SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE

AFRICA IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

By GEORGE SHEPPERSON

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THE United States to-day are deeply enmeshed in the affairs of Africa. American initiatives towards and responses, official and unofficial, to events and trends in the Balkanized collection of countries in the once-designated 'Dark Continent' may have important effects on the foreign and domestic policies of the United States: and, through the ramifications overseas of their energy crisis, on the pursuit of happiness of millions of Americans, about one-tenth of whom can trace some elements in their ancestries back to Africa. And yet, if the lack of direct references to Africa in so many of the general textbooks of United States history and literature in the twentieth century is any indication of popular consciousness ,it would seem that Americans have taken a long time to become aware of the importance of Africa in their national, sectional, state, and individual lives, real and imaginary.

At the heart of the matter is what Gunnar Myrdal has called the 'American Dilemma'.[1] It was—and, for many, still is—a dilemma of definition: what is an American? The problem was recognized, if only implicitly, in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœr's *Letters from an American Farmer*, first published in 1782, the last year of the American Revolutionary War. Crèvecœur dedicated his celebrated book to the Abbé Raynal. 'As an eloquent and powerful advocate you have pleaded the cause of humanity in espousing that of the poor Africans,' declared Crèvecœur to Raynal in his dedication, 'you have viewed these provinces of North America in their true light, as the asylum of freedom; as the cradle of future nations, and the refuge of distressed Europeans.' For the 'poor Africans' there was, presumably, sympathy but not asylum in America. In the famous third chapter of Crèvecœur's *Letters*, he asks the

[1] Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944).

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question 'What then is the American, this new man?' And his answer is: 'He is either an European, or the descendant of an European.' In a less famous but, in the context of the definition of Americanness, not less important chapter of Crèvecœur's *Letters*, the ninth, he pours out his sympathy for the enslaved of America, concluding with his horrifying witness of a Negro who, for his crime of killing the overseer of the plantation on which he worked, was hung up in a cage on a tree to die, and 'the birds had already picked out his eyes'. Crèvecœur was told by local whites that 'the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary':[1] the preservation of a limited definition of Americanness in a country whose right to independence had been based on the premiss of human equality. As subsequent cynics have put it, Africa was the exception that proved the rule.

But Africa, real or imagined, was and has continued to be at the heart of the American Dilemma. In the attempt to organize some observations on this theme, with its many variations throughout United States history and literature, I offer three texts from American writers. These three texts are intended as motifs and not, I hope, as the occasion for a sermon or as the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis of a dialectical interpretation of the African element in the American experience. Indeed, I have little sympathy with the original dialectician of African history, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who, in his lectures on the philosophy of history at Berlin in 1830–1, stated that Africa was 'the Gold-land compressed within itself—the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history is enveloped in the dark mantle of night.'[2] Yet his views are worth noting because, either in its original or in its derived forms, the Hegelian picture of black Africa as 'the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature'[3] has influenced both white and black in the United States.

My three texts or motifs come from Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville, from the conclusions of three masterpieces of what D. H. Lawrence called the classical age of American literature. The first is from *Walden, or Life in the Woods* which Thoreau published in 1854: 'What does Africa,—what does the

[1] For the quotations from Crèvecœur in this paragraph see J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London, 1971), pp. 5, 43, 172–3.

[2] George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, tr. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), p. 91.

[3] Ibid., p. 99.

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West [the American West] stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast when discovered. . . . It is not worth while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar.'[1]

The other two texts are from Melville's novella of 1856, *Benito Cereno*, and from his epic poem of twenty years later, *Clarel. A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land.* They are, I believe best appreciated in juxtaposition. But it may be helpful to indicate that the first of them is a question put to the captain of the ill-fated ship, *San Dominick*, after his rescue from rebellious slaves on board who had wanted him to take them back to Africa, and his melancholy answer to this question. The second of them is part of Herman Melville's reflections on the Enlightenment. In juxtaposition, then, my two quotations from Herman Melville, against the background of the African element in the American experience, read:

> . . . what has cast such a shadow upon you?
> The negro.[2]
>
> The light is greater, hence the shadow more.[3]

As my quotation from *Walden* may already have suggested, Africa in American history and literature is a problem of perception, usually of wrong perceptions, either by those who do not wish to bear the burden of responsibility which correct perception would entail or by those who, often through no fault of their own, are incapable of distinguishing the reality behind the image. Thoreau's picture of Africa as a *tabula rasa* on which white men project their fantasies and often act them out is older than his epoch, and it is not limited to Americans. It goes back at least to Sir Thomas Browne in the seventeenth century and his assertion that 'We carry within us the wonders we seek without us: There is all Africa and her prodigies in us.'[4] And it continues in Laurens van der Post's address to the Psychological Club of Zürich in 1954 which formed the substance of his book *The Dark Eye in Africa*, published the following year, in which he declared that 'the greatest of all the mirrors of our age is Africa'.[5] Americans, white and black, have made of this particular mirror, especially after their own

[1] Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston, Mass., 1882), pp. 343–4.

[2] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and other stories* (London, 1951), p. 209.

[3] Herman Melville, *Clarel. A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, ed. Walter E. Bezanson (New York, 1960), p. 523.

[4] Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (Oxford, 1964), p. 15.

