-American literature must also know Euro-American tradition. In short, whereas critics of such American authors as Henry James or Edith Wharton may be one-dimensional, critics of Afro-American authors must be multi-dimensional. In addition to knowing the literature, literary standards, and historical traditions of Euro-American culture, critics of Afro-American literature must be familiar with and sensitive to the literature, history, attitudes, cultural values, nuances, legends and myths of black Americans.

Notice, I have ~~not~~ said that the critic must be a black American. Nevertheless, it is true that black Americans probably are the most



perceptive judges of black American literature -- not because they possess any special talent derived from skin color, mystique, or even "soul," but because they have shared with the black authors the common (though not necessarily identical) experience of living as blacks in a white-oriented, white-dominated society. Since there are variations within that common black American experience, some blacks will disagree when designating particular values to <sup>be honored</sup> honor; other blacks <sup>may</sup> be unfamiliar with the nuances of black <sup>life</sup> living which are unique to a particular region. Nevertheless, a black will generally be more familiar than the average white, who has been socially and culturally separated from black Americans and who frequently has been educated to believe fallacies about black Americans.

After this brief consideration of the nature of the critic, I wish to speculate more extensively about the nature of the appropriate criticism. As Frank Davis implied, no matter what they attempt, most black writers will be hanged in effigy by some critics armed with moral, aesthetic (that is, "literary"), intellectual, or political reasons. If the works of white authors were consistently misjudged according to the same criteria, I would assume that <sup>the</sup> able faulty perceptions resulted from ignorance rather than bias. Unfortunately, the contrary is true.

Consider the apologies used to protect non-black authors. If Thomas Hardy seems aesthetically weak because he overuses coincidence, literary historians demand respect for his philosophy of life <sup>that</sup> presuming the inevitability of coincidence. If Charles Dickens seems melodramatic, historians praise instead his humor and serious social commentary. How is Dickens' social criticism different from the "protest writing" for which black writers are castigated? If Henry James seems

to say nothing significant about life, he is nonetheless venerated for the artistry with which he says nothing.

Critics should apply the same standards to black American authors -- praise for their virtues rather than a focus solely on their weaknesses. But critics should not condescendingly <sup>applaud</sup> black authors for any and all efforts. Instead, critics must determine the appropriate bases for approving.

For example, much of the criticism of Paul Laurence Dunbar focuses on the question of whether he should have re-created character types identified with the plantation tradition of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, white American authors. Too little criticism, however, calls attention to the fact that, in non-dialect poetry -- the writing on which he wished to be judged, Dunbar was a proficient versifier, whose experiments with meter surpassed those of his American contemporaries. Frequently identified carelessly as a writer who championed mulattoes, Charles Chesnutt too seldom has been examined as one who satirized the color-consciousness, superficiality, and vanity of the very group which he supposedly romanticized or idealized. Too seldom is he heralded for creating an art form from the folk tales, which he considered inferior forms of literature. Eldridge Cleaver, a black writer, has vilified James Baldwin for writing about black protagonists who suffer death-wishes,<sup>1</sup> and Robert Bone, a white critic, has berated Baldwin for writing about a homosexual.<sup>2</sup> Why should not these critics acknowledge that, whether or

<sup>1</sup>Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965).



not readers sympathize with the homosexual subject-matter of Giovanni's Room, Baldwin has narrated the story artfully in a style far superior to that of other contemporary American novelists who have won praise for their style? Why should Baldwin be castigated when he writes artistically about a subject he comprehends psychologically while William Styron, a white novelist, earns adulation when he writes less artistically about Nat Turner, a black revolutionary whom he cannot fathom psychologically?

Let me re-emphasize the point. I do not suggest that black writers be praised merely for writing and publishing a book. Instead, I propose a mere continuation of the habits which critics practice when assessing respected non-black writers. Despite their weaknesses, the Shakespeares, Miltons, Jameses, Eliots, and Faulkners are praised for their strengths. Each is worshipped even though he can be judged deficient morally, aesthetically, intellectually, or sociologically. Why then should a black writer be condemned if he is not superior according to all four of these criteria?

Perhaps the most direct approach to the appraisal of literary works is a three-part catechism which I was taught many years ago: What is the author trying to do? Does the author do it well? Was it worth doing? An attempt to use this simple frame reveals further problems for the black writer.

The first and third questions of the catechism relate to the author's purpose and subject. In these areas, as Frank Davis points out, black writers will rarely please all American readers.

