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The Concept Of God In The Poetry Of The American Negro

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THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE POETRY
OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO

BY

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New Orleans, Louisiana
1943

THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE POETRY
OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO

BY

SISTER MARY HELENA JONES

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE
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Xavier University
New Orleans, Louisiana
1943

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IN GRATITUDE
TO
MY HEAVENLY MOTHER
WHO
HAS OBTAINED FOR ME AND FOR MANY
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THE GIFT OF FAITH
AND TO
MY BELOVED EARTHLY MOTHER
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PREFACE

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has changed, how far away has he strayed, and why has he drifted?"

The deep thoughts and philosophical doctrines of a people are best studied through its poetry, for it is in this form of literature that man best expresses himself.

PREFACE

Many authors have written much about the Negro and religion. Those who know the black man in America readily concede that he is by nature a lover of God, and that this great innate belief manifests itself in his daily life. Books of deep and light reading - some written in prose, others in verse - have been produced by American Negro men and women. Many of their works have mirrored forth the concept of God in the mind of the Afro-American; but this concept has not remained the same - this great faith is at present suffering decay. Comparatively few Negroes now trust and confide in God for all the needs of life. Therefore, these questions arise: "What has caused this misfortune, and what is the remedy?" Also, "Has the Negro followed his white brother in this respect as he has done so often in other ways?" And lastly, "If the Negro's idea of God

has changed, how far away has he strayed, and why has he drifted?"

The deep thoughts and philosophical doctrines of a people are best studied through its poetry, for it is in this form of literature that man best expresses himself; hence, a consideration of the Negro's concept of God, as found in his poetry, is timely. Another reason for its timeliness is the advent of the present War, usually a period in any people's history that causes a change either for the better or for the worse.

Although many of these dark children have been gifted by the muses, this thesis will be limited to those few men and women who are universally recognized as representative poets of the race, e.g., the unknown singers of the slave songs: Hammon, the first writer of verse; Phillis Wheatley, a gifted poetess and Paul Laurence Dunbar a popular rhymers of the broken tongue; then, the poets of the new spirit: James Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen; and lastly, the New Negro - the black poets of today: Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown.

In this study of how the Negro regards God, which will progress through the medium of the works of the above named poets, our guide will be the divine attributes of God and His relation to man. These distinctive attributes of God are well known - His Power, Love, Justice, Goodness, Immutability and Mercy - also the relationship He had established with man while on earth, as Saviour, Friend, Master, Shepherd and King. From the study of the poetry of these men and women, one may gain an idea of their concept of God, both of His attributes and of His relation to man.

I am glad to have the opportunity to express my appreciation, first to my Community for the privilege granted me to do graduate work at Xavier University, then, to Sister M. Francis for her encouragement during the years I have spent under her direction. I also say, "Thank you", to Mr. Connolly, Professor of many of my advanced English courses, for his many kindnesses, and to the librarians at both Xavier and the New Orleans Public Library, for the help received from them.

S.M.H.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

There is no doubt that the Negro is by nature a religious being. Yet, as we consider his idea of God, we wonder where and what was his religious background before he came to our American shores. In retrospect let us see what reasons there are for the native African Negro's ready acceptance of Christianity.

When the Negro came from Africa he brought with him a knowledge of God as a Being who lived in heaven and who created all things. He did not know that the Goodness and the Providence of God are infinite - rather, he believed that He, the Creator, left the creature to look out for himself after He put him upon the earth. Therefore, he concluded that no duty of praise and reverence to God was incumbent upon him, and he thought that appeasing the spirits of the millions of things about him

in which he believed the divinity manifested itself, was his only obligation.

This African animism or Nature Religion is the religion of the savage. It is a most primitive form of religious belief, and is often seen in the present day Christianity of the Negro.¹ This pagan creed was found almost universally among the African people, different in application in the various sections, but governed by the same general principle throughout the continent. For example, the people living in the plains saw and paid tribute to the divinity animating the land; those in the forest recognized His power in the trees, and they who lived near the streams saw God there.² We Christians say that these people perceived, indeed, the hand of God, but not the Infinite Being in the Omnipresence as we know Him.

Living in a land of spirits, then, those inhabitants of the Dark Continent, believing that a man had two souls, concluded that one of these souls wandered during sleep and, therefore, that dreams about persons separated in

¹Carter G. Woodson, The African Background Outlined, p. 358.

²Ibid., p. 359.

body were mediums of revelation regarding the will of those contacted by the wandering spirit - hence, at death, man's soul did not go into a place of rest or punishment, but returned to dwell with the living. Thus, they had a faint idea of immortality for the soul.¹

The Africans are not the only people to have such ideas of God and life. The Greeks believed there were guardian spirits over the forests, the streams, the hills and the valleys. These spirits, as they understood it, were supposed to control the benefits of nature.²

Relative to the African religion, however, Mommun says, that it is through Africa that Christianity became the religion of the world. In Africa, the Church, he continues, found some of its most zealous confessors and some of the most gifted defenders of the faith.³

It is definitely stated, however, that among the early African tribes, a few individuals were either Mohammedan or Christian, having been converted to these

¹Woodson, op. cit., p. 359.

²William Ferris, The African Abroad, p. 247.

³W.E.B. DuBois, Black Folk Then and Now, pp. 108-109.

religions by missionaries who found their way into the Dark Continent. Yet, before the advent of these missionaries, there existed in Africa native religious leaders or native priests, some of whom were brought to America on the slave ships.¹ Since no one in the New World paid attention to the religious needs of the Negro, there arose among these peoples a low form of African worship which, in turn, led to Voodooism.² The motives of the religious leaders were not very high. They had for their end or purpose the curing of disease, the making of rain, the protecting of property, and even the causing of insanity or blindness to some enemy.³ On the plantation, when he was no longer allowed to perform, as in his homeland, his superstitious task, the native religious leader comforted his people in their sorrow; and although the white masters succeeded in their attempt to eradicate all external practices among their slaves, still, there remain today various traces of these native beliefs. For instance, some of our unlettered people believe that the devil causes sickness, and that by prayer and faith God will cure it.

¹Woodson, The Negro in Our History, p. 35.

²Benjamin Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro, p. 196.

³Newell Pluckett, "Religious Folk-Belief of Whites and Negroes," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XVI, p. 27.

During the first hundred years of the slaves' stay in America, we may suppose that most of them died in heathenism, while others may have retained or acquired an imperfect knowledge of God.¹ History proves that in the early days of the South, where most of the slaves were living, religious instructions could not be given to them. A law was enacted, prohibiting the education of the slave, both in the fundamentals of secular learning and in moral and religious training. In most cases the master who had complete control over his "human beast" was embarrassed to bring the knowledge of Christ to these simple folk - he could ill allow the doctrine of brotherly love, so manifestly contradictory to the relationship then existing between the bonded servant and himself, to reach the ear and mind of those unfortunate human beings. He reasoned logically, that the acceptance of Christianity would mean the end of slavery, and that the missionaries or preachers could not easily teach religion if the recipient through want of education could not understand the truths of Christ presented to him.²

¹Edward Blyden, Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race, p. 34.

²Edwin R. Embree, Brown America, p. 61.

Other handicaps were imposed by law, which often prohibited ministers of different denominations from coming into the various sections of the country to teach.¹ When some of those religious leaders offered to bring God to these people, they were told that their efforts would be futile, that the Negro had no soul, and if he did, that he (the white man) did not want to meet him in heaven. Again, the unwritten law that people captured in a just war could be justly enslaved, as well as the equally weighty opinion that a christianized slave automatically became a free man, led the white man into the following delusions: The Negro was captured in a just war; therefore, God willed him to be enslaved. If the missionaries were prohibited from christianizing the slaves, they would then remain in bondage. This situation existed until the church and state agreed that the christianization of the Negro would not thereby make him a free man.²

Add to this the fact that the slave himself had certain ideas that had to be rooted out before he could be christianized.³ He had customs and practices that

¹Caroline L. Shanks, "The Biblical Anti-Slavery Argument", Journal of Negro History, Vol. XVI, pp. 132-157.

²For further material consult: Carter G. Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, Ch. II.

³Woodson, op. cit., p. 367.

were not compatible with the new religion;¹ he supposedly had no morality, and morals as well as faith figures in Christianity's objective: to make a creature more like unto the Creator in perfection.² Of course, many individual bondsmen were models of integrity and faithfulness even though they had not the more perfect idea of the Divinity that the follower of Christ possesses. They knew not the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Light.³ Some few, however, had been converted to Mohammedanism, a doctrine that had spread when men were everywhere held in slavery, and which appealed to these people in bondage.⁴ The Mohammedan slave was treated better than those among the Christians. The Koran taught the blessedness of kindness to slaves - God to these people had been pictured not as a white man, but like the great men of their tribes. Unlike the condition in Christian surroundings, the Negro was allowed to rise to any position as a Mohammedan - as a convert to this faith, a greater sympathy and brotherliness existed between him and the Mohammedan missionary.

¹Blyden, Op. cit., p. 30.

²Ibid., p. 40.

³Woodson, op. cit., p. 36.

⁴James H. Johnson, "The Mohammedan Slave Trade" Journal of Negro History, Vol. XIII, p. 478.

⁵Blyden, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

Lastly, a slave who became a member of this religion also became a free man.

Hence, the promulgation of Christianity among the slaves would necessitate a change in many happenings on the plantation. The slave had been forced into relationships that were like those of the animal world. After the master had chosen or consented for two slaves to be joined together, the marriage ceremony consisted of jumping over a broom, or the reading of a biblical verse by himself. The purpose of these owners was almost invariably the rapid increase of their slaves without cost to themselves - the larger the slave family, the better for his profits. Yet he did not scruple to sell individual members of a family as often as he desired. The families of these black men and women were like herds of cattle - sold to bring in the best price.¹

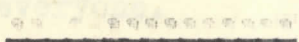
All the white masters, however, were not of the same opinion. Some believed in the education and christianization of the Negro in spite of obstacles and objections, because they would make the Negro more valuable and useful to the owners.

¹John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves", Journal of Negro History, Vol. 20, pp. 302-316.

The deeper the piety of the slave, the more valuable he would be in every sense of the word, they reasoned. Christianity truly taught and sincerely treasured or cherished would render the slave population more tranquil and happy;¹ therefore, the Gospel was the best means to preserve peace and good conduct, and religion was a means to an end - it would keep the slaves peaceful and working diligently for the master.²

Those who were opposed to the above theory held that such a procedure was good in itself, but it would make the blacks long for liberty - in fact, however, religion made them long for heaven and really despise their earthly home.

A third class of whites was really mission-minded; in their zeal they wanted to teach the faith in Christ to all men,³ but wondered who would give the instructions.⁴ They did not always have ministers with them, though there were in certain sections, a few Anglican clergymen who



¹Luther Jackson, "Religious Instructions of the Negroes", Journal of Negro History, Vol. XV, p. 111.

²Blyden, op. cit., p. 38.

³Woodson, Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, pp.1-3

⁴Jackson, op. cit., p. 87.

worked for the higher classes and had no time for the hopeless heathen.¹ In the course of time these masters decided to allow their slaves to come into their own churches for instructions. In the rural sections a part of the church was segregated for these black folk. In the cities, very often they were allowed to have their own meeting places for worship which was presided over by a white minister² who taught the much-propounded lesson: "Servants be obedient to your masters."³ A famous code used as topics for sermons was the Old Mosaic Law which recognized slavery - it was pointed out that the Apostle Paul upheld the fugitive slave law, because he advised the servant Onesimus to go back to his master Philimon.⁴ They argued that even Jesus, the meek Christ, had never spoken against slavery; and other themes used were: "This world is a sorrowful place," and "This is a world of misery and toil;" thus the slave was advised to be humble, holy, prayerful and patient. As a consolation they were reminded that vexations, disappointment and sorrow come to everyone.⁵

¹Woodson, The African Background Outlined, p. 359.

²A. A. Taylor, "Religious Efforts among the Negroes", The Negro in the Reclamation of Virginia.