[5] Laurens van der Post, *The Dark Eye in Africa* (London, 1955), p. 64.

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West has ceased to provide a psychological outlet for them, an instrument of distortion as well as of reflection not only of their attitudes towards slavery and its consequences for the American Dream but also of their deepest personal impulses.

The power of blackness in American literature was effectively displayed two decades ago in Harry Levin's evocative book with that title; and students of the fascination of the abomination, the heart of the darkness, will recognize that the attraction which Africa, its peoples and its imagery, has held for American writers, wrestling, Jacob-like, with their own guilt-ridden metaphysic, embedded especially in the King James Version of the Old Testament with its many references to Ethiopians (the seventeenth-century name for Africans), is a variation on a very ancient theme. Africa, to be sure, was very much part of the Old World when America was becoming a synonym for the New; and the first white settlers took over the Atlantic Ocean with them all the hopes and fears which the mention of Ethiopia or Africa held for them before they introduced black slaves into their own 'raw, untidy continent',[1] as W. H. Auden called America when he, too, sought refuge in the West.

In Conrad Aiken's *The Kid* (1947), a poetic essay on the American frontiersman from the time of the mysterious William Blackstone who went in advance of the first English settlers of 1630 to Massachusetts and moved on to fresh wildernesses in the then dark continent of America, the imagery of darkness is constantly employed:

> Dark was the forest, dark was the mind:
> dark the trail that he stooped to find:
> dark, dark, dark, in the midnight lost,
> in self's own midnight, the seeking ghost . . .
> Dark is the forest when false dawn looms—
> darkest now, when the true day comes.[2]

The sources of such imagery may, at first sight, seem to be purely psychological or metaphysical. And in Harry Levin's book, *The Power of Blackness*, ample evidence, from the times of Hawthorne and Melville to Faulkner and Hemingway, is provided for this. Levin quotes, for example, a striking image of darkness from Robert Penn Warren's narrative poem *Brother to Dragons* (1953) which was based on the story of a brutal

[1] W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter* (London, 1941), p. 68.
[2] Conrad Aiken, *The Kid* (London, 1947), p. 35.

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murder of a black slave by two nephews of the patriarch of the American Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson. Yet Levin seems to see this, even in its context of slavery in America, as a manifestation of 'an innate blackness in the white man.'[1] Colour symbolism, of course, in American literature owed much to Calvinist and other Christian concepts of Original Sin. But, without the transfer across the Atlantic Ocean of European attitudes towards Africa, and later of Africans themselves, in the slave ships of the Middle Passage, is it likely that such a marked interplay of darkness and light in imagery and themes would have become a feature of American literature?

These African elements in American literature and history coexisted with, interacted with the European heritage of the pioneers, and, until the closing of the West, in a frontier, a wilderness environment. Perry Miller, the historian of the New England mind, in his appropriately entitled study, *Errand into the Wilderness*, reminds us that 'a basic conditioning factor' in early American history was 'the wilderness'; and, in spite of some criticism of Frederick Jackson Turner, declares that 'thanks to Turner . . . unless we acknowledge the existence of the forest the character of American history is obscure'.[2] But which forest, which wilderness?

The immediate answer is the American forest, the American wilderness. 'Old Abe Lincoln', as his supporters sang, 'came out of the wilderness'—and who could be more American than old Abe? And yet, behind the American wilderness was the African wilderness, the African forests, and the African deserts. Is it purely accidental, simply symbolical that Perry Miller, as he tells us in the preface to *Errand in the Wilderness*, acquired the determination to expound the 'movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America' on the jungle-edged banks of the Congo river, Joseph Conrad's heart of the darkness, to which he had gone in search of adventure in the 1920s? In Perry Miller's words, Africa became 'the setting for a sudden epiphany (if the word be not too strong) of the pressing necessity of expounding my America to the twentieth century'.[3] I should like to think that experience of the African wilderness evoked memories of the American wilderness for this historian of the New England mind because the two wildernesses, from the earliest times of the American experience, were linked

[1] Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (London, 1958), p. 175.
[2] Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. 1.
[3] Ibid., p. viii.

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together, mainly by slavery and the Atlantic slave-trade but also by other factors such as the fields which they offered for ambitious and often psychotic individuals to project their fantasies on to them and, sometimes, to acquire reputation and wealth in their exploration and exploitation of these wildernesses.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of such an individual was Henry Morton Stanley, the American name assumed by John Rowlands who was born in humble circumstances in Wales in 1841 and who escaped from a Welsh workhouse to America on the eve of the Civil War and, eventually, through his African escapades to fame and, compared with his very modest origins, to fortune. Stanley was acquainted with slavery in the United States through his work with a New Orleans cotton merchant and his service with both the Confederate and the Union forces. His first journalistic assignment, reporting on General Hancock's expedition against the Indians in 1867, added to his knowledge of the American frontier. Stanley, therefore, knew something of the American wilderness before he went to Africa in 1871 to look for David Livingstone for James Gordon Bennett of *The New York Herald*. This episode, which was to launch Stanley on nineteen years of writing, exploring, and empire-building in Africa, during which period he continued to be an American citizen, deserves more than a passing glance because it illustrates the power of American journalism and 'instant history' in presenting an image of Africa to the world. It was the Hegelian picture of Africa which Stanley, through his writings and lectures, presented to readers in America, Britain, and further afield. It reinforced all the old prejudices of the Cotton Kingdom against Africa. Whether Stanley coined the expression 'Dark Continent' for Africa or not, his two best-selling works, *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and *In Darkest Africa* (1890), helped to popularize this image of the Afro-American's ancestral home, so that when, for example, James K. Vardaman of Mississippi told the Senate in 1914 that, 'when left to himself' the African 'has universally gone back to the barbarism of the jungle',[1] his words did not fall on unprepared soil in a United States which was faced with the necessity of extending the promise of American life to four and a half million emancipated slaves and their descendants.