No matter what subject a black writer picks, he displeases someone. If Frank Yerby or Willard Motley writes about white people, a Robert

...the way  
Bone condemns him for being an assimilationist, or a black critic<sup>may</sup> accuses him of wasting his time. When blacks of the 1920's wrote about ghetto blacks, W.E.B. DuBois often accused them of sullyng the image of Negroes. If a black of the 1970's delineates middle-class blacks sympathetically, some black critics denounce him for "Tommism." If a writer<sup>of the 1970's</sup> praises revolutionaries, self-proclaimed liberals and integrationists scream that literary talent has been sacrificed on an altar of insanity. While many Americans weep for foreign writers required to support Fascist or Communist philosophy in their work, insufficient attention is paid to the comparable yoke placed on black writers, not by the dictates of a government, but by the emotions of critics who view black writers as tools, weapons, victims, or threats, but seldom as artists.

The reasons are rooted in history. As long as literate blacks were few, many Americans insisted that they use their talent to help the race politically and socially. Even after the numbers of literate blacks increased, the pressure on them continued. Editors expected particular subjects and particular approaches from their Negro authors. Why include work by a Negro unless it was written about Negroes, and why have a work about Negroes if it did not validate what white America knew to be the truth about Negroes? Recently, during the late 1960's, black Americans concerned with a black nation -- either as a spiritual or physical fact -- have turned the wheel full circle with their demand for a total commitment of black talent to the cause of nation-building.

The basis for evaluating the appropriate subject-matter<sup>however,</sup> should be the one Countee Cullen advocated more than forty years ago, in a column in Opportunity magazine. Pointing out that no one condemns William



Shakespeare, an Englishman, for writing about Greeks and Italians, Cullen argued that black writers should have equal freedom to select their own subject matter (in his words, "to go excursioning") with the only stipulation being that the writer enjoy himself and create an entertaining excursion.<sup>1</sup> Any other demand is restrictive, whether imposed by a critic (white or black) who wants to promote a cause, or imposed by an editor who assumes that blacks are competent only to write about blacks.

Related to the writer's choice of subject is his purpose for writing. As one should not castigate an author merely because one does not like the author's subject, so one reveals unjustifiable arrogance when one denounces an author's purpose. Nevertheless, failure to respect the artist's choice characterizes much of the criticism of black American writers. David Littlejohn rejects without hesitation black writers who show the bleakness and oppression of black life.<sup>2</sup> Without denying the reality of the picture, he insists that black authors should stop describing "unpleasant situations." Robert Bone condemns both the writers who wish to reveal the Americanness of middle-class blacks and those writers who use literature to encourage the development of black nationalism. In a bewildering pattern of reasoning, Bone seems to propose that black writers should recognize and revere the folk qualities which make them blackly different from a dominating white society; simultaneously, he insists that they should neither demand that that society adjust to in order to accommodate their differences, nor demand the right to withdraw from a

<sup>1</sup> Interview by Lester Walton, The World, May 15, 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Littlejohn, Black on White: a Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes (New York: Grossman, 1966).

society which refuses to accommodate them. Horrified by LeRoi Jones' public exhortations to revolution and by his arguments that literature is a weapon to be used against an enemy, Donald Costello, a white critic, denounces Jones' dramas without determining whether the themes actually are merely exhortations to rebellion.<sup>1</sup> Most of the criticism deploring Black Arts literature argues that, by using literature to encourage revolution, blacks are rejecting both art and reason.

Such judgment wins quick approval from those who view literature as a muse-inspired art uncontaminated by political realities. The judgment, however, is false. First, Black Arts literature is not limited to the dimension of encouraging revolution. More significantly, the judgment reflects continuation of biased prescriptions about what should be reasonable for blacks. Polish people who rebelled against Russia in the early nineteenth century were revered by Americans; simultaneously, some of those same Americans were executing Nat Turner and his black rebels. In the 1950's newspapers pictured and praised a Czech hurling a grenade against a Russian tank; yet, a decade later, blacks who burned stores of men who had cheated and insulted them were decried as looters and rioters. Richard Daley, the mayor of Chicago, encouraged Chicago police to shoot to kill black "rioters" and looters; he defended the same police when, without provocation, they broke into an apartment at night and killed two Black Panthers; yet, when Irish Catholic rioters were shot by British soldiers, Richard Daley accepted the chairman's position for a relief committee for the Irish rioters. Perhaps these instances seem irrelevant

<sup>1</sup>Costello, "LeRoi Jones: Black Man as Victim," Commonweal 87 (June 28, 1968), 436-40.



to a discussion of literature because they are derived from actuality, not from literature. But comparable examples pollute the literature. What except a color-blended reasoning would cause critics to applaud that literature which venerates Spanish revolutionaries of the 1930's but denounce black writers who seek to create literary heroes from black revolutionaries of the 1970's?

