

A Survey Course in Negro Literature

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When I first went to Chapel Hill in 1969 I still affected the luxury of a permissive attitude toward the compulsory study of Negro literature. "Subject Negro literature," I allowed myself to say then, "to the competition of the marketplace." I have changed, if only because, as Langston Hughes once said in another context, the Negro is no longer in vogue. Now I preach that every English major should be required to take a comprehensive general course in Negro literature. I preach also that no American should be granted a bachelor's degree who has not acquired credit for either a general course in Negro literature or a general course in Negro history.

Insofar as we know now Negro literature begins with a poem called "Bars Fight" which was written by a sixteen-year-old girl, Lucy Terry, in 1746, although it was not published until 1893. The survey of Negro literature which I advocate begins with Lucy Terry and is divided into six periods.

Its first period extends from 1746 until 1830, the year in which David Walker, after preparing the third edition of his famous *Appeal*, met his sudden death on a Boston street, possibly by assassination. I call this period, "The Apprentice Years."

My second period extends from 1830

through 1895. 1895 is perhaps the most convenient date in all of Negro history. It is the year in which — I am giving the actual order of events — first, Frederick Douglass died at his fine residence in Anacostia after he had returned home from being honored at one meeting and just as he was preparing to go on to another public honoring while, only a few weeks later, Booker T. Washington, at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, was to deliver the historic speech in which he assured the white South that in all things purely social Negroes and whites could be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things, as he put it, essential to mutual progress. This second period of sixty-five years I call the "Age of the Abolitionists." My third period extends from 1895 until 1920. The symbols of its great dichotomy are Washington and the relatively young W. E. B. Dubois of the doctrine of the "Talented Tenth." I call this period "the Negro Nadir." My fourth period is "The Harlem Renaissance." It is virtually co-terminous with the 1920's, but with a dying fall into the beginning of the 1930's. My fifth period I call "The Age of Wright," for I contend that Richard Wright dominated it as no other Negro writer has ever dominated Negro letters. This period extends from the early 1930's until 1957 — until after, that is, Rosa Parks refused to move in Montgomery. My sixth and final period is the period of "The Black Militants," from about 1957 until now, 1972.

In my first period four poets, Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley

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and George Moses Horton, occupy a stage which they share with the writers of prose narratives, Briton Hammon, John Marrant and Olaudah Equiano, and with early Negro leaders whose presence in a course in Negro literature, during the initiatory stages of the course, is highly important if the leaders are used, as they should be, to remind students of Negro literature, many of whom have been accustomed to expect Negro talent only in the exploits of "exceptional" Negroes, that the American Negro, even as early as the formative years of his American identity, began then to build for his own self-respect, his own communal institutions. So this first period should not ignore Richard Allen, founder and first bishop of the A.M.E. Church, who is sometimes called the Father of Black America; Prince Hall, founder of the Negro Masons, the first Negro fraternal order (lodges have meant much in Negro life); Benjamin Banneker, who sounded a note connecting him with Negro higher education; John Russwurm, co-founder of the Negro press; the leading pioneer Negro businessman, James Forten; the integrationist, Lemuel Haynes; the colonizationist, Paul Cuffe; and Peter Williams, pastor of a Negro congregation in a white denominational church. Each of these leaders, incidentally, did write something.

My second period of Negro literature is pre-eminently the period of the slave narrative, although the first slave narrative was written, or recorded, by a white man over forty years before "Bars Fight" and the last, well into the twentieth century. But the slave narrative is of such importance in Negro literature that no limitations other than those imposed by the chronology of a realistically organized teaching schedule should be observed in handling it. The two big names of this second period are Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown. Increasingly, the classic qualities of Douglass' *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* are being proclaimed. Brown wrote the first Negro novel and the first Negro play. In the shadow of

the slave narrative, and of Douglass and of Brown, stand Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, poet, novelist and short-story writer and poet Albery Whitman, whose *Not a Man and Yet a Man* is not the longest poem written by a Negro, but whose stature as a figure of some eminence in Negro literature may now be steadily increasing in the judgment of informed observers. Quick reference in this period should be made to the poets, Charles Reardon, George Boyer Vashon, James M. Whitfield and James Madison Bell, and to the historian, George Washington Williams.

Intelligent orchestration of the period of "The Negro Nadir" would seem to require that Charles W. Chesnutt be paired with Paul Laurence Dunbar and Washington with his fiery opposite, DuBois. Nevertheless, DuBois' whole long almost seventy-year career, which includes the Black Flame trilogy written long after Washington had been gathered to his forebears, probably should be presented as a unit. The Negro dialect poets, James Edwin Campbell, Daniel Webster Davis, James David Corrothers and J. Mord Allen, moreover, may be introduced with Dunbar. A small outpouring of very bad novels, woefully similar in their crudities and their simpering gentilities, as much as any other single combined effect, provides a character to this period. These novels can easily be disposed of en masse, although, even so, perhaps best with some detailed attention to Elbert Sutton Griggs, who wrote, published, and peddled with his own hands five of these unhappy artifacts in less than ten years. Other writers of this period, the poets, William Stanley Braithwaite, Georgia Douglass Johnson, and the Carters, father and son, with the short-story writers, George Marion McClellan (also a poet), James McGirt, the elder Carter and Dunbar's wife, Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, deserve only passing mention. Fenton Johnson, poet and short-story writer, leads into the Harlem Renaissance. Even more does James Weldon Johnson, who, in his spanning of generations, should be, like DuBois, treated as a unit, but whose novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Col-*

oured Man, is a major work of "The Negro Nadir."