³R. A. Carter, "What the Negro Church Has Done", Journal of Negro History, Vol. II, pp. 1-8.

⁴Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 59.

⁵Thomas W. Talley, Negro Folk Rhymes, p. 324.

Therefore, the instructions given to the Negro taught him how to be subservient to the master,¹ they taught him that there was a reason for obeying the commands of the overseer, and they enabled him to turn quickly from heathenism to the Christian faith. Few slaves adhered to the customs of their native land; they were less troublesome; they murmured less since they then understood - through their religious teachings - that they were ordained by God, their Creator, to be the servants of their white brothers. It was a sin to try to change the designs of God, which they would do if they tried to become free and independent - all that happened to them was the will of God - some day they would rest in eternity with God, but until then, they must be resigned to their present circumstances.

A few quotations illustrative of the foregoing discussion may be aptly cited here. In an address to the slaves, a bishop in the diocese of Virginia, writes thus:

Although God hath been pleased to make you slaves here, and to give you nothing but labor and poverty in this world, which you are obliged to submit to, it is His will that it should be so. Your bodies, you know, are not your own, they are at the disposal of those you belong to, etc.²

Further on in his book, the same prelate continues:

¹Brawley, op. cit., p. 59.

²Quoted by Edward Blyden, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

When correction is given you, you either deserve it or you do not deserve it. But whether you really deserve it or not it is your duty, and Almighty God requires, that you bear it patiently

Another minister writes the following material for the oral instruction of the slaves:

To disobey his master is to yield to the temptation of the devil.

A fourth catechism quotation compiled for slaves runs:

Is it right for the slave to run away or is it right to harbor a run away?

The answer that follows is "No".¹

These doctrines implied that God willed that one branch of the human race should be enslaved and the other remain free to promote the branches of knowledge and the cultural sciences. Hence, this religion which made life secure for the slave owners, but only endurable for the slave himself, was the will of God.

Notwithstanding all this, the Negro imbibed the new faith readily, chiefly because Christianity had its beginning in the Orient, and the native African had an Oriental mind suitable for reception of the faith;² so it was not difficult to accept this faith that had something in common with the belief which he had heard of from his elders.

¹Quoted by Edward Blyden, op. cit., p. 35.

²Woodson, The African Background Outlined, p. 359.

Bishop Quayle gives another reason for these people's ready acceptance of the faith: The Negro, he says, believes in man and God, in the human and Divine government; by nature he is neither depressive, pessimistic, nor misanthropic. Although he has been mistreated both by man and government, and has suffered greatly, he is not bitter - on every side barred, but not hemmed in; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.¹

The great task, then, before the Negro was to develop his mind in order that he might receive intelligently these truths since only an intellectual mind can appreciate the true religion. This method of instruction - to prepare the mind for the reception of spiritual truths - has been used principally by Catholic priests in both the South and the North.

As has been said, there was always one Negro among the slaves who seemed to be more religious-minded and thus became a natural comforter of his people; in the rural districts he was allowed to conduct meetings for his fellow workmen if one white man was present. Often, however, to ease their burdened hearts and to be able to speak more freely to and of God, secret meetings were held, at which

¹L. W. Kyles, "Contributions to Religions in America," Journal of Negro History, Vol. II, p. 4.

wet rags were hung about to prevent their voices from being heard by their master who would severely punish them if they were detected thereat.¹ These slave preachers were ignorant but they learned their subjects from the white preachers who said, after some time, that the native preacher would be better able to make his people understand. They spoke truly, for these people believed that the sermons of their black ministers came directly from God.² Of course, during these sermons the preacher was carefully watched lest he should teach anything but that which bespoke of resignation and docility.³

The first religious sect that gave the Negro equal religious and educational advantages in America were the Quakers;⁴ then, other churches sent missionaries to convert the slaves, some of whom were not so interested in the salvation of souls or the moral betterment of their new members as they were interested in the extra numbers it added to their respective denominations.⁵

¹John B. Cade, op. cit., pp. 327-334.

²Newell Pluckett, op. cit., p. 30.

³Carter, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

⁴Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, p. 4.

⁵Jackson, "Religious Instructions of Negroes," 1830 to 1860, with special reference to South Carolina, Journal of Negro History, Vol. XV, p. 74.

Most of the Negroes embraced the Methodist and the Baptist faiths first, because they were instructed in the faith of their masters who nearly all professed either one or the other of these creeds.¹ The Negro is also emotional by nature, and the preachings of these denominations appealed to his emotions.² Members of other religious sects were equally interested in christianizing the Negro, but they failed to draw these simple people, perhaps because the religious expressions of these were cold or ritualistic, or, because of the fact that the Methodists and Baptists for about a generation after the American Revolution, allowed the Negroes themselves to preach and organize churches.

In the South white preachers were provided because there was fear of insurrection. Some of these preached that the Negroes were descendants of Noah's accursed son and that they were to be punished by the children of the other brothers. Being Hamites or descendants from Canaan,³ they must therefore bear the curse which for them was slavery.⁴ Thus, they concluded that God was a respecter of persons - He blessed the highly favored.

Yet, the slaves who embraced the faith of Christ became

¹A. A. Taylor, op. cit., p. 425.

²Jackson, "The Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia, 1760-1860," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XVI, p. 168.

³Woodson, The Negro in Our History, p. 96.

⁴Logan W. Rayford, "The Attitude of the Church toward Slavery Prior to 1500." Journal of Negro History, Vol. 17, p. 469.
CONTRADICTS THIS THEORY.

better, and so did their masters who in some way were also influenced. In many cases better houses, food and clothes were provided for the slaves after their conversion; the punishments likewise were less severe than before; religious leaders predicted, also, that there would be less cause for correction.¹

In fact, this religion which taught of heaven and hell gave the highly imaginative native of Africa much room for expression and expansion. This new concept of God and particularly the Person of the Saviour awoke his innate religious aspirations and satisfied his cravings. Even his hunger for musical expression was appeased by the hymns of the Christian Church. As a relief to his depression, he put his hope in heaven; for his helplessness and lonely life, he sought the aid and comfort of the greatest of friends - Jesus Christ.² Yes, Christianity was a great source of consolation for the slave in his deep suffering of soul and body.³

Although, as mentioned before, every form of education was prohibited by law, fortunately for the Negro, the leaders of the various religious sects persisted in giving him

¹Jackson, "Religious Instructions of Negroes," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XV, pp. 92-93.

²Ferris, op. cit., p. 254.

³Blyden, op. cit., p. 14.

instructions. In spite of persecution, the Church maintained and declared that light should come to these dark people who were equally immortal creatures of God's hands.¹ As a result, these true followers of Christ who today are reaping the fruit of this early planted seed of Truth, have acquired dignity, grace and good manners. The Negro knows how to take the buffets of the world with a smile and a grace that only few in other races can boast of. He is neither ugly nor awkward in the hours of trial, and well might one ponder here over the thought that from evil flows some good; for who knows that but for suffering - but for association and ancestral contact with the Southern gentleman somewhere in the years gone by, there would today be in the soul of the Negro a lack of the deep qualities of virtue by which he is characterized.

Even though it is thought the Negro has been a source of worry to America, still he has added luster to the picture and made this adopted land of his more interesting.² Cannot God - the Creator of all things, even of our suffering existence, - make us fit into His Divine work?

From another point of view, however, the early imperfect training of the Negro - for selfish purposes in the main -

¹Woodson, Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, p. 4.

²Embree, Brown America, pp. 23-24.

has done him much harm. Many of these poorly instructed people have only a superficial sense of the dignity of human nature and a low standard of family and social life; and even though God, in His Infinite Wisdom and Goodness, raised up for Himself saints from among them, still we may conclude that most of them were only imperfect products of an imperfect system.¹

After following the slave from Africa to America and tracing briefly his acquired knowledge of God, there arises in the Catholic mind this question: Why do we find so few Negroes possessing or professing the true Faith? The Catholic Church surely has done much for the dark-skinned children of Christ:

Back in 1462, Pope Pius II issued a letter in which he, as the visible head of Christ's Church, speaking for and as the Divine Master, reproved and condemned the slave trade then carried on; in the following century (1537), Leo X openly denounced slavery; during the next two hundred years Urban VIII and Benedict XIV (about 1741) defended the liberty of the slave, although the poor creature was as yet ignorant of the Christian faith.² As early as the seventeenth and the middle of the eighteenth century Jesuit priests were working

¹Blyden, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

²Joseph Butsch, "The Catholic Church and the Negro," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XI, p. 400.

along the Atlantic coast.¹ In 1815 Pius VII demanded the Congress of Vienna to suppress the slave trade.²

Dr. Du Bois tells us that Christianity was represented early in the Nile under Holy Popes and Patriarchs of the great city of Alexandria, in all Egypt, the holy city of Jerusalem, Nubia, Abyssinia and Pentapolis. About the fourth century this See possessed one hundred bishops and one thousand black christians. Unfortunately most of these wonderful beginnings were overthrown by Islamism, and the zealous strivings of the Church were further halted in the eighteenth century when Protestantism took the lead.³

About this time the Church was under prohibition in some parts of the North American continent, yet Catholic schools were functioning as early as 1821.⁴ After the emancipation the bishops received a letter to this effect: Upon every Bishop rested the weighty responsibility of feeding these sheep of the Lord's flock - they, as shepherds of God's fold upon earth, were obliged to study and find a means of bringing about the education and the salvation of the Negro slave.⁵

¹Willis Huggins, "The Catholic Church and the Negro," Opportunity, Vol. X, p. 272.

²Joseph Butsch, op. cit., p. 400.

³W. E. Du Bois, op. cit., p. 109.

⁴Woodson, The Education of the Negro Priest, 1861, p.139.

⁵Butsch, op. cit., p. 405.

Of course, the difficulties which the Church faced in her work of charity should be considered: Externally, prejudices and discriminations challenged her, as well as a shortage of priests for the large field of unconverted Negroes; besides, funds were low, and money - plenty of money - was required to put up missions, to support the priests, to defray traveling expenses and procure supplies for both church and convert. It must be remembered, too, that from these neophytes nothing in the line of money could be expected.¹

Internally, difficulties were equally great. There was the emotional nature of the Negro to consider. Accustomed heretofore to his own religious leaders, Negro priests would, most probably, have to be trained to minister to him, but the Catholic Church was as yet unprepared to initiate and carry on a program beset with problems as vexatious as the education and training of men of the dark race to stand before the altar of God and offer sacrifice. What could be done about the plantation preacher - the African consoler of his people! What about the fact that the slaves were not settled, being here one day and sold the next?

¹John T. Gillard, S.S.J., Colored Catholics in the United States, pp. 45-48.

Still other immediate difficulties demanded consideration, viz: secret societies which had been formed, the many mixed or illegal marriages existing, and the cruel barrier of race consciousness which needed breaking down, if possible. What about the law of Sunday observance?¹ When masters were unsympathetic these obligations could not be fulfilled. In spite of their number and gravity, however, these difficulties did not keep the Catholic Church from working and striving among these down-trodden people. Those who know the history of the Church remember that the very Chair of Peter had been held by ex-slaves of other races - by men such as, Pius in the second century and Callistus in the third century.² God had chosen to lead His Church, then, even men who had suffered the pain and degradation of slavery. Yes, even slaves were loved by God, as proof of which their names are inscribed among the martyrs - they are honored among the saints of God.³

Turning back again the pages of history, the reader finds that the French and Spanish from the beginning were sympathetic toward the native African and taught the slave the true Faith. The "Code Noir"⁴ obliged the owners to

¹Gillard, S.S.J., op. cit., pp. 48-59.

²Butsch, "Catholics and the Negro," Journal of Negro History, Vol. VII, p. 393.

³Idem.