These comments are not an emotional digression. As evidence of a double standard in defining "reason" and "reasonable," <sup>they</sup> are relevant to a consideration of the distinction between propaganda and art. Black writers who have protested against the oppressive or restrictive treatment of blacks in America are frequently labeled "propagandists." The label identifies them as individuals who wish to persuade others to accept conclusions which are not supported by reason. But if a black American is judged unreasonable when he performs in ways considered reasonable for white Europeans, can black writers ever hope to persuade those white judges that black literary conclusions are based upon reason?

All of this seems to support the contention of Nick Ford, a black critic, that too many people distinguish propaganda from art only according to their agreement or disagreement with the author's ideas. If they disagree, they pronounce the work "propagandistic"; if they agree, they praise it as "art." When all possible has been said about style, characterization, structure, and so on, the fact remains that John Milton's *Paradise* poems and Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, for example, are propaganda pieces, in the sense that they were designed to manipulate readers emotionally to adopt a particular philosophical or social view. How many ministers in New England practiced adultery with members of their congre-



gation? How many cuckolds are spiritually destroyed by desires for vengeance? Who knows? The questions, and the answers, are not deemed important? The literati continue to praise the credibility of The Scarlet Letter. But, when a teacher discusses Richard Wright's "Long Black Song," a story in which a white salesman seduces/rapes a black housewife, some students inevitably will protest: "But that's sentimental and melodramatic. Most black housewives have not been raped or seduced by traveling salesmen." Propaganda need not be art, and art need not be propaganda; but propaganda and art may be interrelated in a literary work, which should not be rejected merely because it is written to express the views of members of a particular group.

Needless to say, if I defend the right of black authors to use literature for educational purposes, I will also support the right of black artists to write romance, escape, fantasy, or whatever they desire. If I do not like literature created solely for entertainment, I may stop reading it; I may encourage others not to read it; but I do not question a writer's right to create it. In this respect, obviously, I differ from some critics -- such as Addison Gayle, <sup>(Larry Neal, Ben L. Lee)</sup> and Hoyt Fuller -- whose judgment I generally respect. Unlike them, I do not believe that a black author is betraying himself and his people if he uses his pen for entertainment.

Interwoven with the author's subject and purpose, obviously, is his thought or philosophy. Too often, black writers have been castigated whenever their thought fails to correspond to the ideas of other Americans, many of whom know very little about black people. Often, the castigation has taken the severest form possible -- the refusal of editors to publish.

Consider some of the problems involved in evaluating the thought of



black writers. One traditional question is, "How representative is the thought?" The logical response should be, "Who cares?" but it cannot be. Recently, a graduate student asked me whether Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man was autobiographical. As a teacher, she felt that she could not offer it to her students as a valid presentation of black life and black thought unless Ellison had experienced the incidents he recounts. I might have answered by describing the ability of a writer to project himself into a situation through imagination, or I might have explained that the question itself reflected the fallacious assumption that the only value derived from reading Afro-American literature is an autobiographical commentary on society. But I responded more simply. The very fact that American society identifies Ellison as a Negro means that Invisible Man represents the attitude with which at least one Negro is willing to be identified publicly. How in the name of academe can Americans presume that Styron, a white Virginian, has faithfully recreated the feelings of a black rebel who died a century before that white man was born, yet question the validity of a contemporary black man's presentation of the feelings of some contemporary black Americans.

But another question must be raised quickly. Is it justifiable for black readers to derogate Invisible Man merely because Ellison repudiates Ras, the nationalist, or because Ellison himself has failed to participate in black political activities of the 1960's and 1970's?

Various other questions constitute the conventional scheme for evaluating a novelist's thought: Is the philosophy of life/the thought original? Obviously, one cannot make such a judgment without knowing something about the work of other black American writers. Is the author's thought biased? This question has value only if one expects to make a

judgment about a group or take action purely on the basis of a single literary work. A literary work promotes a feeling about a situation; it creates an empathy, or at least a sympathy, for people. For data about the history, sociology, and psychology of people, I prefer nonfictional, sometimes dull, analyses and records which permit me to estimate the truth by weighing fact against fact. Nevertheless, I recognize the tendency of many readers to accept fiction as history and, thus, to respect the authenticity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Thomas Dixon's The Clansman, Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus, Thomas Page's plantation stories, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, and Styron's Confessions. As long as most Americans presume to find objectivity in the works of a Northern abolitionist, a Southern Negrophobe, two chauvinists from the South, and two Southerners of more moderate views, I resent even the question of whether a black author is biased.