[1] Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., and Benjamin Quarles, editors, *The Black American. A Brief Documentary History* (Glenview, III., p. 238: quoting from *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 2nd Sess. (6 Feb. 1914), pp. 3036, 3038, 3040).

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In the chapter, also entitled 'Through the Dark Continent', of H. M. Stanley's *Autobiography* (1909), he gave a picture of what he called 'Fatal Africa', which for one reader at least, evokes memories of similar responses from Americans faced with the problems of subduing their own wilderness and of bringing order into their own raw, untidy continent:

One after another, travellers drop away. It is such a huge continent, and each of its secrets is environed by many difficulties—the torrid heat, the miasma exhaled from the soil, the noisome vapours enveloping every path, the giant cane grass suffocating the wayfarer, the rabid fury of the native guarding every entry and exit, the unspeakable misery of life within the wild continent, the utter absence of every comfort, the bitterness which each day heaps upon the poor white man's head, in that land of blackness, the sombrous solemnity pervading every feature of it . . .[1]

'The Power of Blackness' indeed!

This picture of the undeveloped, unredeemed Dark Continent influenced black as well as white Americans; and the reaction to this image of Africa by its descendants in the United States has been important in their life and literature. At this stage I would limit my remarks on this basic feature of Afro-American history to a reference to that unduly neglected work, although it was published by the American Historical Association in 1953, Miles Mark Fisher's *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*. In his study of the so-called 'Negro Spirituals' this Afro-American scholar drew attention to the fascination of Africa for the slaves, as a place and as a symbol, although it was often veiled in covert references to keep the real meaning from their masters. To the Negroes of the ante-bellum South, furthermore, according to Fisher, the wilderness was not a place to be feared, as it was for many of the white settlers, but a place to be welcomed. Any woods where they could meet secretly and practise their religion, whether the African cult or Christianity or in a syncretistic, religio-political form, were places to be welcomed rather than feared. As one slave song expressed it: 'I sought my Lord in de wilderness . . . For I'm a-going home . . . I found free grace in de wilderness . . . For I'm a-going home.'[2] In such lines perhaps we may see the wilderness as the one place which many blacks could call their own: as a touch of Africa

[1] *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley G.C.B.*, edited by his wife, Dorothy Stanley (Boston, Mass., 1909), pp. 296–7.

[2] Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (Ithaca, NY, 1953), p. 74.

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in an alien white environment. For white writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the great Virginian swamp was the 'Dismal Swamp'; but for the blacks who met there covertly to worship and to scheme against their masters, it could be interpreted as the prelude of a return to Africa, long lost for many slaves but coming alive from time to time in the American wilderness. The two wildernesses, the negative American and the positive African became one, if only momentarily.

Although the use of the imagery and symbols of darkness by white American writers seems to me to owe more to the place of Africa and slavery in American traditions than is commonly realized, overt references to Africa, its use for plots and characters by white writers in the United States, have been limited. What an opportunity was missed by an American writer in the nineteenth century to pursue the satirical novel on the over-serious American traveller implicit in Thoreau's assertion that 'It is not worth while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar'! Writing in mid-nineteenth-century Massachusetts, Thoreau would have known of its trade to East Africa, through Zanzibar, in cotton cloth. (It was a trade, incidentally, which put the word 'Amerikani' into the Swahili language for a coarse, cotton cloth.) But the opportunity was missed. Melville, of course, set African aspirations, the deep-seated desire to go back to Africa, at the heart of *Benito Cereno*; and his unfinished novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857), could have been a vehicle for more African elements in the masquerade of American life than he appears to have realized. Before the Civil War, however, it was left to a few declaredly abolitionist writers to sound the African theme. John Greenleaf Whittier extolled the heroism of Joseph Cinqué, the Mende from Sierra Leone who led the *Amistad* mutiny in 1839; and Whittier's adaptation, 'Song of the Slaves in the Desert' about the captives from Bornu, indicates that African songs were brought across the Atlantic Ocean by the slaves and preserved and modified in the United States.