⁴A set of laws made by the French in 1685 to regulate slavery.

have their slaves instructed and baptized; it made provision for Divine worship; Sundays and feasts of the Church were set aside as days of instruction and rest. It went farther, to correct the morals it forbade any corruption of female slaves. It preserved and made holy family life - no member of the Negro family, husband, wife or child could be sold separately; all torture or inhuman treatment was forbidden; all old and decrepit slaves had to be cared for. If they were not cared for, fed and clothed as the law prescribed, then the neglected slave could apply to the Procureur for protection.¹

After a short time some Negroes were chosen and sent to school so that they might aid in teaching others of their people. In the Catholic Church there arose white men and women who formed religious societies to ransom and care for slaves.² The Josephites were the first religious organization to take up exclusive work on behalf of Negroes. Among others who partly work for the improvement of the Negro are the Holy Ghost Fathers, and members of the African Mission of the Society of the Divine Word. Added thereto are many religious communities of women - both white and colored - comprising several hundred members, doing exclusive work at

¹Woodson, The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861, p.23.

²Cardinal Gibbons, Our Christian Heritage, p. 436.

the present time among the Colored. These devote themselves to catechising, teaching and training thousands of Negro children in schools, academies and orphanages. The highest point of service in education by consecrated women has been, and is still being done by Mother Katherine Drexel. She has spent her fortune to educate Negro youth all over the country for the sole purpose of bringing them to true freedom - nearness to God.¹ To appraise this work of these noble religious, Cardinal Gibbons says: "What then is the first need of the colored people? A sound religious education to fit them for a sublime destiny which awaits them after acquisition of a knowledge of their origin and a practical knowledge of God."² Nor will the Negro forget Archbishop Ireland who championed equality and justice when the Protestants, about two generations ago, began to make compromises.³ It was in 1888 that the Catholic Church had the joy of ordaining and appointing her first Negro priest in the United States. Since that time the Church has worked steadily and zealously in her new field of endeavor and slowly increased the number of Negro priests in America.⁴ Grace Sherwood says: "The Catholics

¹Huggins, "The Catholic Church and the Negro," Opportunity, Vol. X, pp. 273-274.

²Quoted by Butsch, op. cit., p. 407.

³Book Review, Journal of Negro History, Vol. XV, p.375.
--Gillard, "Catholic Church and the American Negro."

⁴Brawley, op. cit., p. 206.

have always shown themselves more Christ-like in their dealings with the Negro."¹

In fine, the right thinking Protestant or unbeliever will of necessity admit that the Negro race owes much - historically speaking - to the Catholic Church, for the only Negroes who attained power and who later succeeded in throwing off oppression and holding that independence which had been gained, were Roman Catholic Negroes of Haiti. This Island produced the greatest Negro of the Christian world - Toussaint L'Ouverture - a true son of the Faith.

There is no need to continue thus enumerating the good which this Church has done and is still doing for the Negro in America - rather let us hope that the number of those who embrace the Truth of Christ as members of that Faith established by God for all men, will grow daily, and that heaven will be peopled with many men and women of the dark race who have carried within their temples beautiful souls of spotless white.

We have studied the religious background of the African and his native country as well as his first years in America; it has prepared us for the deep religious beliefs that are

¹Author of "The Oblates - Hundred and One Years."

found in the great gift that the slave has left us - the Negro Spirituals. Because they are so full of God as the black man saw Him, and because they have so poetically expressed the outpourings, as it were, of suppressed souls, they are a great source of information to us in our study of the "Concept of God in the Poetry of the American Negro."

Though several music lovers, both white and black, have gathered a number of these folk-songs and left them to posterity, many of these early rhythmic productions yet remain literally buried, one might say, in unfrequented rural sections of the country. Nevertheless, from the volumes that have been compiled, we shall draw our conclusions regarding the Negro singer and his idea of God.

Hence, in considering the Negro and his idea of God, there is no better or richer source material for soul-perception than in the religious drama of these Afro-American brethren of ours - a literary gift that they have bequeathed to the world, variously entitled "Negro Spirituals," "Negro Folk Songs,"² No matter what the name, these slave songs which are indisputably the Negro's contribution

¹Nathaniel Love, Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro p. 10.

²"Negro Spirituals," Literary Digest, Sept. 25, 1903, p. 34.

CHAPTER TWO

SPIRITUALS

To gain some knowledge of the interior life of any people one must penetrate into their soul - that is, one must become intimately acquainted with their literature, their philosophy and their arts - since only through these media of expression are reflected the ideas, the passions and the dreams of a whole race.¹

Hence, in considering the Negro and his idea of God, there is no better or richer source material for soul-perception than in the religious dreams of these Afro-American brethren of ours - in the literary gift that they have bequeathed to the world, variously entitled "Negro Spirituals," "Melodies" or "Folk Songs."² No matter what the name, these slave songs which are indisputably the Negro's contribution

¹Nathaniel Dett, Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro, p. 10.

²"Negro Spirituals," Literary Digest, Sept. 22, 1938.p.34

to American Art, are nearly all of a religious theme.¹
 Being free from the impurity of the materialism of today
 and containing in their beauty an appeal to all emotions,
 they have become a part of the nation's sacred literature.²

"Folk Songs," says Henry E. Krehbiel, "are echoes of
 the heart-beats of the vast number of folk who flooded the
 South with their songs, and in them are preserved the beliefs,
 the feelings and the habits of a great antiquity."³ To us,
 then, they are of inestimable value since they cast an illum-
 inating light upon the "individual element in the character
 of the race."

The great number of Negro Spirituals existent is some-
 times attributed to a prevailing thought that Negroes are
 natural talkers. One writer says that no race has ever
 peopled the earth who could talk more than the Negro. Not
 even the Greeks, who by no means are a silent people, can
 equal the Negro race. As proof of this, he asks us to re-
 call the long discourse of the untrained Negro preacher,
 to listen intently to all that he lets flow from his lips
 for hours at a time - rude oratory, it is true, but none the

¹John W. Work, American Negro Song, p. 12.

²"Negro Spirituals", Literary Digest, Sept. 22, 1938, p. 34

³Henry Edward Krehbiel, Afro-American Folk Songs, p. 3.

less eloquent and noble.¹

It has been said, too, that the greatest literature is produced when life is most stormy; as evidence, writers tell us that the greatest works of Milton, Dante and Carlyle were wrung out of their souls during the time that they were steeped in agony. One should, therefore, not be surprised at the rich heritage bequeathed by our progenitors after two hundred fifty years of bondage, wretchedness and torture.² Were not the hearts of these natural poets touched by the Divine Spirit? Is not the race richer in emotional endowment than any other race in the world?³ The Negro has an innate ear for harmony and a great instinctive love for music; and this field has been equally enriched. Note, for instance, the soul-stirring melodies that accompany many of the poetical expressions of the authors of our slave poetry. They appeal to every human heart, and in a special way to the heart that knows sorrow and pain and looks to God for help.⁴ Some one has said that "the religious growth of millions of men, even though they be slaves, cannot be without potent influence upon their contemporaries." Recalling

¹William Ferris, African Abroad, p. 245.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Robert Kerlin, Negro Poets and Their Poems, p. 9.

Browning's "Pippa Passes" in which a little factory girl goes down the street singing her song, and, all unknowingly, touches in a very helpful way several people who heard the song, it is not unwise to say that the slaves of yesterday as well as the poets of today do influence and have influenced many by their song.¹ Kerlin says: "These Spirituals are the golden vials spoken of in Holy Writ - full of odors which are the prayers of saints." Before the throne of God may they have an everlasting memorial.²

Although the beauty and the worth of the Negro Spirituals is not disputed, their originality, however, has been questioned. Some white writers claim that the Negro took his song from the camp meeting hymnals used at the time. Sterling Brown, quoting Asbury, offers a contradiction thereto: that words of the best white spirituals cannot compare, as poetry, with the words of the best Negro Spirituals.³ Granting that in some in-

¹L. W. Kyles, "Contribution to Religious Life of America," Journal of Negro History, Vol. II, pp. 8-16.

²Kerlin, op. cit., p. 12.

³Sterling Brown, "From the Southwest," Opportunity, Vol. II, p. 313.

stances the words of the Spirituals are similar to those found in white hymnals, the Negro's expressions in the poetical form are, nevertheless, just his own.¹ Whatever he borrowed from the white man, he put it into his own spiritual cover, adding the barbaric color, beauty and melancholy which belong distinctly to the Negro.² Louis Untermeyer explains further, that the slave exposed to Christianity gave it back in a manner that was original and elevated - in his songs there is a pathos, a tenderness, an edge of sympathy, a beauty, a loyalty, and a genuineness of simplicity. In them, too, he proves that he is by his very nature best suited to Christianity since he has none of the hard and offensive pride that stains the character of the Caucasian. The author logically concludes that "there are certain qualities of spirit, certain shades of passion and of conscience wherein the Negro excels, and which he can portray better than any other race."

As an act of praise and as a means of encouragement, President Henry Churchill King of Oberlin College has this to say:

¹Negro Caravan, pp. 417-419.

²Sister M. Hilarion, "The Negro Spiritual," The Catholic World, Vol. 143, April 1936, p. 80.

Not all the qualities of the Anglo-Saxon are to be envied by the Negro, for as a contrast to the John Bull attitude, the Negro seems often to have a temperamental kindliness of disposition, a good nature, a readiness to make the most of a situation, and to find none insufferable. And while this may be an obstacle to advancement, it is a great gift for contentment and happiness of life

The natural endowment of the Negro, to make the most of a situation, is probably unsurpassed by any race except the Jew, and the modern Jew may hardly be regarded as a rival.¹

As a final proof of the originality of the Spirituals, the qualities of members of the race as seen in their religious expressions could hardly yield place to the following quotation from a slave who, when asked, "How do they get their song?", quickly responded: "Dey make em, sah!", and by way of explanation continued:

When Massa ordered for me a short peck of corn and a hundred lashes, my friends, hearing of it, felt sorry for me. So when evening came and we assembled for praise meeting, they expressed their sympathy for me in song.

This composing of song was no easy task, and it was done only by the good singers who worked at it until they got it.² Generally, a leader in their meetings sang the

¹Kyles, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

²William Allen, Charles Ware, Lucy Garrison, Slave Songs of the United States, Preface, p. XVIII.

principal words, and the congregation took up the refrain which was often repeated several times. One can easily ascribe a similar procedure in the composition of the Spirituals given here:

Nobody knows the troubles I've had
Nobody knows but Jesus.¹

POOR ME²

I'm sometimes up, I'm sometimes down,
Trouble will bury down,
But still my soul feels heav'nly bound,
Trouble will bury me down;
O brethern, Poor me, Poor me,
Trouble will bury me down,
Poor me, Poor me,
Trouble will bury me down.

O'ER THE CROSSING³

Bendin' knees a achin',
Body racked with pain,
I wish I was a child of God
I'd git home.

I'M IN TROUBLE⁴

I'm in trouble, Lord
Trouble about my grave.
Sometime I weep, sometime I mourn,
I'm in trouble about my grave,
Sometime I can't do neither one,
I'm in trouble about my grave.

¹Johnson, The Book of Negro Spirituals, p. 34.

²John Work, op. cit., p. 67.

³Allen, Ware, Garrison, op. cit., p. 72.

⁴Ibid. p. 94.

A perusal of the Spirituals brings to light the fact that various changes in the language occur. This can be accounted for by the fact that each plantation had its own form or peculiarities.¹ However, if the poems are considered as a whole, their meanings are all clear.

There is no doubt that the Lord of Heaven existed for the slave. In his singing, in the language he used with God, there is evidence of his faith in prayer and of his knowledge of the indwelling Spirit - without Whom, says the great Apostle, we cannot even say the name of Jesus.

Listen:

Every time I feel the Spirit moving
In my heart I will pray.²

The verses that follow clearly manifest the slaves' knowledge of the Old Testament as it tells of God's power:

Upon the mountain my Lord spoke
Out of His mouth came fire and smoke.

Again:

Hail! Hail! Hail!³
If you git dere before I do,
Look out for me, I'm comin' too;
I'm on my journey home.

¹Allen, Ware, Garrison, op. cit., Preface.

²Johnson, Johnson, The Books of Negro Spirituals, p.142.

³Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 185.

The last two lines are indicative of the Negro's trust in God - of his hope that some day he would go to Him for rest. "A Homeward Journey" conveys the idea that death to the slave was not a fearful departure but a joyful transition. There is a simple faith and confidence in the famous old Spiritual:

Gimme dat ole-time religion¹
It's good enough for me
It will take us all to heaven.