Related to the question of bias is the question of whether a black writer knows his subject sufficiently. Again, I insist that no single black American can speak for all blacks -- or even for blacks of a different region. Dunbar wrote unconvincingly about social problems of Southern blacks because he was not familiar with those problems. Frances Harper and James Baldwin wrote rhetorically pleasing but vague protest against the South because they were unfamiliar with the situations. On the other hand, Jean Toomer wrote lyrically about Southern blacks because, emotionally detached from them, he did not submerge them in the psychological realism with which he analyzed Northern blacks, whom he knew better. Certainly, the mere fact that a writer is of African ancestry does not mean that he is an authentic voice for the beliefs of all or most black



Americans. To determine the author's unique position and reliability, one needs to know something about his background -- the region in which he was reared, the culture to which he was exposed -- and one needs to consider the group of blacks about <sup>whom</sup> the writer most often <sup>delineates</sup>. Few people believe that William Faulkner is speaking for Henry James' people or that Edith Wharton is describing Mark Twain country. Similarly, it is ridiculous to presume that any single representative of thirty million black Americans is drawing a composite of all thirty million.

It is, therefore, very important not to castigate a black writer for failing to represent the thought of all blacks if he does faithfully present the thought of those whom he knows and proposes to describe. It is equally important, as I have implied, not to assume carelessly that a black writer's race necessarily makes him an accurate presenter of the thought of a particular group. Because I emphasize this limitation of black writers, I must point out the probability that any black writer will represent the thought of a black group with whom he sympathizes more accurately than a white writer will. Here, the critical factor is that a similarity of experience provides a black writer with an empathy generally lacking in the white writer, who, without a basis of experience, may understate or overstate the feelings.

Finally, in respect to thought, there is too often a tendency to judge the thought of black writers according to the respectability of their morality. Let me cite examples of the problem. A white college professor who proposed an anthology of poetry by contemporary blacks decided to select entries according to the "moral quality" of the work. Does that mean automatic rejection of black revolutionary writers whose morality insists upon the destruction of the white establishment? Or does it

mean rejection of blacks who do not insist upon destruction? Does it mean selecting only those poems which approve the publicly professed morality of the middle-class American (Anglo-European)? Or will the editor include only those poems which honor the morality of the lower-class rural or ghetto dweller?

W.E.B. DuBois respected the aesthetic quality of McKay's Home to Harlem but rejected its moral values because it portrays some black people who do not aspire to the middle-class. Robert Bone condemned Charles Chesnutt because Chesnutt did not profess love for all blacks; Paul Elmer More, a white humanist-critic, approved an essay which condemned Chesnutt for vilifying whites.

Today, of course, many blacks are protesting the works which portray Shafts, Superflys, pimps, hustlers, and prostitutes. Those protests are justified when the thought of a work glorifies a way of life which is destructive to black people -- physically, spiritually, or mentally.

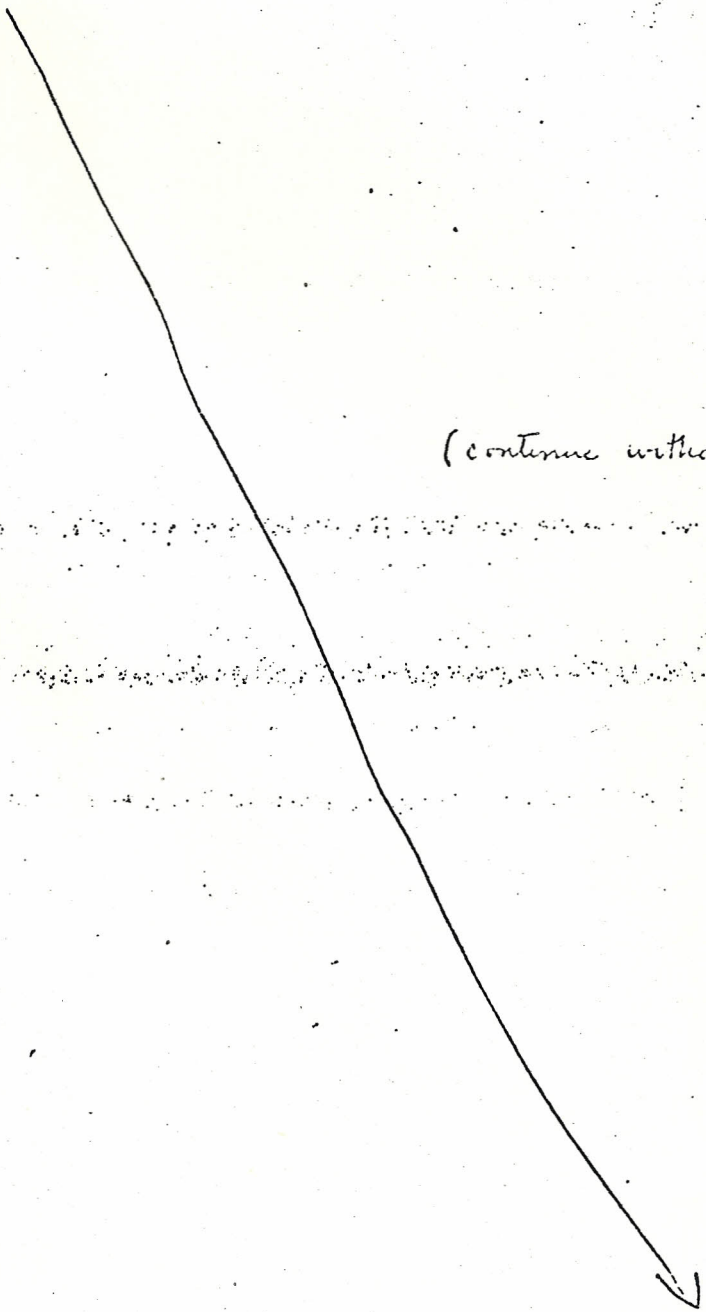
But how does one determine what is truly destructive? DuBois contended that the portrayal of black nightlifers, by demeaning the race, was destructive to the race; he would have approved portraits of blacks who, accepting the American system, strive to improve their position in it. Undoubtedly, <sup>however,</sup> many contemporary black writers would decry as destructive any work which advocates black conformity to and acceptance of the status quo.