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance, as Negro writers go, tend to be well-known. I shall not linger over them. This is the period of Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, the younger Langston Hughes and the younger Arna Bontemps, the much too ignored Anne Spencer, the later James Weldon Johnson and the midpassage DuBois — both of whom should have already, in this course, received their due — Frank Horne, Gwendolyn Bennett, Helene Johnson and, primarily as novelists, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, George Schuyler, Walter White, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston. McKay, Cullen and Hughes, lyricists all, are the poets' triumvirate of this period. Perhaps the individual works of prose fiction to be stressed are Toomer's *Cane*, McKay's *Home to Harlem*, Cullen's *One Way to Heaven*, Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*, Bontemps' *God Sends Sunday*, Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*, Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho*, Schuyler's *Black No More* and Larsen's *Quicksand*. But the Harlem Renaissance possesses a unifying theme, the "New Negro," and in this theme it rejects both the "darky" of American minstrelsy, the ebon beast of *The Birth of a Nation*, and the "dicty" of the bad novels of "The Negro Nadir." Not until Black Militancy will Negro literature be so dedicated in its adherence to a theme and so consciously loyal to a program correlated with that theme. Most of the participants in the Harlem Renaissance were young at the time of the Renaissance. Arna Bontemps is still active. Of Langston Hughes no presentation would be just which did not reflect the length and versatility of his career, as well as his sympathetic sensitivity to the changes in atmosphere and zeitgeist around him. Nor would such a presentation be just if it failed to establish Hughes as a figure of the first magnitude in Negro literary history. He is not our greatest Negro writer. He may, nevertheless, be our greatest Negro writing man.

The "Age of Wright," whatever the future may hold, is, until now, the Golden Age of Negro literature. For all of its high spirits and genuine desire to present the Negro, New or Old, as he actually was, the Harlem Renaissance was guilty of its own method of misrepresenting Negroes. In both prose and poetry the Renaissance tended too often to turn Negro life into too much of a myth and a fairy tale. There was something unreal, something superficial, something that was too arch and studied, upon occasion, in the Renaissance version of Negro life. But "The Age of Wright" built upon what was solid in the Renaissance even as it reconstructed it and brought it closer to reality. Moreover, for this later age, apparently its sense of realism, as well as of reality, was honed into fine focus by the asperities of the Great Depression. The added vision and power of the writers of this age announce themselves early in the poetry of Sterling Brown and Frank Marshall Davis, surely the two most incredibly neglected of all Negro poets. In Brown's *Southern Road*, and in a poem like Davis' "Snapshots of the Cotton South," Renaissance pastiche largely disappears. With increments of precious meaning the world which has produced the black peasantry of the sharecropping South, the Negro migrant of the urban slum, and the precarious Negro middle class of both North and South is brought into sounder artistic focus. For Brown and Davis are not only rather accurate socio-political observers. They are also true poets. The greatest writer of this age, however, is Richard Wright, and, if not Wright, Ralph Ellison, and if the pinnacle of achievement in Negro literature until now has not been reached by these two, then it has been reached by one, or all, of the three poets, Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, and Pulitzer-Prize-winning Gwendolyn Brooks, through the poetry which this trio wrote during the Age of Wright. Study of the Age of Wright, as of a comprehensive course in Negro literature, climaxes in a study of these five. Even so, the Age of Wright probably is still inadequately treated un-

less some reference is made therein at least to poets Owen Dodson, Margaret Walker and M. Carl Holman, to novelists Chester Himes, Ann Petry, William Gardner Smith and John Oliver Killens in *Youngblood*, and to James Baldwin in his essays and fiction before *Another Country*.

Baldwin is a writer of whom much must be said. *Another Country*, for example, belongs to the Age of Wright, and yet it does not. It is truly a protest novel, written as much to commiserate with whites as with blacks. But there is little commiseration for whites in the poetry, prose and drama of the Black Militant, the prevailing Negro writer of the present age. More Negro writers are being published now than ever before. Clearly, the leading Militant is Leroi Jones, or Imamu Amiri Baraka, as he prefers to be called. Through Baraka's contributions to the drama, however, it may be expedient to review the history of the American Negro as playwright and as a creator for the American stage. Baraka's poetry is an open door to the introduction of other Black Militant poets, particularly of Don L. Lee. But the list of currently active black poets is long, and practical considerations demand a somewhat stringent selection among them for classroom use. Of current novelists perhaps John A. Williams, Paule Marshall, William Demby, William Melvin Kelley and Ernest Gaines should be treated in some detail. Of current novels surely reference must be made at least to Williams' *The Man Who Cried I Am*, Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Demby's *The Catacombs*, Kelley's *A Different Drummer* and *Dem*, and Gaines' *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman*. But, again, the current black novels and novelists are sufficiently numerous to render of stringent selection among them a categorical imperative. Moreover, it would certainly appear that no review of the current activity in Negro literature can be respectable which does not include analyses of Eldridge Cleaver, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and such other autobiographical works as those of Claude Brown and Piri Thomas. A special word of cau-