Even while he trusted in the good God, the Negro believed that only those who lived a life of prayer and good works in the service of God might expect the bliss of sharing heaven with the Creator.

I'm a Rolling²
O' brother, won't you help me,
Won't you help me in the service
of the Lord?

He believed, too, that there was need of petitioning for wants and for helps toward personal satisfaction:

'Tis Me³
Standing in the need of prayer
Not my brother
Not my sister
But me, O Lord!
Standing in the need of prayer.

¹Johnson, op. cit., p. 76.

²Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 186.

³Ibid., p. IX.

Using the new law as a source of belief, the black makers of verse say:

I want to be ready¹
 To walk in Jerusalem just like John
 When Peter was preaching at Pentecost,
 O' he was filled with the Holy Ghost.

Thus far, the Spirituals make no mention of the Son of God - the Redeemer; but the old time Negro knew Him, too, and what He had done for mankind. Evidence thereof may be found in

Were you there²
 When they crucified my Lord?

However, the Negro or Negroes who composed the verses that follow, entitled: "If You Love God Serve Him," either had only a vague idea of the Catholic doctrine on the subject of redemption, or for the sake of rhythm, attributed the special work of the Son to the Father as well. Hear what the group sings, especially in line three:

De Father, He looked on de Son and smiled³
 De Son, He looked on me:
 De Father, redeemed my soul from hell;
 An de Son, He set me free.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 33.

²Ibid., (App. VI), p. 106.

³Ibid., p. 9.

Christians not only believe in heaven but they also believe in the existence of the Evil One --

You must be pure and holy¹
 The Devil's mad and I am glad,
 My Lord
 He lost this soul, he thought he had,
 My Lord

From the folk songs just quoted, it is evident that the slaves believed in the God-Head, and that the doctrine of Christianity brought hope, salvation and an assurance of filial companionship with a Father who dwelled in heaven.² They doubted not the Paternal solicitude of this Father who could be so generous in His love as to give His only Son for man's salvation. God is Love. Simply the slave says:

Walk in de Light³
 Oh, children, do you think it's true
 Dat Jesus Christ did die for you?
 Yes, He died for me and He died for you,
 For de Holy Bible does say so.

In his perfect trust, he again sings of Love:

Seek and Ye Shall Find⁴
 Knock, and de door shall be opened,
 Ask, and it shall be giv'n,
 And de Love come a trick-aling down.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 141.

²S. R. Wilson, "Religion of the American Negro Slave," J. N. W., Vol. VIII, p. 53.

³Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 24.

⁴Ibid., p. 20.

Often, too, these people of hope meet the God of Mercy as they travel life's highway, singing along. Although whole lines in the poetical creation that follows are taken from the Bible, the meaning is not always the same as that expressed by the Biblical writers. At times the slave has two meanings - one spiritual, the other material, i. e., for his own necessity:¹

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?²
 An' why not ebery man?
 He delivered Daniel from de lion's den,
 Jonah from de belly of de whale,
 An' de Hebrew chillun from de
 fiery furnace,
 An' why not ebery man?

Here he sees a similarity between his bondage and that of the Jews whom God set free. He was pleading for his freedom, but he knew he could never cry boldly.³ He looked ever toward heaven, God and tomorrow.⁴ Not only a tomorrow in heaven, but also a tomorrow wherein delivery, by the God whose Love and Power freed Israel from bondage, would come to him.

¹Johnson, Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 18.

²Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 103.

³Negro Caravan, p. 418.

⁴Hughes, "Songs Called Blues," Pylon, Vol. II, p.143.

Sometimes the Negro was humorous in his hope. Yet, there is a dignity in him even as he longs for the comforts of earthly things in Heaven when he sings:

I Got Shoes,¹
 You got shoes
 All God's chillun got shoes
 When I get to heab'n I'm goin' to
 put on my shoes,
 I'm goin' to walk all over God's heab'n.

Heab'n, heab'n,
 Everybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't
 gwine dar.
 Heab'n, heab'n,
 I'm goin' to walk all over God's heab'n,

The third line before the last proves what has been said before, that the Negro discovered a contradiction to Christianity in the life of his master, and in many of his songs he tells of the Justice of God - of Him who would some day mete out the reward or punishment each had merited.

You Goin' to Reap Jus' What You Sow²
 Upon the Mountain,
 Down in the Valley
 You goin' to reap jus' what you sow.

Sometimes his songs of Justice were used as a means to bring back those of his brethren who had ceased to work for Heaven - their one hope of joy - and who lived estranged from God. Such are the following:

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 28.

²Ibid., p. 28.

Oh! Sinner You'd Better Get Ready¹
 I think I heard-a my mother say --
 Time is comin' dat sinner must die.
 'Twas a pretty thing-a to serve de Lord!

But He Ain't Comin' Here t' Die No Mo'²
 He died for de rich, He died for de po'
 He ain't comin' here t' die no mo'.
 He died for de blind, He died for de lame,
 He bore de pain an' all de blame.

The slaves also believed that before God - the God of Justice - all men would be treated alike. Sin would be punished or virtue rewarded, irrespective of persons:

Children, We All Shall Be Free³
 When the Lord shall appear.

Another example is:

I Can't Stay Behind⁴
 Dere's room in dar, in de heaven,
 My Lord!

Indeed, theirs was a childlike faith in a personal Father, and their hearts glowed with the hope that they, the children of bondage, would ultimately pass out of the wilderness of slavery into the land of freedom - says Booker T. Washington.⁵ Oftimes, freedom to them meant the

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 16.

²Ibid., p. 103.

³Ibid., p. 107.

⁴Allen, Ware, Garrison, op. cit., p. 6.

⁵Henry Edward Krehbiel, op. cit., p. 30.

right to give vent to their pent up emotions, to rest from their great labors and to enjoy the niceties of life. Several of the Spirituals express these ideas ---

BY AND BY¹

O when I get to heav'n I'm goin' to
sing and shout,
I'm goin' to lay down this heavy load,
For there's no one there to turn me out,
I'm goin' to lay down this heavy load.

Note their longing in:

I've got shoes, You've got shoes,
... ..
I've got a harp, You've got a harp,
I've got a song, You've got a song,
All God's children got a song.

However, they seem to have imbibed the idea that Faith is a free gift of God - that each man must render Him praise and reverence and work out his salvation in the state of life in which he is placed. Full of the optimism that is born of faith in God, they tell of that attribute of God by which all men are equal:

WE ARE WALKING IN DE LIGHT²

If religion was a thing money could buy,
De rich would live and de poor would die.
We are walkin' in de light
But I thank God it is not so,
De rich and de poor together must go.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 124.

²Ibid., p. 16.

Torn - soul and body - only the strong hope of God's justice could, and did strengthen the black man.¹

Lecturers often speak of the army of God. The reference is analogical but it is appropriate to the efforts that oppressed men make in order to bear their burdens for God who will give sure victory to those who persevere unto the end. Simply the Negro sings:

I AM GOIN' TO JOIN IN THIS ARMY²

All christians can join in this army
In this army of the Lord.

To these burdened people with uncultivated minds, all things were possible with God - in Him they hoped with never a doubt about His Infinite Power. Recalling the great miracle of power and friendship spoken of in the Gospels, the people sang:

OH, HE RAISE-a POOR LAZARUS³

He give heal unto de sick - yes, He did,
He give sight unto de blin', I know He did
He done 'able de cripple to walk,
Oh, He raise de dead from under de groun'
An' give dem permission to talk.

¹W. E. Burghardt, Du Bois, The Soul of Black Folk, p. 6.

²Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 120.

³Ibid., p. 66.

God will never change - He is immutable. Simply but cunningly the Negro congregation sing:

God is a God¹
 God don't never change
 God is God
 And He always will be God.

When the Spirituals as a source of the Negro's idea of God are considered, it is found that he also saw the relation the Good God had built up with himself - the black man whom He had made.

Often, in treating of the attributes of God as the Negro expressed them in his folk songs, the Fatherhood of God was mentioned. In the Spiritual, "Every Hour in the Day,"² he addresses the Creator by that consoling and sweet name of Father, a name which means so very much to us the product of His Hands, a name which tells so much to us His exiled children, a name which the Saviour while on earth taught men to use in their conversations with God when He gave them the Prayer of prayers - the "Pater Noster." The hymn opens:

One cold freezing morning
 I lay dis body down,
 I will pick up my cross
 An' follow my Lord
 All roun' my Fader's throne.

¹Work, op. cit., p. 10.

²Allen, Ware, Garrison, op. cit., p. 58.

Truly, as Kerlin says: "Trouble is the mother of song."¹
 Hear him now pleading with his Father for relief & God
 surely could not turn a deaf ear to his cry.

MY FATHER, HOW LONG²

My Father, how long,
 My Father, how long,
 My Father, how long,
 Poor sinner suffer here?

More often this man of bondage refers to God as
 Master and King. This is not surprising - to him anyone
 having authority was master. However, this Divine Master,
 he felt, was equally as good, just, all-loving and all-
 beautiful as He was King. It is interesting to note the
 simple dignity with which he clothes Christ, the King:

HE'S THE LILY OF THE VALLEY

Oh, my Lord,
 He's the Lily of the Valley
 Oh, my Lord,
 King Jesus in His Chariot rides,
 Oh, my Lord,
 With four white horses side by side,
 Oh, my Lord!

A sense of conviction is evident in the following
 musical outburst, and our hearts swell with pride to know

¹Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 7.

²Allen, Ware, Garrison, op. cit., p. 73.

³Nathaniel Dett, Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro,
 p. 145.

that we are followers of this "Lord of Lords."¹

Why He's the King of Kings,
And the Lord of Lords.
Why, Jesus Christ is the First
and the Last,
No one can work like Him.

These people seemed to delight in calling God, King; note the many regal references made in the verses that follow:

HEAR THE ANGELS SINGIN'²

I love to praise my Hebbenly King
Hear the angels singin',

Many a simple catechism lesson was taught in these outbursts of slavish hearts:

KING EMANUEL³

Oh, who do you call de King Emanuel?
I call my Jesus, King Emanuel.
Oh, de King Emanuel is a mighty 'manuel,
I call my Jesus, King Emanuel.

From the many songs of a "Riding King," the reader gathers that the slave thought of riding as a great privilege. Jesus, in his mind is often pictured on horse-back - and he thought also that it was one of the means of getting to

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 146.

²Ibid., p. 106.

³Ibid., p. 147.

heaven; thus, he says:

RIDE ON, JESUS¹

O' ride on, Jesus; ride on, Jesus;
Ride on, conquerin' King.
I want t' go t' hebb'n in de mo'nin.

Child-like, the slave heard the voice of God in thunder and the other elemental disturbances which science explains, but which he could not understand. Is not God master even of these, His creatures? Making use of allegory, he sings of union with his "Master Jesus,"

I'll Be There in the Morning²
When the gen'ral roll is called,
Yes, I'll be there
Gwine to see my massa Jesus,
Yes, I'll be there
Gwine to wear a starry crown,
Yes, I'll be there
Gwine to live forever more,
Yes, I'll be there.

Occasionally in their heart-songs the slaves speak of crossing water - perhaps the idea that a body of water separates this world from the next is due to the common belief that ghosts cannot cross running water; the river generally named is the Jordan, and many are the Negroes who believe that after death they will cross the river.³

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 148

²Ibid., p. 121

³Newell N. Pluckett, "Religious Folk Belief," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XV, p. 13.

Here is an example in poetry:

MOST DONE TRABELLING¹

I'm bound to carry my soul to my Jesus
Roll, Jordan, roll
Little chil'en, learn to fear de Lord,
And let your days be long.

Johnson said that because the songs were spread by mouth some little change in the different versions occurred. A good example of this appears in the hymn "Ride On" now quoted:

Ride on, ride on, King Emanuel²
Don't you want t' go t' hebben
in de morning?