Let me consider the second question in my catechism -- How well does the writer do what he is doing? I shall briefly consider this question in respect to such specific elements of literary analysis as characterization, plot construction, style and language.



First, characterization. Obviously what is said about characterization overlaps with what is said about thought because black writers, like others, frequently develop thought through delineation of character. Here also black writers suffer from critics. Dunbar has been accused of degrading black people by recreating plantation Negroes who love whites. Chesnutt has been condemned, from

(continue without space)



one side, for creating Negroes who consider themselves superior to other Negroes; from the other side, he is castigated for vilifying whites through stereotypes. <sup>(Ch. 12)</sup> McKay is berated for picturing ghetto dwellers who enjoy life in night clubs. <sup>(Richard)</sup> Wright is denounced by some blacks for representing blacks falsely as Bigger Thomases; he is criticized by some whites for caricaturing whites as psychopaths, bigots, and deluded liberals. <sup>(James)</sup> Baldwin's Blues for Mr. Charlie has been praised by some whites who adjudge the white antagonist to be the drama's most sympathetic and credible character, but other critics have protested that most of the white personae are stereotyped bigots. When Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a series of poems about Annie Allen, a critic warned that, <sup>(Long as)</sup> as she wrote only about blacks, Gwendolyn Brooks would be adjudged a minor writer.

The list of examples could be extended interminably. One begins to wonder whether any black writer can delineate characters credibly. Perhaps the appropriate question, however, is whether the alleged weakness of characterization manifests a deficiency in the author's skill or in the readers' perception. Is Othello or Emma Bovary actually more individualized, more credible than Bigger Thomas? Is Bigger to be understood as the representative of all blacks? This certainly was not the contention of Wright, who subsequently explained that Bigger should be seen either as a composite of one particular type of black youth or as a representation of oppressed people of all races. If Chesnutt presumed an author's prerogative to limit his casts of characters (as he did when he explained his refusal to write about those slaves who loved their masters), why should he be condemned for focusing on those blacks who aspire to "middle-class" standards? If Americans defend the right of white authors



to create derogatory images of blacks and idealized portraits of whites, why do critics react in alarm when blacks reverse the process? Ironically, few, if any, critics have charged Frank Yerby with vilifying Southern whites. Have his characters been accepted silently because he pretended to write from a perspective sympathetic to white Southerners? No other reason is obvious; for certainly Yerby, more than any other well-known black author, has pictured whites in demeaning ways. No other black has populated the white South with an aristocratic woman who becomes a prostitute, women who fight each other over clothes, a woman who commits adultery and robbery during her honeymoon, a man who is hated by his entire family -- who won his wife by kidnaping and raping her, and another man who insists that the South is devoid of education, gentility, and virtue. These, one must remind, are Yerby's heroes and heroines -- not his villains.

If it is true that critics evaluate black characters falsely, how can the errors be rectified? How can any critic judge the authenticity of a character whose way of life he does not know? The problem troubles black reader-critics as well as whites. Can a black reared in Chicago assess the credibility of Ernest Gaines' Louisiana blacks? Can a black from a rural community in North Carolina evaluate the reality of Ed Bullins' Northern, urban hustlers? The problem is further complicated by the fact that a writer, for various reasons, may actually be attempting to delude readers. For instance, in the novel If He Hollers Let Him Go, Chester Himes, to provoke action from sympathetic white readers, may have delineated a black motivated by a psychopathic sense of oppression far exceeding that experienced by most black people. Or Black Revolutionary writers, to win supporters, may picture protagonists more dedicated than any

people who ever walked the earth.