But, amongst pre-Civil War white writers, it was Harriet Beecher Stowe who was foremost in her attention to Africa. Both admirers and denigrators tend to forget that her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) finished with praise for African nationalism. It may not be the kind of praise which some African nationalists like; and, because it is put into the mouth of George Harris, the mulatto, who wants to go back to America's freed slave

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colony, Liberia, which had issued its own Declaration of Independence in 1847, it is often criticized by black nationalists who are distrustful of mulattoes. Yet the meaning of George Harris's words is a clear expression of African nationalism:

> But you will tell me that our race have equal rights to mingle in the American republic as the Irishman, the German, the Swede. Granted they have. We *ought* to be free to meet and mingle—to rise by our individual worth, without any consideration of caste or colour; and they who deny this right to us are false to their own professed principles of human equality. We ought, in particular to be allowed here. We have *more* than the rights of an injured race for reparation. But, then, *I do not want it.* I want a country, a nation of my own.[1]

After the Civil War, few white American writers have chosen to dwell exclusively on African subjects, unless they are professional scholars. The doyen here was, and is likely to remain, Melville J. Herskovits, whose work has influenced writers of fiction as well as his fellow anthropologists and historians. Foremost amongst American novelists whom he influenced is Saul Bellow in his *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). But this novel is more concerned with the problem of American identity than it is with Africa itself. Once again, Africa became the setting in which the white man tried to realize himself. Frederic Prokosch's *Storm and Echo* (1948) also falls into this class, with its study of travellers in search of themselves as they wander in the Dark Continent. As American literature shades off, however, into the best-seller industry an occasional American novelist tries his hand at an African topic: an example here is Robert Ruark's *Something of Value* (1955) on the so-called Mau Mau period in Kenya.

If African themes have not been made a major vehicle, except as an adjunct or adornment to self-analysis, by white American writers since the Civil War, several of them have examined African survivals in the United States in their fiction and poetry. The Louisiana writer, George Washington Cable, made sensitive use of African materials in his work, especially in *The Grandissimes* (1880). Chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine of this novel tell the story of Bras-Coupé, the rebellious African slave, a prince among his own people, who died with the dream of going back to Africa on his lips. In the story of Bras-Coupé, George Washington Cable foreshadowed a school of American slave fiction in the second half of the

[1] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London, 1852), pp. 366–7.

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twentieth century by both white and black writers, some of whom hope for inclusion ultimately in the inner circle of literature; others of whom aim no higher than the lucrative heights of bestsellerdom; and most of whom must rest content with the consolations of paper-covers, often of a colourfully salacious variety.

Other white American writers for whom African survivals in the States gave force to their writing include Joel Chandler Harris. As he realized, his Uncle Remus stories rested on a basis of African folk-tales; and he was well aware of the African presence in Southern society. For example, his *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883) introduces a 'genuine African, and for that reason he was known as African Jack'[1] who had been brought to the Georgia sea-islands in a slave ship when he was about twenty years old. The little white boy to whom he was introduced was told that 'the old African was a wizard, a conjuror, a snake charmer'.[2]

A similar character of African origin appeared in Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* (1928). This was Cudjo, the house servant with a distinctively West African name, who knew the whites and what was happening to them better than they knew themselves, and for whom Benét evokes the traditional, African-derived wisdom of Brer Rabbit and the brier-patch:

> Cudjo watched and measured and knew them,
> Seeing behind and around and through them . . .
> And even his master could not find
> The secret place in the back of his mind
> Where witch-bones talked to a scarlet rag
> And a child's voice spoke from a conjure-bag.
> For he belonged to the hidden nation,
> The mute enormous, confederation
> Of the planted earth and the burden borne
> And the horse that is ridden and given corn.
> The wind from the brier-patch brought him news
> That never went walking in white men's shoes
> And the grapevine whispered its message faster
> Than a horse could gallop across a grave,
> Till, long ere the letter could tell the master,
> The doomsday rabbits had told the slave.[3]

[1] Joel Chandler Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus* (London, n.d.), chap. xxv, p. 120. Compare Frank Worthington, *African Aesop* (London, 1940), pp. 9–12.

[2] Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, p. 120.

[3] Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown's Body* (London, 1944), pp. 38–9.

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Was Stephen Vincent Benét aware, when he wrote of 'the hidden nation', of the emergence of nationalist sentiments amongst the slaves and their descendants in the United States: not only of the nationalism based on memories of those who actually knew from what parts of Africa their ancestors had come or of the growth of a specific Afro-American nationalism transcending tribal origins, but also of the 'mute, enormous confederation' of blacks in many countries for whom the Pan-Africanists claimed to speak at the beginning of the twentieth century? Perhaps not—although one cannot be sure of this. The news of Afro-American aspirations was no secret to the white American literati in the 1920s. Was not, for example, Alain Locke's influential *The New Negro* published three years before *John Brown's Body*? It is this sensitive reference to nationalism in this passage from *John Brown's Body* which takes Benét's picture, for me, out of the category of white stereotypes of the Negro.

The same cannot be said of what is probably the most famous and influential collection of white stereotypes of blacks in American literature, a poem which is based on white conceptions of African survivals in the United States: Vachel Lindsay's 'The Congo. A Study of the Negro Race' (1914), with its three sections entitled 'Their Basic Savagery', 'Their Irrepressible High Spirits', and 'The Hope of their Religion'. Lindsay defended himself against the inevitable protests from Afro-American intellectuals and their white liberal supporters. He claimed he had been misunderstood; and no doubt he had, as Dr Ann Massa indicates in her study, *Vachel Lindsay: Field-worker for the American Dream.*[1] But Vachel Lindsay's hypnotic verses, unsupported by his subsequent prose explanations of his fundamentally pro-Negro ideas, probably did more to reinforce the Hegelian stereotype of the Dark Continent in twentieth-century America than any of the crude outpourings of Negrophobe Southern politicians.