As has been mentioned, the soul cries out to God in time of distress, and though the Negro Spirituals lack the element of prayer found in the Psalms of the Israelites, they possess, nevertheless, this underlying meaning and a faith like to that of the chosen of God in bondage.³ In "Oh, Stand the Storm,"⁴ the Negro evinces his belief that the King of heaven will lead him into safety.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 86.

²Ibid., p. 194.

³Robert Kerlin, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

⁴Dett, op. cit., p. 189.

Oh, stand the storm, it won't be long,
 We'll anchor by and by,
 King Jesus is our Captain
 We'll anchor by and by.

Like the great St. Ignatius, Christ is often likened to a great General who asks naught of His followers but what He Himself has suffered.

They look like Men of War¹
 They follow their great General,
 The great eternal Lamb.
 His garment stained in His own Blood,
 King Jesus is His name.

The hopeful slave also used other appealing names when he thought and spoke of God - the sweet name of Shepherd appears in many of the Spirituals. Yes, they were His black sheep whom He loved and tended so faithfully. Of course, the Shepherd had His own reasons for not manifesting tenderness toward His dark-fleeced flock in their hour of trial, so the bondsmen's songs could but depict the ever underlying resignation and the spiritual joy that is born of hope for a brighter tomorrow. Was it because these sheep of darker hue regarded themselves as favored lambs that they sang:

RISE AND SHINE²

Jesus carry de young lambs in His bosom
 For de year ob Juberlee,

¹Dett, op. cit., p. 180.

²Ibid., p. 180.

or did he, the inferior, think that his superior or master was charged with the slave's care and simply neglected that duty, when he sang?

LISTEN TO THE LAMBS¹

Hear de lambs a-crying
 Oh, shepherd, feed-a my sheep,
 Our Savior spoke dese words so sweet,
 Oh, shepherd, feed-a my sheep.

Saviour and Shepherd are apparently very closely associated in his mind. Hear now the manner in which the slave-poet calls or regards the God-man as Saviour - was it as a Redeemer from sin, or from bondage? "I've Been a-Listenin' All de Night Long."²

Is the patient Saviour waiting for the return of the sinner? God died for all, was the doctrine which they heard preached. To the slave of earth this meant more than mere words - he hoped that when they would meet each other in Heaven, he could tell the Saviour, God, how grateful he was:

In That Beautiful World on High³
 I know my Saviour will be there,
 In that beautiful world on high,
 That used to listen to my prayer
 In that beautiful world on high.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 148.

²Ibid., p. 136.

³Ibid., p. 170.

In "Fighting On" the meaning is simpler and clearer:

He died for you¹
 He died for me,
 He died to set de whole world free.
 When I get on dat other shore,
 I'll bless my Lord for ever more.

The slaves in some sections or on plantations were not easily converted nor convinced of the need for repentance - others fell by the wayside. The Spiritual called "De Church of God"² says:

Oh, Jesus tole you once before
 To go in peace an' sin no more;
 Oh, did you hear my Jesus say,
 Come unto me, I am de way?

I've been a-list'ning all de night long
 I've been a-list'ning all de day long,
 I've been a-list'ning all de day long
 To hear some sinner pray.

Dere was a search in heaven,
 An' a all de earth around,
 John stood in sorrow hoping
 Dat a Saviour might be found.

There was sunshine as well as gloom in the lives of the enslaved, but the finest of their poetical productions are those telling of the Negro's pain, and of his hope of deliverance from bondage here and admittance to the joys of Heaven. There is a double meaning in:

¹Dett, op. cit., p. 130.

²Ibid., p. 84.

KEEP ME FROM SINKIN' DOWN¹

Oh Lord, Oh, my Lord!
 Oh my good Lord,
 Keep me from sinkin' down.
 I bless de Lord, I'm gwine to die,
 Keep me from sinkin' down.

One author has said that no people but the Negro could sing of trouble and in the same strain cry out the joyful "Hallelujah;" but one can hear it resound clearly when a group sings:

Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen,²
 Nobody knows but Jesus
 Nobody knows de trouble I've seen
 Glory! Hallelujah!

The leader of the group continues to tell of the bliss of being washed "from sin" by the Lord, thus:

One day when I was walkin' along,
 Oh, yes, Lord,
 De elements opened and' de Love come down,
 Oh, yes, Lord,
 I shall never forget de day
 When Jesus washed my sin away.

Does this joy come for self alone? There seems to be a deep spirituality in "Happy Morning"³ - a happiness in the Victory of Christ, the Savior, unsullied by selfishness:

Glorious Morning,
 My Savior rise from de dead,
 Happy morning.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., (App. XII) p. 278.

²Johnson, Johnson, op. cit., p. 34.

³Allen, Ware, Garrison, op. cit., p. 10.

"Slav'ry Chain"¹ seemed to be the fruit of a joy
born after freedom - after hope had been fulfilled:

Slav'ry chain done broke at las'
Goin' to praise God 'til I die.
Now no more weary trav'lin'.
Come, my Jesus, set me free
An' dere's no more auction block for me
Since He give me liberty.

Some souls will not be persuaded by love - hence, a
few camp-meeting hymns tell of the Supreme Judge who will
punish in eternity even more severely than earthly mas-
ters have done. "Oh, Jerusalem"² is simple but effect-
ive:

I'm walking on the road, Oh, my Lord!
Mind, my sister, how you walk on de cross
Yo' foot might slip an' yo' soul get los"!

In other hymns the untrained black singer gives us a
more vivid picture of the physical destruction meted out
by God to the unfaithful soul:

OH, YES, YONDER COMES MY LORD³

He is comin' this-a way
With His sword in His han'
He's gwine t' hew dem sinners down
Right level to de groun'.

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit. p. 112.

²Ibid., p. 190.

³Ibid., p. 219.

The day the soul is judged, is judgment day to these same singers - this theme was often used as a topic for sermons, and it filled the sinners or persons who had not "joined church" with fear.

MY LORD, WHAT A MORNING!¹

My Lord, what a morning,
When the stars begin to fall!
You'll hear de trumpet sound
To wake the nations underground,
Look in my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall.

Also,

MY LORD'S A-RIDING ALL THE TIME²

O sinner you had better pray,
My Lord's a-riding all the time,
It looks like judgment day.

Fear fills the souls who hear "Stars in the Elements"³ -
yet this fear is mixed with gratitude . . .

Oh, the stars in the elements
are falling
And the moon drips away in blood,
And the ransomed of the Lord
are returning home to God.
Oh, blessed be the name of the Lord!

¹John W. Work, op. cit., p. 92.

²R. Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 150.

³Ibid., p. 161.

There is more pleading in "Oh, the Rocks and the Mountains"¹ - a pleading for the sinner to go to the Savior before it is too late:

Oh, the rocks and the mountains shall
 all flee away,
 And you shall have a new hiding place
 that day.
 Seeker, seeker, give your heart to God,
 And you shall have a new hiding place
 that day.

Like unto his Lord, the slave would bear the suffering of this crucifixion of his body and soul in silence and resignation:

THEY CRUCIFIED MY LORD²

An' He never said a mumblin' word
 They nailed Him to the tree;
 They pierced Him in the side,
 The blood came trickling down,
 He bowed His head and died;
 An' He never said a mumblin' word,
 Not a word, not a word, not a word.

When one reviews the life of the slaves, can one doubt that the Bible became their most cherished sacred book,³ and that they looked upon Jesus Christ - the Hero of the New Testament - as their model?

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 161.

²Johnson, Johnson, op. cit., p. 174.

³G. R. Wilson, "Religion of the American Negro Slave," Journal of Negro History, Vol. VIII, p. 52.

The most sacred relationship between God and man - the most precious to the oppressed and lonely - is that expressed by the simple word, Friend. Jesus Christ was more than Master, King, Judge, Saviour or Brother to these down-trodden people - He was, He is, a Friend. A friend is trustworthy, dependable and always welcome - we know it is he before we see him. "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door" expresses these qualities of the Divine Friend:

Knock like Jesus
Can't you trust Him?

Even Our Lord sought courage from His friends the night He felt so deserted in the garden. The Negro slaves knew this and say in song:

Don't ever be discouraged
For Jesus is your Friend,
And if you lack for knowledge,
He'll ne'er refuse to lend.

There is relief from grief when one goes to a real friend - he will always console and find a way to give aid. Surely those long years of pain were endurable only because of the Divine Friendship:

M Nathaniel Brett, op. cit., p. 236.

ibid., p. 189.

G. A. Wilson, op. cit., p. 54.

I'M TROUBLED IN MIND¹

When ladened with trouble and burdened
with grief,
To Jesus in secret I'll go for relief.

.....

In dark days of bondage to Jesus I prayed
To help me to bear it and He gave me aid.

Despair must often have come nigh the slavish hearts
that were frequently deprived of the comfort of family
life and bereft of friends - "Poor Pilgrim"² - no wonder
he ran to Jesus with:

My friends and relatives forsake me
And troubles roll round me so high,
I thought of the kind voice of Jesus
Saying, "Poor Pilgrim, I'm always nigh."

Yes, the depressed "Lean on the Lord" and often cry:
"I'm so glad trouble don't last always." Like Fred.
Douglas after hearing of the wondrous kindness of Christ,
many of the slaves realized that in God they had a friend.³

A study of the Spirituals reveals the simple faith of
these lonely people; it discloses the fact that many of
them not only made early contact with the Bible, but also
lived by it. They loved the charming stories of the crea-

¹Nathaniel Dett, op. cit., p. 236.

²Ibid., p. 169.

³G. R. Wilson, op. cit., p. 34.

tion, of the Egyptian bondage, and of the journey across the Red Sea. The kind intervention of God filled failing hearts with hope. In the New Testament story, they felt the power, death and resurrection of Christ with its "apocalyptic imagery." As a result the Negro, unlike other oppressed peoples, has been recorded as being "active, jubilant and spontaneous in the expression of his thoughts."¹

The Negro and the Spirituals are likened to the out-cast christians as they bewailed their lot at the hands of the Roman Emperors. These latter - martyrs, most of them - set up their cry secretly in the catacombs, their hymns of sorrow were their songs of triumph.²

After the study of the Spiritual there is no doubt that the Negro, the composer of the religious folk song, believed in the True God, saw His Goodness, Justice, Mercy and Love, and that he acknowledged the relationship which existed between himself and the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is Father to man; the Son is Redeemer, Master, King, Friend and Brother; the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier. These truths the Negro sang.

¹G. R. Wilson, op. cit., p. 52.

²Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 10.

Leaving the slave composers of those dark days of bondage let us consider those individual writers of verse who have most distinguished themselves in the early ages of American Literature - Hammon, Wheatley and Dunbar. Here, too, we shall examine their poetical works for a knowledge of the poets' idea of God.

Jupiter Hammon was the first American Negro to see his name in print as a maker of verse. Nothing much about him is known, however; even the date of his birth and death are uncertain. He was born about 1720, motivated by one idea - obedience to his earthly and his Divine Master¹ - he paid both due homage.

Hammon's first published work was, "An Brevis Thought - Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Advice." It appeared about 1760. The lengthy title tells the subject matter of the equally long poem of eighty-eight rhyming lines printed on a "double column broadside."

Like all writers of the eighteenth century, his poetry is all religious.² It reflects, however, a

¹ Saunders Redding, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

² Robert Berlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

CHAPTER THREE

EARLY NEGRO POETS

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¹Saunders Redding, op. cit., pp. 4-7.

²Robert Kerlin, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

probable influence of the "Methodist Dissenter Hymnody of the Great Awakening,"¹ and the hymns of Charles Wesley, William Cowper and J. Newton.²

There is a knowledge of three Divine Persons in one God and the honor which man as a creature owes God, the Redeemer. He is regarded as the Benefactor of all peoples, irrespective of persons or races - dispensing to each the gifts which are so necessary for salvation. The opening lines to this first poem are convincing:

Dear Jesus give Thy Spirit now,
Thy Grace to every Nation
That Hasn't the Lord to whom we bow,
The Author of Salvation.³

Only God is the Saviour of man:

Salvation comes from God we know,
The true and only One.⁴

It is the Father, however, who in all His generosity has given us the object of His love:

¹(Ed.) Negro Caravan, p. 274.