There is no simple solution to a valid assessment of the authenticity of characterization. Perhaps the most effective is to approach each character as a literary portrait by an individual author, not a historical photograph of a people. Viewed from this perspective, characters are well-drawn if credible and if consistent with themselves and with what is known about blacks of a particular time and place. Individualized black characters cannot always be expanded into Everyman. On the other hand, allegorical figures -- such as Black Arts writers have created -- should not be evaluated by the criteria used to judge realistic presentations of individuals.

Rather than assuming that thought and characterization are the only literary elements to be scrutinized in the works of Afro-Americans, critics must consider such other elements as plot/structure and style. Furthermore, critics must attend to the question of a Black Aesthetic -- that is, a basis for judgment derived from African-American culture rather than from European-American culture.

Until recently, few individuals questioned the validity of European-American literary standards as a basis for evaluating works by black writers. Critics assumed that all, or certainly most, Afro-American writers imitated the forms respected in Euro-American literature. And the assumption seemed to be validated by the ease with which the literary techniques of most Afro-Americans could be compared with those of Europeans and white Americans. In the 1970's, however, prompted by Black Arts writers, who propose styles derived from Afro-American culture, critics need to re-examine older Afro-American works to determine whether any of these reveal a previously unsuspected derivation from Afro-American cultural styles and traditions.



For instance, just as some historians suggest that slave narratives have provided a basic model for autobiographies by later black Americans, so careful analysis may reveal that novels by Afro-Americans have a unique style evolved from African romance or from oral Afro-American tales. Consider another possible study: \* Many black writers have consciously imitated the sermons of Afro-American preachers; but how many works by Afro-Americans derive their form (or imagery and rhetoric) from the author's unconscious echo of sermons? When they are judged according to the literary prescriptions of Henry James, W.E.B. DuBois's novels seem to be a chaotic mixture of fantasy and social realism: Does the mixture merely demonstrate DuBois's ineptness, his failure to blend the regional romance popular at the end of the nineteenth century with the social criticism which became popular in the early years of the twentieth; or does the mixture reveal DuBois's unconscious echo of a black preacher's characteristic use of allegorical romance as a device to vivify the social message in his sermon? / I do not suggest that all earlier writing evolved from such a black heritage, but I do propose consideration of such a possibility as a profitable approach to a study of black literature.

Until such re-examinations are undertaken, the forms and structures of black literature prior to the 1960's will be evaluated according to their correspondence to the forms used by white authors. Even using such a criterion, however, a critic or a reader must not condemn a writer for failing to transcend his time in form and style. That is, black literary works of the 1890's should be judged in comparison with works by whites published during the 1880's and 1890's.

While I continue to insist that black writers deserve commendation

for their effective uses of the forms and structures identified with all American literature, I hope that increasing numbers of black writers will examine African and black American traditions for additional forms and structures. This proposal is not original or new. During the 1920's, Alain Locke, urged blacks to explore their heritage for artistic traditions which they might use and perfect in the present. Ishmael Reed's interest in the ritual and meaning of Hoodoo is only one example of the kind of black tradition which might be used to undergird and/or give form to black literature.

Style and language must also be considered in the appraisal of literature by blacks. Generally, American black writers have adopted styles approved by the American white critical establishment. Hence, conventional measures of evaluation have been applicable. A few earlier writers, however, such as Langston Hughes, employed the rhythms of Afro-American music rather than more conventional meters. Certainly, it is unjustifiable to judge a black writer according to the rhythms of Euro-American poetry if he is deliberately creating different rhythms. Today, the use of a Black Aesthetic as a criterion for style is even more important, for many Black Arts poets deliberately imitate rhythms familiar to black culture. These contemporary poets also emphasize intonation, gesture, pantomime, and other devices which traditionally have been significant in singing and story-telling by the black Americans who developed their literature from oral traditions. Such devices frequently have been undervalued by those critics who favor poetry derived from traditions which stress written words.

Each black writer, however, should seek the style which is most significant to him or her in the attempt to communicate with and earn respect



from his audience. Some writers should be free to use a Euro-American style if that is effective for those writers. Perhaps they, like Melvin Tolson, will blacken that style and transform it. Why should not black writers be free to borrow from all cultures, just as white artists are? On the other hand, other black writers <sup>should</sup> must not hesitate to use uniquely black styles even if most white critics are unfamiliar with or deplore those styles.

The matter of language, finally, must be considered. Black artists should have freedom to use the dialect which they deem appropriate, whether that language is labeled colloquial, non-standard, or standard by traditional <sup>teachers</sup> grammarians and linguists. The language of some contemporary black poems and dramas has been castigated as vulgar. Since I can identify comparable vulgarity in non-black works respected by American critics, I protest against any demeaning of black literature solely on the charge of obscenity. On the other hand, I view as immature and pointless any work in which the writer seems to try to impress readers merely with the extensiveness of his vocabulary for cursing or with the number of times he can repeat particular expressions within a given number of lines. Certainly, literary talent is not to be equated with the ability to write "mutha-fucka." In short, so-called "vulgarity" should have a purpose. Obscenity for the sake of obscenity is pretentious and ridiculous.