On the other side of the African continent to Lindsay's jungle-surrounded Congo were the wide-open spaces of East Africa. They seemed to many Americans at the turn of the century to be, if not a potential extension of the American frontier, an attractive alternative to it at a time when the old West was on the wane and virile Americans sought fresh fields for the manifestation of their machismo. Theodore Roosevelt, who published his *African Game Trails* in 1910, was one of the first American white hunters to seek the solaces of the strenuous life in the

[1] *Vachel Lindsay* (Bloomington, Ind., 1970), pp. 162–70.

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East African West. Ernest Hemingway followed in his footsteps; and out of his safaris of the 1930s came *The Green Hills of Africa*, 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro', and 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber'. In the last of these literary errands into the wilderness, Hemingway attempted some satirization of the Hegelian stereotype: 'what was known as Darkest Africa until the Martin Johnsons lighted it on so many silver screens'.[1] But he was as captivated by the myth of the wilderness, African or otherwise, as any of the Americans of his generation.

At least another generation was to be needed before the process could be started of freeing Americans from the romanticism of the Dark Continent. The Peace Corps no doubt helped here, as is suggested by Paul Theroux's satire of Dr Banda's Malawi in his *Jungle Lovers* (1971) which drew upon his experiences with young American voluntary workers in Central Africa. A kindred satirical mood crept into the works of some of the Afro-American writers after the second world war. Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, about black life in Chicago could not avoid the romanticism of Mother Africa which endured in that urban jungle of the Mid-West in the 1950s. But, as one of her characters declaimed, when he was accused of being ashamed of his African ancestry:

> Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our Great West African heritage! In one second we will hear all about the great Ashanti empires; the great Songhai civilizations; and the great sculpture of Bénin—and some poetry in Bantu—and the whole monologue will end with the word *heritage*![2]

Indeed, the exploration of the African heritage has been a constant element amongst the slaves and their descendants in the United States, as it has been in other parts of the Western Hemisphere to which black people were transported. As we have seen, even in the most apparently transcendental Spirituals, by those 'black and unknown bards of long ago',[3] it appears that there were distinctive African elements. Until well into the nineteenth century and later, persons of African descent in America often referred to themselves as Africans, and their mutual aid and cultural organizations and churches fre-

[1] Ernest Hemingway, *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber and Other Stories* (London, 1973), p. 27.

[2] Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (London, 1960), pp. 56–7.

[3] James Weldon Johnson, 'O Black and Unknown Bards'; quoted in *The Negro Caravan* ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York, 1941), p. 325.

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quently adopted the adjective 'African': the New York African Society for Mutual Relief; the African Lodge of Boston, Massachusetts; the African Benevolent Society; the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; the African Orthodox Church; and many others. But as is apparent from the quotation from Lorraine Hansberry's play which I have just made, Afro-Americans were—and, indeed, are—divided on the importance of Africa and its relevance for their future.

The debate on Africa and its importance for the slaves and their descendants is set forth and symbolized by two black abolitionists, writers and orators: Frederick Douglass (1817–1895), the son of a slave mother and, it seems, of a white father; and Martin Robison Delany (1812–1885), the son of a slave father and a free, Afro-American mother. The men collaborated in the struggle to liberate the slaves in the United States; but they differed on Africa. Douglass, as is clear from his address entitled 'The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered'[1] to the Western Reserve College on 12 July 1854, was not ashamed of his African background. But he believed fervently that there was no future in the schemes, by whites or blacks, to return the Negroes of the United States to Africa; and that they should struggle for the full realization of what he conceived to be the promise of the American Constitution, equality for all citizens of the United States. Before the Civil War, Delany had different ideas. In his now famous book, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered* (1852), he declared that the people of African descent in America were 'a nation within a nation'. But, through their American experiences, they had become 'a *broken people*'; and, as the 'claims of no people . . . are respected by any nation, until they are presented in a national capacity', the only way they could regain respect and unity was by some bold gesture. 'We must', said Delany, 'MAKE an ISSUE, CREATE an EVENT, and ESTABLISH a NATIONAL POSITION for OURSELVES; and never may expect to be respected as men and women, until we have undertaken some fearless, bold, and adventurous deeds of daring—contending against every odds—regardless of consequence.'[2] The answer

[1] Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1950), ii, pp. 289–290.

[2] Martin Robison Delany, *The Conditions, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (New York, 1968), pp. 209–10, 215.

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for Delany, as for George Harris, lay in the development of a distinct nationality for themselves in Africa. At first, Delany toyed with the idea of a settlement in East Africa; but he later turned to the slaves' traditional home, West Africa. In 1859 he visited Liberia; and then went on to Abeokuta in what is now Nigeria where he concluded an agreement with the Egba chiefs in the hope of settling blacks from America in Africa. He criticized the white missionaries' practice in West Africa of changing the names of their African converts to a Christian form, claiming that this would lead to 'a loss of identity'.[1] In this, as in other respects, such as his use of the slogan 'Africa for the African',[2] he anticipated the attitudes of many modern nationalists, both amongst Afro-Americans and Africans.