²Benjamin Brawley, Negro Genius, p. 17.

³Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 21.

⁴Brawley, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

He gave His only Son.¹

This Son who has become a true friend to poor fallen man, struggling upon earth:

Dear Jesus, unto Thee we cry,
Give us the Preparation;
Turn not away Thy tender eye;
We seek Thy true Salvation.²

In another selection, "A Poem for Children with Thoughts on Death," there is seen the great Wisdom of God - the consolation of all peoples:

'Tis God alone can make you wise,
His Wisdom's from above.

Again, the Wisdom of God is praised in "The Address to Phillis Wheatley:"³

O come you pious youth adore
The Wisdom of Thy God,
In bringing thee from distant shore
To learn His holy Word.

Thus, from the Divine Knowledge of the Infinite God there flows His infinite mercy and goodness to man:

¹Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 17.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Samnders Redding, op. cit., p. 5.

He fills the soul with sweet supplies
By His redeeming love.¹

The poem which he wrote to his contemporary Phillis Wheatley was published eighteen years later, but the author most probably had done some other writing during that time. In the poem sent to his friend, the black poet expresses the mercy and goodness of God in giving us His faith:

God's tender mercy brought thee here,
Tossed o'er the raging main,
In Christian faith thou hast a share,
Worth all the gold of Spain.²

These poems, perhaps, are very faulty and full of errors, but in them there is an earnestness and suggestion of originality that keep the writer in touch with the people of his race.³ It must be remembered, also, that the author of these lines was an unlettered slave.

Unlike Hammon, Phillis Wheatley - the first Negro poetess of note in America - was very talented. Like him, however, she was deeply religious; hence, she put into her poetry the qualities of the Puritanical doc-

¹Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 19.

²Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 6.

³Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 19.

trine found in Boston,¹ which idea of Christianity prevailed throughout her life. Her writings reflect not her race but the times in which she lived. This is in a large measure the result of environment - the influence of the Wesley-Whitefield revival as well as of the people with whom she lived.²

In contrast with the slave singers - the composers of the spirituals - Phillis Wheatley looked upon heaven in a spiritual light and not as the ultimate satiation of material desires and delights. She never spoke of heaven as a place for feasting or satisfying the appetites, and the like; nor did she tell of the things foremost in the mind of the Negro slave. On the contrary, she is a bit cold, probably because of the influence of Pope, her literary master.³ The heroic couplet is found in almost all her poems, and a personal earnestness throughout her poetic endeavors bespeak her serious and pious purposes.⁴

Not very many of Phillis Wheatley's works are to be

¹(Ed.) Negro Caravan, pp. 274, 275.

²Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 12.

³Ibid., p. 9.

⁴Benjamin Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro, p. 226.

found. Yet, of those collected nearly half are elegies which are not very remarkable¹ for poetic merit, six treat of important public events, two are mere paraphrases of portions of the Bible, and others are translations from the classics. Like her neo-classic models, very few of her poems are concerned with her own life - a life filled with joy, pain, triumph and failure, subjects in turn for great poetical expression, but which she thought were unworthy of being depicted in verse.²

Although but a slave child when she sailed from Africa to America, Phillis Wheatley had sufficient grace and culture to please the peoples of both New England and London. Whenever she spoke they listened to her well-chosen diction and were conscious of her modest refinement. In time she became a noble woman; her great soul hungered for knowledge; and, in her ambition to attain it she had to work hard to be triumphant over various adverse circumstances. To house her magnanimous Christian heart, God gave her a delicate figure; and fittingly, the first Negro woman in American Literature was of "unerring piety and unbending virtue."³

¹(Ed.) Negro Caravan, p. 283.

²Ibid., pp. 274-275.

³Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 237.

Before considering her idea of God as she expressed it in her poetry, it might be well to recall here that when she was but sixteen she became a member of the Old Southern Meeting House, thereby gaining for herself the distinction of being the first slave to be admitted into this religious body. The fact is mentioned because it had some influence on the religious expression in her works.

God takes care of all His creatures - from the hour of creation even until the hour of death. Phillis Wheatley tells us that in Africa her mother worshipped the rising sun.¹ In America she learned that Christ was the Divine Light who never failed to guide and provide for man. This is expressed in her poem, "Thoughts on Works of Providence:"²

Infinite Love, where'er we turn our eyes,
Appears: This ev'ry creature's wants supplies.

Her poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," contains but eight childish lines, but they are sincere. It tells of the great justice of God in His dealings with

¹G. R. Wilson, "The Religion of the American Negro Slave," Journal of Negro History, Vol. VIII, p. 44.

²Saunders Redding, To Make a Poet Black, p. 12.

men;-

¹Their color is a diabolic dye
Remember, Christians, Negroes
black as Cain,
May be refined and join th'angelic
train.

Nothing is impossible with God; His power is infinite. Phillis Wheatley - not yet twenty years old - expresses it with poetic feeling in her masterpiece, "On Imagination:"²

Imagination! Who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
Th' empyreal palace of the thundering God.
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
And leave the rolling universe behind.

In the same poem the power and mercy of God is sung by this dark friend of the muse:

There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze the unbounded soul.

The few poems that are accessible reveal the great faith of this Negro girl.³ Had she the opportunity to see life outside of the conventionalisms of the time and place in which she lived, and free from the circum-

¹Johnson, Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 29.

²Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 28.

³Ibid., p. 28.

stances under which she labored, Phillis Wheatley, no doubt, would have given greater poetry to the world. When, in the last years of her life, these hindrances no longer existed, poverty and sickness entered; they weighed so heavily upon her that she could but poorly make use of the otherwise favorable opportunity to express in deeper poetic strain the thoughts and images of her mind. Nevertheless, this misfortune but distilled the essence of her soul and gave birth to a truly beautiful philosophy of life.

No, Phillis Wheatley is not a great American poet, but she is an important one.¹ She is the first in time of all American women to issue a volume, - if Ann Bradstreet who preceded our poetess by one hundred years be excepted. Thomas Jefferson thought her poems were "beneath the dignity of criticism," saying that religion had produced a Phillis Wheatley, but it could not produce a poet;² and, strange as it may seem, even Voltaire who did not think much of the Negro, said that people of the race should be proud of the beautiful verses of this Negro woman.

¹Johnson, James Weldon, op. cit., p. 23.

²Ibid., p. 25.

Another tribute has been paid Miss Wheatley by Dr. Joseph Ladd. In one of his longest poems, "The Prospects of America," he looks over his country's literary glory, lists its famous persons and lets Phillis Wheatley's name appear among them.¹

When she was but twenty-three, General Washington - in his response of appreciation for a poem she had dedicated to him - gave her this bit of praise: "If you should ever come to Cambridge or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations."² A few lines from the poem sent to this prominent American general, proves that even in these poems of tribute the religious theme was interwoven.

A crown, a mansion, and a throne
that shine
With gold unfading, Washington,
be thine!³

The tribute cited above, along with many others, testify convincingly that this Negro girl - brought, an uncultivated barbarian from Africa - was recognized by men of culture as a genius.

¹Edward D. Seeber, "Phillis Wheatley," Journal of Negro History, Vol. XXIV, pp. 259-262.

²Letter dated February 2, 1776.

³Johnson, James Weldon, op. cit., p. 30.

Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, like the Negro people of old, held fast to their belief in God and, as far as can be seen from the few collections available, their concept of God was that of the true follower of Christ. However, as we move down the years, Paul Laurence Dunbar - the great "Black Singer"-is met. In his poems a different idea of God is seen. Because he is the first great poet of the race to be recognised as a man of genius and, too, because his contribution to the literary world was the largest yet given by one Negro poet, we shall consider the man and his works under a special heading in this chapter.

He brought forth the deep humor and the pathos therein. Here lies Dunbar's importance: He did for his people what Burns did for the Scotch.¹ In our own time we compare him with James Whitcomb Riley, because the works of both are filled with tenderness and pathos. Even before Dunbar published his first book, Riley recognized the younger man's worth and sent him a note of encouragement.²

It has been said that if we are to glow truly great

¹William Morris, pp. 215. p. 278.

²Bradley, A Short History of the Negro, p. 242.

DUNBAR

Very little is known of those Negro men and women who lived and composed in the days before Dunbar. Few people know of any other Negro poet of the early days. He deserves some distinction, this black boy of African parentage, who took the lowly life of his people, touched it with the "magic wand" of his pen and imagination and revealed its meaning - long hidden - as he brought forth the deep humor and the pathos therein. Here lies Dunbar's importance: He did for his people what Burns did for the Scotch.¹ In our own time we compare him with James Whitcomb Riley, because the works of both are filled with tenderness and pathos. Even before Dunbar published his first book, Riley recognized the younger man's worth and sent him a note of encouragement.²

It has been said that if we are to grow truly great

¹William Ferris, op. cit., p. 272.

²Brawley, A Short History of the Negro, p. 242.

and bring out the best in ourselves, we must possess a knowledge of the lives of the great ones of the world. Such knowledge gives a sense of direction in the many pathways of life and adds courage to our souls to go on even though the road be rugged. William Dean Howells, a friend and admirer of our poet, says that Dunbar is the only man of pure African blood who expressed the attributes of the life of the darker race "aesthetically and lyrically." A race, he continues, which can boast of such proficiency in any one of its members, has "attained civilization in him." As an educator, Dunbar taught the world that the process of thinking and of feeling is the same for all human beings, whether or not his skin is black or white. Before his time our poetry had been musically expressed, but now God had raised this black boy to give it a "full and complete literary interpretation."¹

Woodson says that Dunbar followed the advice of Hamlet to the players: "Suit the words to the action and the action to the words." He is said to have studied his people's setting and their attitude towards life. He forgot the "race problem" and only used

¹Edward Arnold, "Some Personal Reminiscences of Paul Laurence Dunbar." Journal of Negro History, Vol. XVII, pp. 400-408.

those phases which interested him. As a result, his works became popular¹ - but Dunbar's heart was not in this dialectic form of poetry which he popularized. He knew the limitations of the broken language and used the dialect, as Redding says, principally as a medium to express the thoughts of others in their own way. But he loved the pure form of the English language as used by learned and cultured Americans, which form - his wife said - he always used at home, and which form too - according to Redding - he used when he wrote for himself.

Dunbar declares that his best literary friends - lovers of his dialectic creations - were his worst enemies. They tried, it would seem, to kill the English-speaking, singing Dunbar - to suppress that part of himself which he longed to see live. In this great desire of his heart he failed, however; for, the world knows the Dunbar of dialect best, although more than half of his poetical works were written in English. Nevertheless, Dunbar was in truth a poet, his poems are filled with loveable characters. Yet, he was less disappointed and crushed because he was not received as a poet, than he was because of his dialectic works.³ Would the poet have

¹Woodson, The African Background Outlined, p. 420.

²Saunders Redding, op. cit., pp. 56-63.

³ibid., p. 66.

felt justified for his sacrifice had he heard Johnson say: "Dunbar was the first to rise to that height from which he could take a view of his people. He was the first to see objectively its superstitions, its shortcomings; the first to feel sympathetically its heart-wounds, its yearnings, its aspirations; and the first to voice them all in a purely literary form."¹

Dunbar, the talented son of an unschooled but appreciative mother, was taught religious principles at her knee, and often sang the praises of God with her in the evenings as the two sat at home together. A number of these old hymns, dear to the heart of the Negro, were sources of inspiration for many of his poems.²

A consideration of his poetical works reveals that although he was a believer in God and eternal life, erroneous theories crept into his life. The right to commit suicide - a doctrine Christians cannot hold - is advocated.³ Agnosticism and fatalism are found in his poetry. This agnosticism is based upon his inability to find ad-

¹James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., Preface, pp.34-35.

²Edward Arnold, op. cit., pp. 400-408.