Because I have implied that it is useful to examine Afro-American literature from the <sup>cr</sup>perspective of the Afro-American critic, I wish to conclude by identifying some of the more competent among the recent critics.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For the identities of critics whose reputations were established before 1960, please see my essay, "Introduction to Afro-American Critics," The Black Aesthetic, Addison Gayle, Jr., ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Anchor, 1971), pp. 57-74.



The renewed interest in Afro-American literature has facilitated the publication of books by black academic critics<sup>1</sup> who had established their reputations before 1960. Because commercial publishers are less interested in scholarly studies than in anthologies, which can have wide sales as textbooks in classes, a significant bulk of the criticism and literary history has appeared in the introductions to literary anthologies.<sup>2</sup> New anthologies by "older" critics are Black Insights (Ginn, 1971) by Nick A. Ford, author of The Contemporary Negro Novel, a Study in Race Relations (Meador, 1936); Cavalcade (Houghton Mifflin, 1971) by Arthur P. Davis, co-editor of The Negro Caravan (Dryden, 1941), and Saunders Redding, author of To Make a Poet Black (University of North Carolina Press, 1939), a critical history of black writing before 1930. Richard Barksdale, a black academician, has co-edited an anthology, Black Writers of America (Macmillan, 1972), with Kenneth Kinnamon, a white colleague.

The major recent book-length critical studies by "older" academicians are Arthur Davis's From the Dark Tower (Howard University Press, 1974), a study of black American writers from 1900 to 1960, and W. Edward Farrison's William Wells Brown (University of Chicago Press, 1969), a definitive study of the first black American novelist.

Publishers' interest has also encouraged the publication of omnibus

<sup>1</sup>I identify as "academic critics" those who have been formally trained in literary study in universities and whose primary occupation is college or university teaching.

<sup>2</sup>I shall mention only those anthologies whose editors have provided useful criticism or literature history. Hence, I am omitting some anthologies which are valuable for their literary selections. Examples are Lindsay Patterson's Black Theater and Woodie King's anthologies of drama, fiction, and poetry.



anthologies by a number of black academicians who have acquired significant reputations only since 1960. Among these are Black Literature in America (McGraw-Hill, 1971) by Houston A. Baker, Dark Symphony (Free Press, 1968) by James A. Emanuel (co-edited with Theodore Gross, a white colleague); and Black American Literature: Essays, Poetry, Fiction, Drama (Merrill, 1970) by Darwin T. Turner. Significant history and criticism in collections restricted to one genre appear in Early Black American Poets (William Brown, 1969) and Early Black American Prose (Brown, 1971), both edited and in Black Drama in America (Fawcett, 1971) by Darwin T. Turner.

Useful samples of criticism can be found also in collections of essays by black critics. Among these are Black Expression (Weybright and Talley, 1969) and The Black Aesthetic (Doubleday, 1972), both edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., an academician, who has become identified as a leading spokesman for "Black Arts" criticism. A collection of critical essays about an individual author is Langston Hughes: Black Genius (Morrow, 1971), edited by Therman O'Daniel.

As I have stated earlier, scholarly studies, because of limited market value, are generally unattractive to commercial publishers, especially since the waning of the early surge of interest in black literature. Even university presses, responding to rising costs, have begun to restrict publication. Consequently, valuable criticism often is limited to publication in periodicals or through such black-controlled presses as the Third World Press of Chicago, Illinois, or the Howard University Press of Washington, D.C.

Despite these publishing difficulties, scholarly studies by black academicians have appeared. A popular format combines critical introduc-

tions with unpublished or uncollected writings of individual blacks. This structure has promoted the publication of Philip Butcher's The William Stanley Braithwaite Reader (University of Michigan Press, 1972); Sylvia Render's The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt (Howard University Press, 1974); and Darwin T. Turner's collection of selected writings of Jean Toomer -- autobiographical papers, dramas, narratives, poems, and aphorisms (to be published by Howard University Press, 1975). Other significant studies are Catherine J. Starke's Black Portraiture in American Fiction (Basic Books, 1971), a study of black images in American fiction; Darwin T. Turner's In a Minor Chord (Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), a bio-critical study of Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston; Houston Baker's Long Black Song (University of Virginia Press, 1972), a collection of critical essays; Merle A. Richmond's Bid the Vassal Soar (Howard University Press, 1974), a study of Phillis Wheatley and George M. Horton, early black American poets, and Addison Gayle's Claude McKay: The Poet at War (Broadside, 1972).