Delany, furthermore, envisaged a role for Cuba in the liberation of the Africans. On 18 October 1854 the American ministers to Britain, France, and Spain met in Belgium and drew up what has come to be known as the Ostend Manifesto, in which they implied that if Spain would not sell Cuba to the United States, the States should wrest it from her by force. 'We should', declared the three ministers, 'commit base treason to our posterity, should we permit Cuba to be Africanized',[3] a reflection of the fear current in the mid nineteenth century amongst Southern annexationists and Cuban exiles that Spain, by easing the restrictions on blacks in Cuba, would eventually Africanize the island. Delany had no fears about this. In a novel entitled *Blake; or the Huts of America* about a militant black American of West Indian origin in the United States and Cuba, which Delany published serially in 1861 and 1862, he argued that Cuban blacks should take an active part, by revolution, in their own Africanization. This would have a liberatory effect on the slaves of the United States and, by implication, on Africa itself. Delany's hero in this novel looked forward to the African 'race and country' rising 'to the first magnitude of importance in the estimation of the greatest nations on earth, from their dependence upon them for the great staples from which is derived their natural wealth'.[4]

In Delany's picture of a Cuban revolutionary movement his

[1] Martin R. Delany, *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (New York, 1861), p. 52.

[2] Ibid., p. 61.

[3] Henry Steele Commager, *Documents of American History* (New York, 9146), p. 335.

[4] Martin R. Delany, *Blake or the Huts of America* ed. Floyd J. Miller (Boston, Mass., 1970), pp. 261–2.

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hero advocates the setting aside of all religious scruples in the interest of the ultimate liberation of blacks. This was a very different view from that held by other Afro-Americans. Some of them adopted the white belief that the blacks had been brought from Africa to America in order that they could be introduced to Christianity and then, in their turn, could take its blessings back to their benighted ancestors in Africa. There was even a touch of this belief in James Weldon Johnson's 'O Black and Unknown Bards', a poem on the anonymous composers of the Negro Spirituals by the Africa-conscious author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* of 1912. Johnson concluded his poem, 'You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.'[1]

There is also something of this Afro-American dilemma in one of the most widely quoted of all poems on Africa by an American author of African descent: 'Heritage' by Countee Cullen (1903–1946):

> *One three centuries removed*
> *From the scenes his father loved,*
> *Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,*
> *What is Africa to me?*[2]
> Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
> Black men fashion out of rods,
> Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
> In a likeness like their own,
> My conversion is high-priced:
> I belong to Jesus Christ . . .[3]

The conventional, sensuous imagery of the Dark Continent is apparent even in this brief extract from Cullen's 'Heritage'. By all accounts, he should reject his African heritage. But, all the time, it threatens to overwhelm him:

> *All day long and all night through,*
> *One thing only must I do;*
> *Quench my pride and cool my blood . . .*
> *Lest the grave restore its dead.*
> *Nor has yet my heart or head*
> *In the least way realized*
> *They and I are civilized.*[4]

Countee Cullen, because his Christian convictions meant so much to him, explored his African background mainly in

[1] *Negro Caravan*, op. cit., p. 326.

[2] Countee Cullen, 'Heritage': quoted in *Negro Caravan*, op. cit., p. 357.

[3] Ibid., p. 359.

[4] Ibid., p. 360.

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religious terms: in 'Heritage' and in such other poems as 'Black Majesty' and 'The Black Christ'. Other Afro-American writers have chosen different channels. A favourite one has been the historical approach, although, until recently, few Afro-American historians have had the resources or the determination to go back to Africa in search of the past. George Washington Williams (1848–91), author of the pioneering *History of the Negro Race in America* (1883), spent a year, 1890–1, circumnavigating Africa, in the course of which he gained enough material on the infamies of Belgian rule in the Congo to make a public denunciation of both King Leopold and his principal emissary in the Congo, Henry M. Stanley.[1] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963), the Afro-American intellectual who lived to be over twice George Washington Williams's age, the author of numerous works on Africa and Afro-America in several literary modes, is the only Afro-American historian, to the best of my knowledge, who has chosen to end his life in Africa. He left the United States in 1961 for Ghana, of which he became a citizen and where he died in 1963. Du Bois's approach to African history was synoptic, Pan-African; and, in this, he was in the line of descent of other Afro-American writers such as William Wells Brown in *The Rising Son: or, the Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race* (1874). But William Wells Brown gathered his material on Africa from afar.

An Afro-American poet whose work contrasts strikingly with Countee Cullen's, although he shared his preoccupation with the African heritage, was Melvin B. Tolson (1898–1966), a highly sophisticated author whose poetry, in spite of the praise bestowed upon it by writers of the calibre of Allen Tate and Karl Shapiro, still seems to elude the serious critical attention which it merits. This may be because Melvin B. Tolson's major works were written relatively late in his life. His *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) was commissioned, with Duke Ellington's *Liberia Suite*, for the Liberian Centennial and International Exhibition. In highly complex, heavily referenced verse, it explores the past, present, and future of Africa, concluding with a science-fiction style vision of a post-industrial African Utopia. Melvin B. Tolson's last published work, *Harlem Gallery* (1965), is an even more complicated poem than his *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*; but, alas, it lacks the scholarly

[1] John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams and Africa* (Washington, DC, 1971), p. 25.