³W. T. Fontaine, "The Mind and Thought of the Negro of the United States as Revealed in Imaginative Literature, 1898-1940." Bulletin, Southern University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, Vol. 28, March 1942, p. 11.

equate manifestations of Providence in human affairs. His fatalism and his resignation thereto appear in the feeling that life is a "pint of joy to a peck of trouble; and that, even so, a man ought to keep a pluggin' away."¹ An expression of agnosticism occurs in his poem, "Behind the Arras."²

Poor fooled and foolish soul!
 Know now that death
 Is but a blind, false door that
 nowhere leads,
 And gives no hope of exit, final,
 free.*

But the soul of this struggling Negro boy was not often thus perplexed concerning the Creator. In his poem "Theology,"³ where he tells of the existence of God, doubt seems to have disappeared and surety is present:

There is a heaven, forever, day by day,
 The upward longing of my soul doth
 tell me so.
 There is a hell, I'm quite as sure,
 for pray,
 If there were not, where would my
 Neighbors go?

¹W. T. Fontaine, op. cit., p. 11.

²Dunbar, Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, p.95.

*If Dunbar's Complete Poems be arranged in chronological order, doubt will be encountered therein at various times during the years. No definite or stated time as to when he began to doubt appears; only reference to its cause: "injustice," which gives us to understand that doubt was a result of years of sore experience and blasted hope.

³Dunbar, op. cit., p. 106.

The last line is filled with bitterness, but even this may be excused when the struggle of Negro life in an unsympathetic white world is considered. Sometimes even the patient Negro became overburdened and resistant.

Apparently, after some reflection - which all honest, intelligent men must make - Dunbar, who being finite cannot comprehend it, nevertheless sees the wisdom of God in all His works - whether or not it be death in life or a living death. Listen:

TO THE MEMORY OF MARY YOUNG¹

God has His plans, and what if we
With our sight be too blind to see
Their full fruition; cannot He,
Who made it, solve the mystery?

"Night"² shows the Majesty of God, and there comes over the soul a calm, a peace which only enters with the shades of evening, when the day has been stormy:

Silence, and whirling worlds afar
Through all-encircling skies.
What floods come o'er the spirit's bar,
What wondrous thoughts arise!

The earth, a mantle falls away
And, winged, we leave the sod
Where shines in its eternal sway
The Majesty of God.

¹Dunbar, op. cit., p. 81.

²Ibid., p. 263.

With silence comes a longing for God, a desire to see more clearly the Eternal Light. Here are the author's reflections after reading "Lead Kindly Light," the prayer so beautifully voiced by Cardinal Newman as he sought Truth. "The Hymn"¹ of Dunbar pleads:

Lead gently, Lord, and slow,
For oh, my steps are weak,
And ever as I go
Some soothing sentence speak

That I may turn my face
Through doubt's obscurity
Toward Thine abiding-place,
E'en tho' I cannot see.

God is merciful to man. He bestows His gifts even to those who doubt His goodness and sit in spiritual darkness. The choice gifts bestowed on our poet, and that which he himself recognizes as such, are both song and death. He sings them poetically in "Compensation:"²

God in His great compassion
Gave me a gift of song.
... ..
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of death.

In the poem, "Colored Soldiers,"³ there is a pleading for mercy for the departed - a prayer rarely heard and a

¹Dunbar, op. cit., p. 98.

²Benjamin Brawley, Negro Genius, pp. 157-158.

³Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 64.

doctrine seldom held by those outside the Catholic faith. Yet, conviction and earnestness are in the lines which are also full of faith and hope in God:

And at Pillow! God have mercy
 On the deeds committed there,
 And the souls of those poor victims
 Sent to Thee without a prayer.
 Let the fullness of Thy pity
 O'er the hot, wrought spirits sway
 Of the gallant colored soldiers
 Who fell fighting on that day!

Again, faith and trust and mercy shine forth in the black boy's "Thanksgiving Poem"¹ as he offers a prayer of humble gratitude to the Giver of all good gifts:

No deed of ours hath brought us grace
 When Thou wert nigh our sight was dull,
 We hid in trembling from Thy face,
 But Thou, O God, wert merciful.

Thy mighty hand o'er all the land
 Hath still been open to bestow
 Those blessings which our wants demand
 From Heaven, whence all blessings flow,

In one of his dialectic poems - "An Ante-Bellum Sermon"² - there is put in the mouth of a Negro preacher the praise of God as an Immutable Being:

Now, de Lawd done dis fu' Isrul,
 An' His ways don't nevah change.

¹Dunbar, op. cit. p. 280.

²Ibid., p. 14.

God is not only unchangeable, He is our Father Who cares. Tenderly, in the broken tongue of the Negro singer, the young poet says:

Oh, orphans, a-weepin' lak de widder do,¹
 Ah! I wish you'd tell me why.
 De Mastah is a mammy an' a papy, too;
 Lif' up yo' haid w'en de King go by!

Again, there is encouragement in the knowledge that we are the children of the All-Powerful God.

Fu' de Lawd will he'p his chillun,²
 You kin trust Him evah time.

Here the poet expresses our happiness and thanksgiving for the adoption of our souls by the Father:

Then lift we up our songs of praise³
 To Thee, Father, good and kind.

In the same poem - "A Spiritual" - God is seen as He is in all His Majesty, a King to Whom is due all homage:

De 'cession's stahed on de gospel way,
 De Captin' is a-drawin' nigh,
 Bettah stop a-foolin' an' a-try to pray;
 Lif' up yo' haid w'en de King go by!

 Hyeah come de Mastah wid de powah to saw;
 Lif' up yo' haid w'en de King go by!

¹Dunbar, op. cit., p. 194.

²Dunbar, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," p. 13.

³Dunbar, "A Thanksgiving Poem," p. 280.

Most of Dunbar's expressions of God were written when he spoke for himself in his English poems, it is noticed. In the dialectic ones, he speaks of the Negro as he has been pictured by the whites these many years; hence, the double poetical life of this favored Afro-American can be summed up in his poem, "We Wear the Mask:"¹

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
 To Thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh, the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

His idea of God, however, must not be mistaken. It rings true. He is a follower of Christ even though in several of his poetical productions he seems to doubt the way to Heaven and to God. In the poem - "By Rugged Ways,"² there echoes a plea to the Lord of Salvation that is touched with doubt because the answer of Heaven is delayed; nevertheless, faith in God, the Saviour, is victorious:

"Deliver us, oh Lord," we cry,
 Our hands uplifted to the sky.
 No answer save the thunder's peal,
 And onward, onward, still we reel.
 "Oh, give us now Thy guiding light;"
 Our sole reply, the lightning's blight.
 "Vain, vain," cries one, "in vain we call,"
 But faith serene is over all.

¹Countee Cullen, "Caroling Dusk," p. 98.

²Ibid., p. 215.

After the struggle of soul and body there comes the calm in "Resignation:"¹

Long had I grieved at what I deemed abuse;
But now I am as grain within the mill.
If so be Thou must crush me for Thy use,
Grind on, O potent God, and do Thy will!

All power is given to the Lord of Heaven, but, in His compassion, He wills to save the souls of men.

Beautifully, this lesson is taught in Dunbar's "Hymn:"²

Upon Thy breast secure I rest,
From sorrow and vexation;
No more by sinful cares oppressed,
But in Thy presence ever blest,
O God of my salvation.

Since the soul, after the weary struggle, rests completely on the Heart of the Divine Friend, it sings again in "A Prayer:"³

O Lord, the hard-won miles
Have worn my stumbling feet;
Oh, soothe me with Thy smiles
And make my life complete.

Although we have seen for the first time the thread of unbelief running here and there in the poetry of the Negro - as voiced by the great Dunbar - it can safely be

¹Countee Cullen, op. cit., p. 106.

²Ibid., p. 66.

³Ibid., p. 11.

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said that the Negro's concept is none the less true, and that God is loved by His black children even though their faith in Him be oftentimes weakened because of their inability to understand His ways, particularly His permitting evil to hold prolonged, though temporary sway over justice.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was followed by a number of other men and women writers of verse telling of God and of the people of the Black race, but it is doubtful whether any of their works will ever be read and whether they themselves will live in the world of Literature. Omitting these, therefore, we pass on down the years to a consideration of Johnson and Cullen - men of the Negro race who have earned for themselves a name and a place among writers of note, who have left a gift to the literary world, who bespeak in their work a new spirit and a new outlook on God.

perusal of their poetry reveals that they did not forget the "race problem" as they purposed; rather, they stressed racial attitudes more than their predecessors did, differing only in the approach thereto.

One of the outstanding representatives of the period when the Negro began to feel himself and his position in

While desire is stated in a number of the professedly of their poetical works.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEW SPIRIT IN NEGRO POETRY

After the World War a new poetry came into being: a poetry that bespeaks the disillusionment and bitterness that the Negro men and women of that period were then suffering; a poetry consequently filled with protest, despair and rebellion. The authors of these new poetic creations expressed a desire* to get away from the "race problem" as an exclusive subject and to write freely as men of poetic skill, irrespective of traditional form, customs or public sentiment regarding the works of Negro artists; but, a perusal of their poetry reveals that they did not forget the "race problem" as they purposed; rather, they stressed racial attitudes more than their predecessors did, differing only in the approach thereto.

One of the outstanding representatives of the period when the Negro began to feel himself and his position im-

*This desire is stated in a number of the prefaces of their poetical works.

Unlike Dunbar, he broke down the idea of a stereotyped Negro. He not only made others think of the colored man as a real human being, but he also elevated this brown-hued member of the political world in the eyes of his own people. His lyrics express the sentiment of all Negro Americans.¹

With Johnson, Dunbar's "Slow Through the Dark" loses all significance. This new poet contends that the future is full of opportunity for the people of the race whom he reminds of their past - not so much the past of slavery, as the rich and glorious background of African heritage. This younger poet cries out that we must fulfill our mission, we must attain our "God-given destiny."²

Among the outstanding contributions in the field of poetry is Johnson's "God's Trombones." In this collection of poems, the author shows the Negro's relation to the elements: the earth, the field, the sun of the South; in them, more particularly, he upholds the prestige of the Negro preacher, whose dignified style - borrowed either from the Bible or from Milton's "Paradise Lost" and taught him directly by the old Southern white preacher³ - wrecks

¹Eunice B. Potts, op. cit., pp. 132-135.

²Bulletin, op. cit., p. 17.

³Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 216.

the old idea people had of looking upon this religious leader as an "ignorant, happy-go-lucky figure." He makes one feel respect for this Negro minister who gave the Africans their first unity and solidarity, and to whom, for generations, the slaves looked up for hope and inspiration.¹ In "Listen, Lord" and "A Prayer," Johnson, - showing clearly his faith in the existence of God - makes the Negro preacher go humbly in prayer to the Divine Master, seeking help "Like empty pitchers to a free fountain, with no merits of our own."²

"God's Trombones" - a retrospect of the Negro's deep spirituality - possesses greater depth than the old time Spiritual contains. In fact, "The Creation" and "Go Down Death" - two of the seven sermons - are considered among the best in Negro American Literature. In these poems he fulfills what he said was needed: a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which still holds the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought and the distinctive humor of pathos of the Negro, yet capable of voicing his deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and of allowing the widest range of subjects and scope of treatment.³ This same idea,

¹Eunice B. Potts, op. cit., pp. 132-135.

²James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., pp. 125-127.

³Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 120.

bute that is perceived in the punishment meted out to fallen man - God's mercy is there, too; for, even as He condemned, the Eternal Father promised to send His Divine Son to redeem man.

"Go Down Death"¹ - a funeral sermon that Johnson puts in the mouth of a Negro preacher - makes the idea of death less fearful because of the mercy of God. The occasion of the sermon is the death of a woman:

Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband, weep no more,
Grief-stricken son, weep no more,
She's only just gone home.

The preacher then goes on to describe the beauty of death, the mercy of our Lord in coming to relieve the weary traveler of the burden of life. There is no dread; there is a real joy in the story as the Infinite Goodness of God commands His angel to call His messenger, Death, to go down to earth on his errand of mercy.

Making use of Allegory - as Our Lord did so often when teaching the simple people of His day - the black minister in "Listen, Lord"² also praises the mercy of God

¹(Ed.) Negro Caravan, pp. 331-333.