tion, incidentally, may be needed about this period. It is pre-eminently the period of the Black Militant. Yet it is far from that exclusively. No formula derived exclusively from the thought of Frantz Fanon and the religion of black separatism will fit in any way, for example, Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee* or *The Catacombs* or even Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Finally, Negroes are still writing short stories, as witness James McPherson and Cyrus Coulter, while in the detective novels of Chester Himes, the science fiction of Samuel Delany and the continuing costume romances of Frank Yerby (whose *Speak Now* seems to be an attempt to revive within his product the serious outlook of his early short story "Health Card,") the Negro writer does essay, as did, earlier, Negro writer Willard Motley in his novels, *Knock on Any Door* and *They Fished All Night*, other voices and other rooms beyond those usually associated with Negro literature.

It well may be that more emphasis should be put, in teaching a general course in Negro literature, on a reserve shelf than is generally the case. The shelf need not, and probably should not, be large. But almost brutal tactics should be employed to insure its use. Ideally, several copies of every reserve book should be on the reserve shelf. Moreover, it is background in Negro history rather than criticism of Negro literature which the reserve shelf should emphasize. I recommend as follows: for Negro history, as a reference to be used throughout the course, John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom*; as an account of the African slave trade, Malcolm Cowley and Daniel Mannix's *Black Cargoes*; to put the case for African survivals in the Americas, Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro Past*; to picture the history of the Negro family, and also to argue against Herskovits, E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*; as an introduction to the Negro leadership of accommodation and the Negro leadership of protest, chapters 33 through 37 of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*; as a back-

ground for the Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Huggins' *The Harlem Renaissance*; to prepare the student for the ghetto, Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*; as a prelude to the current scene, Louis Lomax's *The Negro Revolt*; and, as a stimulant to consider black psychology, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobb's *Black Rage*. Reference works on the reserve shelf to be consulted as the title indicates might well include Vernon Loggins' *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900*; J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black*; Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction*; Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America*; David Littlejohn's *Black on White*; Edward Margolies' *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors*; *Black Expression and The Black Aesthetic*, two collections of essays both edited by Addison Gayle; and, while they may well have other uses also, Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The text for this course now can be an anthology. It is not for me to choose among those currently available. But I would close with a statement about the teacher of the course. Whoever teaches it should continue to teach it for years, if not for life. I have said nothing here about the still relative dearth of extensive research in Negro literary history. I do say here that this dearth is somewhat matched by a lack, on the part of many teachers of Negro literature, of familiarity with the actual total corpus of Negro writing. At the moment only repeated teaching of a truly comprehensive course in Negro literature can overcome for most recruits to Negro literature this lack of familiarity. By accretion, the repeated reading for class presentation of, for example, John Marrant's *Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant*, a *Black*, David Walker's *Appeal*, William Wells Brown's *Clotel* in its several versions, the long poems of Albery Whitman, some of the bad novels of the early nineteen-hundreds, poems like Dunbar's

"The Haunted Oak," James Weldon Johnson's "St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Judgement Day," Countee Cullen's "Heritage," Sterling Brown's "Black Odyssey," Gwendolyn Brooks' "Satinlegs Smith," and Imamu Baraka's "Jitterbugs," as well as of numerous other novels, shorter pieces of fiction and poetry, and plays, a literature does grow into the consciousness of those who would teach it. By such an accretion one does acquire a sense, not only of individual writers and works, but also of the shape and organic nature of an integrated literary tradition. And Negro literature is an integrated literary tradition. It does have its continuities, its new departures, its interaction with a world of human experience and its own interpretations of its own underlying epistemologies. Moreover, it is not devoid of art. All courses in literature are, or should be, courses in life. But the attention to art in them makes of them more than courses in social science. It makes of them courses in the humanities. By accretion, every general survey course, I think, in Negro literature should become a course in the humanities. Earlier in this paper I have argued a compulsory degree requirement in either Negro history or Negro literature. I now argue that a general course in Negro literature should offer more than a course in Negro history. I now argue that it should become, in any fair competition between history and literature, the preferred alternative. I now argue that, with increasing knowledge of the literary history of Negro literature and increasing insight into the art that often does accompany the product of the Negro writer, a good comprehensive survey course in Negro literature will become a course in the humanities. And I argue that this is precisely what such a course should become. I argue that, otherwise, it has little, if any, reason in any college curriculum. For, otherwise, it fails to serve, not only the interest of the specialist, but also the broader, finer interests of all of those who believe in the parliament of man and the genuine, although not necessarily governmental, federation of the world.