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apparatus of this earlier work. Part satire, part symbol, it both subscribes to and castigates *négritude* in an Afro-American context. A major character in it is the African expatriate Doctor Obi Nkomo, who 'followed the Christ of the African veld / to the Statue of Liberty / to Wall Street, / and to Mr. Morgan's Thirteen Galleries of Art'.[1] I have the feeling that when we have come to terms with these two long poems by Melvin B. Tolson we shall be much closer to understanding the complex pattern of relations, in time and space, between America and Africa than we are at the moment.

In his own highly idiosyncratic way Tolson was searching for his roots. This is a quest with which we are only too familiar through Alex Haley's *Roots*, in print and on television, since 1976. The Afro-American search for ancestry is, to be sure, but a part of a general American quest for roots. It is, however, given a special poignancy because the slave-trade and plantation conditions obliterated genealogies and ancestries far more effectively than for any other group of immigrants to America. The loss of African names, usually by the *Diktat* of the white masters, covered many trails that might have led back to origins in the Old World. Of all the rootless peoples of the United States, the Afro-Americans are the most uprooted; and the problem of tracing ancestors, when the desire arose and the means became available, has been rendered unusually difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, because, during three and a half centuries of existence in the New World, many people of African origin had succumbed to the image of Africa as the dark, unredeemed continent, best forgotten. Yet, in spite of all the white-imposed or black-imitated prejudice against Africa, the hope was never lost amongst Afro-Americans of finding, if not ancestors, at least some reference points in the ancestral continent which would give dignity and meaning to life.

Sometimes this search for roots amongst Afro-Americans has not gone all the way to Africa, as if realizing how difficult the process of tracing actual ancestors would be. Sometimes it has manifested itself in the rejection of white names and by the adoption of African or African-sounding names, and in the jettisoning of Christianity in its white modes and by the assumption of African forms of faith or of non-Christian religions, of which Islam has been the most prominent, growing steadily since black intellectuals, such as West-Indian born Edward

[1] Melvin B. Tolson, *Harlem Gallery: Book I, The Curator* (London, 1969), p. 105.

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Blyden, commended it as the characteristic African religion in the nineteenth century. But in the twentieth century, as transport improved, particularly air travel, increasing numbers of Afro-Americans have gone back to Africa to see for themselves.

Langston Hughes, who had made his own pilgrimage to the ancestral continent when ships were the only practical way of getting there, indicated in his anthology of black writing, *An African Treasury* (1960), the influence of African nationalism on the Afro-American desire to sample Africa. 'When I first began to gather this material', said Langston Hughes referring to his African anthology, 'the term "négritude"—currently popular with African writers, especially poets influenced by Senghor [Hughes was referring to the late 1950s and the early 1960s; *négritude*, however, in the 1970s has lost much of the esteem which it used to enjoy.]—had not come into common use. But there was in most of this writing which reached me, an accent of Africanness—blackness, if you will, not unlike the racial consciousness found in the work of American Negro writers a quarter of a century ago. [Langston Hughes was referring here to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s which is known to have influenced the Francophone formulators of *négritude*.] The Harlem writers of that period had to search for their folk roots. The African writer had these roots right at hand.'[1]

Langston Hughes was speaking here of the force of African cultural nationalism in turning the Afro-American writers' attention to their roots in the Old World. But African political nationalism was a more powerful influence on this process. When, for example, Richard Wright, famous for his *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), went to the Gold Coast four years before it became independent in 1957 under the old African name of Ghana, the suggestion had been put into his mind by a friend of Kwame Nkrumah, although Wright and Nkrumah had met when the Osagyefo was a student in the United States. And when Richard Wright published in 1954 a book on his trip to the Gold Coast, he gave it a title which anticipated the nomenclature of Afro-American militancy a decade later: *Black Power*. Wright was not uncritical of what he had seen in Africa; but he was sympathetic to the plight of what he called in his short book, *White Man, Listen!*, of 1957 'the tragic élite of . . . Africa'.[2] He believed that the answer to Africa's apparently intractable problems was Black Power. In the letter to Kwame Nkrumah,

[1] Langston Hughes, ed., *An African Treasury* (New York, 1960), p. xi.

[2] Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (New York, 1964), p. v.

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then Prime Minister of the Gold Coast, with which he concluded his book of this title, Richard Wright spoke frankly and showed that, although he had left the American Communist Party ten years before, he still shared some of its Stalinist assumptions: 'There is but one honorable course that assumes and answers the ideological, traditional, organizational, emotional, political, and productive needs of Africa at this time: AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED! . . . not for war, but for peace; not for destruction, but for service; not for aggression, but for production; not for despotism, but to free minds from mumbo-jumbo. . . . Above all, Africans must be regimented for the "long pull", for what happens in Africa will spread itself out over decades of time and a continent of space . . .'[1] Richard Wright concluded this prophetic letter to Nkrumah with a quotation from Walt Whitman and the assertion that 'Your fight has been fought before. I am an American and my country was once a colony of England . . .'[2] It seems that he had apparently answered to his own satisfaction Countee Cullen's question which Wright quoted as an epigraph in *Black Power*: 'What is Africa to me?'