Book-length bibliographies and presentations of literary theory are the least common forms of publication. Nevertheless, the interest in black literature enabled a few blacks to publish a limited number of these. A useful bibliography is Darwin T. Turner's Afro-American Writers (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970; reprinted by AHM Publishing Corp., Northbrook, Ill.). An extremely valuable study of the theory of poetry is the introduction to Understanding the New Black Poetry (Morrow, 1972) by Stephen Henderson, an academician who, without the fanfare given to some, has sought to define a Black Aesthetic in literature.

Although I am focusing attention on black academicians who have



published their criticism in books, attention should be given also to such academicians as George Kent, Helen Johnson, and Donald Gibson, whose best criticism appears in black periodicals.

At present, as in the past, relatively few blacks serve as professional critics -- that is, individuals who derive their income primarily from their critical writing. Clayton Riley, a drama critic whose work occasionally appears in The New York Times is probably the best-known of these.

A very interesting group of contemporary critics is that associated with the Black Arts movement. For convenience, let me catalogue these in three groups: introducers, theorists, and reviewers. As I am using the term, an "introducer" is an individual respected as author or critic who calls attention to a new writer either by means of an introduction to the writer's first book or by a brief, favorable notice in a periodical.

The two major introducers of the moment are Gwendolyn Brooks, Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet, and Dudley Randall, publisher of Broadside Press, the most important source of books of black poetry in America. Traditionally trained as poets, both Brooks and Randall have questioned the value of some of the more extravagant stylistic experiments of young black poets; but both have consistently demonstrated sympathetic understanding and encouragement for the efforts of the newer poets. In the category of introducer, one must also place Hoyt Fuller, editor of Black World, who occasionally writes a review or an essay, but who more often uses a column of literary notes as a vehicle for calling attention to unknown black writers.

The most productive work of Black Arts critics has been in literary.

theory, for obvious reasons. Their use of a Black Aesthetic has required them to explain the concept to readers. Most of the theorists have been literary creators. One of the earliest and most important was Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), whose criticism remains scattered through black periodicals. In drama Larry Neal and Ed Bullins have led the way with articles in Freedomways, Black World, and Black Theater Journal. One of the more important theorists of poetry has been Carolyn Rodgers, especially in her essay, "Black Poetry Where It's At" (Black World, 1968). Recently Ishmael Reed, well-known as a novelist and poet, has assumed greater responsibility as a theorist, partly to defend his own practices and partly to support new writers. Although most of his criticism appears in a variety of periodicals, a valuable single source is 19 Necromancers from Now (Download/Anchor, 1970), which he edited. Perhaps the most competent and productive writer-theorist at the moment is Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti), author of Dynamite Voices (Broadside, 1971), which combines theory and criticism.

The "reviewers" are more difficult to identify and to evaluate. Many, like Sarah Fabio, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Johara Amini, and Cecil Brown, are writers, themselves. Sometimes they seem to have agreed to review only books which they love or detest. Examples are the laudatory reviews which Sonia Sanchez writes in a Black <sup>Arts</sup> poetic style, the exhortatory reviews by Nikki Giovanni and Johara Amini, or Cecil Brown's flurry of attacks on Native Son. In all instances, their reputations as writers are exceeding their reputations as critics.

Among those who are winning recognition primarily as critics, rather than writers, Karamu ya Salaam (Val Ferdinand) and Liz Gant are particu-



larly noteworthy. Karamu ya Salaam won the 1972 Richard Wright Award for literary criticism, and Liz Gant won the Amiri Baraka Award for dramatic criticism; their work has appeared primarily in Black World. Gant and Karamu ya Salaam, like Don L. Lee, begin their criticism with the assumption that the proper subject matter of Black literature is the black experience and that the purpose of a black writer should be to educate black readers. But their willingness to specify weaknesses as well as strengths evidences that black critics have moved beyond the early days of Black Arts, when many young writers esteemed emotion, consciousness, and subject-matter as the sole criteria of literary excellence. These new critics, however, are not seeking to destroy writers with their condemnation. Like patient teachers, they point out weaknesses in a tone which assures the writer that he or she can do better. But because they have no delusion that literature is an effortless art, they insist that black writers take sufficient time to perfect each work before publishing it.

In conclusion, I have no illusion that I have answered all or even most questions about how to read and evaluate literature by Afro-Americans. I have been more anxious to raise questions or, as I <sup>stated,</sup> said, to meditate with you in order to encourage further consideration of the need to establish bases for evaluating Afro-American literature. What is important to remember is that Afro-American literature is a variety of American literature. But, because of the social, political, emotional environment in which it exists, literature by Afro-Americans must be judged as somewhat different -- not inferior, but different -- from other varieties of American literature, and it must be interpreted and evaluated by

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individuals who understand the unique circumstances which have shaped that literature.