The most celebrated Afro-American author of today, James Baldwin, who inherited Richard Wright's mantle when he died in 1960, has clearly been asking himself this question all his life; and, like Wright's, his answer is sometimes ambivalent. Yet, in his address in the People's Congregational Church of Washington, DC, on 14 October, 1979, as part of its Black Heritage Week activities, James Baldwin spoke with an unambivalent prophetic voice that went back beyond the admonishment of Wright's *White Man, Listen!* to the spirit of the warning at the start of his *Black Power* of 1954: 'Africa challenges the West in a way that the West has not been challenged before. The West can meanly lose Africa, or the West can nobly save Africa; but whatever happens, make no mistake: THE WEST IS BEING JUDGED BY THE EVENTS THAT TRANSPIRE IN AFRICA.[3] Baldwin put it in another way, directing his remarks to the Afro-American predicament: 'The Western world has lost its source of cheap labour. In the process, it has lost its Western identity.'[4] And then he gave his own distinctive

[1] Richard Wright, *Black Power, A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York, 1954), pp. 346–7.

[2] Ibid., p. 351.

[3] Ibid., p. 15.

[4] Robert Goodman Sr., 'Author James Baldwin takes to the pulpit', *The Washington Afro-American*, 20 Oct. 1979, p. 14.

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point of view on Africa in the Afro-American heritage: 'When I was a little boy, I was told that black people never contributed anything to civilization and I was lucky that the white man came to the dark continent and saved me from eating up my uncles . . .'[1] 'We may be the only people here [the US] who did not deny our ancestors. We brought ourselves with us.' In James Baldwin's opinion, delivered in the predominantly black capital of the United States, 'We're living through the end of an era—the fall of a kingdom. We are standing on the threshold of a new world.' And then, with one of those striking Biblical images which seem to come naturally to this former boy preacher of Harlem, Baldwin concluded his address: 'We are the world's only black Westerners. We were born in the belly of the whale.'[2]

The belly of the whale is also part of the imagery and part of the narrative of *Moby-Dick*, that parable and prophecy of American life, white and black. This image, through the slaves chained in their rows in the ships of the Middle Passage, links America and Africa. America, of course, in its relations with Africa has been concerned with other matters than the enslavement of Africans: for example, with securing access for its merchant ships to the Mediterranean which led for a while to tribute being paid to the North African Muslim states and to the war with Tripoli between 1801 and 1804; with coastal commerce other than the slave-trade, such as the cotton trade through Zanzibar; with the service by American ex-officers after the Civil War in Egypt and its southern frontier, with the Blue and the Gray on the Nile;[3] with American involvement in the rise of modern South Africa, during the growth of the Rand and the development of the Boer War and after; and with many other matters in Africa, not the least of which is missionary enterprise, through an often bewildering variety of Christian denominations. Impressive by any standard though such American-African connections may be, and unduly neglected by students of American history and literature, they are minor matters compared with the significance of African slavery for America. The numbers of the slaves transported to America may have been exaggerated—the statistics of its slave population promise to be a continuing cliometric controversy—

[1] Paul Hendrickson, 'James Baldwin Comes Home', *The Washington Post*, 15 Oct. 1979, p. B7.

[2] Goodman, loc. cit.

[3] See William B. Hesseltine and Hazel C. Wolf, *The Blue and the Gray on the Nile* (Chicago, 1961).

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but the fact of slavery lasting two and half centuries in a country which, from its origins, set himself up as an example to the world must continue to be, perhaps for a very long time to come, the first thing that one thinks of when America and Africa are mentioned. And, for some time, I am sure, the question will be asked: What role can the descendants of the slaves in America play in Africa? That they have played a significant part in the history of their ancestral country, particularly in the development of modern African nationalism, is clear.[1] But in the immediate future their prospects of having any major influence on the new African nations seem slight; and, for the time being at least, power appears to have passed in Africa to the descendants of slaves from another New World country, Cuba.

In coming to the end of my own errand into the wilderness, I am very conscious of much that I have left unsaid. I am particularly aware that I have not attempted to discuss the influence of the transmission to America and the transformation there of African ways of life on the emergence of an overall American culture. Bold claims have been made for this influence. 'The white man in America', it has been asserted, 'has continued, and in an inferior manner, a culture of European origin. . . . In respect of originality . . . the Negro is more important in the growth of American culture than the white man.'[2] When this statement was made in 1929 its author did not have at his disposal the resources of scholarship on Africa and Afro-America which have developed since the Second World War, and which have done much to destroy the Hegelian stereotype of Africa and Africans, at home and abroad. The many important findings of this scholarship have still to be synthesized and analysed from the point of view of the influence of Africa on America, although, in such a work as Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977), there are welcome signs that this process has begun.

In many other fields the serious study of the interactions between Africa and America is still in its infancy. The light in

[1] See, for example, George Shepperson, 'Notes on Negro American Influences on the Emergence of African Nationalism', *The Journal of American History*, i. 2, 1960, pp. 299–312.

[2] V. F. Calverton, ed. *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (New York, 1929), p. 4.

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America, the extension and adaptation of the European Enlightenment, has been greater; hence the shadow, the shadow of Africa and the slave-trade, has been felt more acutely in the United States than in other parts of the world which have experienced black bondage. This shadow, I believe, has become for the United States of today, over a hundred years after Emancipation, a barrier across its path in the conduct of foreign policy—and not only with Third World countries. If this is so, it could be argued that the increasing of the knowledge of Africa, both as image and as reality, in American history and literature is an essential step in the diminishing and the ultimate removal of that shadow; and, through this, in the easing of communications between white and non-white peoples everywhere.

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