²James W. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 125-127.

as He saves poor sinners from hell:

Mount your milk-white horse,
 And ride-a this morning -
 And in your ride, ride by old hell,
 Ride by the dingy gates of hell,
 And stop poor sinners in their
 headlong plunge.

These lines convey, we presume, neither misconception of God nor of His immaterial nature; the preacher apparently wishes to express in his own simple, limited, human way, the great dignity of the All-Powerful God "riding on a beautiful milk-white horse." Evidently there is the belief that sin will be punished, since the rider is asked to stop by hell. Further on in the same poem the intercessor goes on to beg the merciful God to protect the pastor of the church from the "gunshot of the devil." Hear God's mercy, power, providence and wisdom being invoked:

1 Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
 Hang him up and drain him dry of sin,
 Pin his ear to the Wisdom-post,
 And make his words sledge-hammers of truth
 Beating on the iron heart of sin.

 Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
 And let him look upon the paper walls of
 time.
 Lord, turpentine his imagination,
 Put perpetual motion in his arms,
 Fill him full of the dynamite of Thy power,
 Anoint him over with the oil of Thy
 salvation,
 And set his tongue on fire!

¹James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., pp. 126-127.

Finally, at the end of the prayer the petitioner begs for final perseverance and pity when all is done in this world - when the "gettin' up morning" comes. To God, the Master of every man, and of all creation, creatures must pay homage. In this prayer, therefore, the humble servant is seen appealing to the divine Master as Son of Mary:

O Lord, we come this morning
 Knees bowed and body bent
 Before Thy throne of grace.

 And now, O Lord -
 When I've done drunk my last
 cup of sorrow -
 When I've been called everything
 but a child of God -
 When I'm done travelling up the
 rough side of the Mountain -
 O, Mary's Baby!
 When I start down the steep and
 slippery steps of death -
 When this old world begins to
 rock beneath my feet -
 Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
 To wait for that great gettin' up
 morning.

Can one consider any of God's attributes, His dealings with man or His threats and promises and not be aware of His great power?

With a wave of His hand God will¹
 blot out time,
 And start the wheel of eternity.

¹Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 216.

Somewhat like the old singer of the Spiritual,
Johnson sings of the divine Judge:

God's a-going to sit in the middle¹
of the air,
To judge the quick and the dead.

And of His justice, he adds:

And God will divide the sheep from
the goats,
The one on the right, the other on
the left.

... ..

In hell, sinner! In hell!
Beyond the reach of the love of God.

Even while acknowledging that the Justice of God is infinite, it is consoling to remember that the "Prodigal Son"² had a more than loving father, and that this faultless parent is only typical of the sweet heavenly Father whom every man can claim. Johnson's poem runs:

But Jesus spoke in a parable,
and He said:
A certain man had two sons.
Jesus didn't give this man a name,
But his name is God Almighty.
And Jesus didn't call these sons by
name,
But every young man, everywhere,
Is one of these two sons.

¹Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 213.

²(Ed.) Negro Caravan, pp. 328-329.

The intellectual Negro, say critics, has not the faith of the old time Negro, and this is true of Johnson - a man whose life was full and whose philosophy was summed up in his own words:

The race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul.¹

He was racked by doubt, we learn in his autobiography, "Along This Way"; he was not sure. Does this doubt come to the black man because he sees such gross injustice meted out to him and his dark-skinned brethren in this world which is governed not by men but rather by race? His poetic creations, however, reveal no uncertainty. Like most Negroes, he seems to have possessed in his soul a deep faith, especially when he could so sincerely write for himself and his people² "Lift Every Voice and Sing":³

God of our weary years,
 God of our silent tears
 Thou Who hast brought us thus
 far on the way,
 Thou Who hast by Thy might
 Led us into the light,
 Keep us ever in Thy path we pray

¹"Tribute from the Nation's Press" at his death. Crisis, Vol. XLV, Sept. 1938, pp. 295-299.

²Bulletin, op. cit., p. 17.

³Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 96.

Lest our feet stray from the place,
 our God, where we met Thee;
 Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine
 of the world, we forget Thee.
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
 May we forever stand,
 True to our God,
 True to our native land.

The Negro - in Johnson - is still that believing creature; he is a being who sees his part and his work in the great plan of heaven. Perceiving the task as opportunity from God for personal and racial advancement, this "new Negro" works while he prays.

Another leading representative poet of this new era is Countee Cullen. This lyricist, fine and sensitive, belongs to the classical school. He was the son of a minister, and he enjoyed all the religious, educational and social life compatible with such surroundings. When his background is considered, one expects a wealth of interesting work, to say the least. For his poetical masters, the young Negro artist chose no lesser patterns than Shelley and Keats; and even as he follows them he fills his own poems with fresh beauty. Many critics say he is not a Negro poet because he does not stick to racial themes; but, as he himself avers, he writes as a poet and not as

a member of any certain race, and he voices this in:

TO CERTAIN CRITICS¹

Then call me traitor if you must,
Shout treason and default!
Say I betray a sacred trust
Acting beyond this vault.
I'll hear your censure as your praise,
For never shall the clan
Confine my singing to its ways
Beyond the ways of men.

No racial option narrows grief,
Pain is no patriot,
And sorrow plaits her dismal loaf
For all as lief as not.
With blind sheep groping every hill,
Searching an oriflamme,
How shall the shepherd's heart then thrill
To only the darker lamb?

Many of his best poems, however, deal with racial themes; yet, he does not hem himself in by these bounds. His poetry - undoubtedly the work of an artist - is rich with imagination and intelligence; although pessimistic, he has a gift for wit and "epigrammatic expression." Even in his beautiful love themes - where he rises to the very skies - Countee Cullen nearly always makes a sudden ironic turn that soars above "pathos or peevishness."²

After considering this poet's work, Brawley says

¹Countee Cullen, Black Christ, p. 60.

²James W. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 219-221.

that there is much room for improvement of style. While the young poet seems not to be certain in his work, he appears not to have any inclination or taste to stress the low life as Hughes' collections do.¹ To Cullen, poetry is sacred, and in it he hopes to find a powerful relief for men;² hence, according to Brawley, "his poetry reveals a sincere attempt to discern whatever spiritual adjustment there may be for suffering, passionate and weak souls in a hostile world." He tries to show in his treatment of human ideals, his hoped-for "faith in Love, Beauty, Mankind, the Sacrifice of Christ, and Poetry," which he offers as a remedy for the pains of life.³ There are moments of doubt and weakness, however; then, he feels too keenly the never-ending "strife and frustration" in the world, and the great mastery of Death. He seems not to be able to endure the world with its injustices; therefore he does not keep, in all his writings, that spiritual serenity which appears in some of them. Sometimes he gets sentimental about the "thorn", and then he wants top-happiness where and how he finds it⁴- may he hold fast to the faith. Now and again

¹Benjamin Brawley, "The Negro in Contemporary Literature," English Journal, Vol. XVIII, Feb.-Dec., p. 187.

²Woodruff, op. cit., p. 219.

³Ibid., p. 214.

⁴Bertram Woodruff, "The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen," Phylon, Vol. I, p. 223.

he gives us a picture of the spiritual warfare in the modern man - the struggle between his "primitive passions and his spiritual light." Through it all, Cullen's poetry is rich in beauty and powerfully intense - like that of Keats. Like Shelley, he believes the sweetest songs depict the saddest thoughts,¹ and this probably accounts for the many melancholy strains running through his verses.

As his life thus far has been one long struggle between his pagan inclinations and the Christian principles imbibed at his mother's knee, it is not surprising that his concept of God is at one time full and strong, and at another, weak and diffused with doubt.

"Lines to My Father"² glows with faith and trust, and the poem must have made his parent's heart thrill with joy, as well as increased within him a deeper trust in God:

Yours is no fairy gift, no heritage
 Without travail to which weak wills aspire;
 This is a merited and grief-earned wage
 From One Who holds His servants worth their hire.

However, he cannot account for his own great faith; this baffles his reason. Yet, sincerely, he sings, in:

¹Bertram Woodruff, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

²Countee Cullen, "Cooper Sun," p. 83.

COUNTER MOOD¹

Let this be scattered far and wide,
 laid low
 Upon the waters as they fall and rise,
 Be caught and carried by the winds
 that blow,
 Nor let it be arrested by the skies;
 I who am mortal say I shall not die;
 I who am dust, of this am positive,
 That though my nights tend toward the
 grave, yet, I
 Shall on some brighter day arise and
 live.

The picture he gives in "An Epitaph for Amy Lowell"² is humorous, but the lines tell of the existence of God and of His Wisdom and Justice:

She leans across a golden table,
 Confronts God with an eye
 Still puzzled by the standard label
 All flesh bears: made to die -
 And questions Him if He is able
 To reassure her why.

Is there not hope and gratitude tinged with bitterness in "Colors, Black"³ as the poet tells of Christ and the Cyrenean?...

Yea, he who helped Christ up Golgotha's
 track,
 That Simon who did not deny, was black.

In "Yet Do I Marvel"⁴ the poet acknowledges that the

¹Countee Cullen, Black Christ, p. 18.

²Ibid., p. 60.

³Ibid., p. 11.

⁴James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 231.

All-Wise God can unravel every puzzle of life - nothing is hard or difficult to Him; therefore, man should abandon himself to this Omnipotent Being. Then the poem ends ironically, in a pathetic tragedy, when he sings:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing -
To make a poet black and bid him sing.

Full of faith again, the poet in the first verse of the poem, "Not Saccs and Vanzette,"¹ tries to think of what will become of the oppressors of the race who dare to take a mortal's life; then he recalls the just Judge, Jesus Christ, and says:

The day a slumbering but awful God
Before time to Eternity is blown,
Examines with the same unyielding rod
These images of His with hearts of stone,
These men who do not die, but death decree -
These are the men I should not care to be!

Pleading for mercy for the younger generation who seem to be slipping from the old faith in God, the poet, in "A Miracle Demanded,"² humbly begs:

Against such foes how shall a tree prevail
To curb its consummation in decay,
And like a tree shall men not strive and
fail,

¹Countee Cullen, Black Christ, p. 36.

²Ibid., p. 26.

And shoulders his own coffin up a steep
 Immortal mountain, there to meet his doom
 Between two wretched dying men, of whom
 One doubts, and one for pity's sake believes.

As has been said, a fight exists in the colored man's soul - to believe or not - as he meets the injustices that are born of racial proscription. In this struggle he is torn between materialistic and theistic concepts. "Man is diseased, trunk, branch and shoot."¹ Rebelling against all the principles of Christian patience and submission, the young writer in the first stanza of "Mood"² thinks of taking his life because of his own helplessness and of the hopelessness of finding happiness in life. Bitter, he nevertheless meditates and thus recalls the teachings of Christ:

God knows I would be kind, let live,
 speak fair,
 Requite an honest debt with more than just,
 And love for Christ's dear sake these
 shapes that wear
 A pride that had its genesis in dust,⁻²
 The meek are promised much in a book
 I know --
 But one grows weary turning cheek to blow.

Agnosticism fills his soul as he writes "Dictum",³
 and the picture of the Godhead therein is ugly and distorted in his mind:

¹Bertram Woodruff, op. cit., pp. 214-215.

²Countee Cullen, op. cit. p. 17.

³Ibid., p. 47.

They fare full ill since Christ forsook
 The cross to mount a throne,
 And virtue still is stooping down
 To cast the first hard stone.

There is little change of thought, no more hopeful attitude when later he yields to introspection, muses in "Self Criticism"¹ and wonders whether he should go on trusting Divine Providence:

Shall I never feel and meet the urge
 To bugle out beyond my sense
 That the fittest song of earth is a dirge,
 And only fools trust Providence?

Farther, he thinks that before he ceases to believe he would like to use his tongue in song. Here again, however, there is wavering. Is man self-sufficient? as is implied in,

ULTIMATUM²

I hold not with the fatalist creed
 Of what must be must be;
 There is enough to meet my need
 In this most meagre me.

... ..

The seed I plant is chosen well,
 Ambushed by no sly sweven,
 I plant it if it drops to hell,
 Or if it blooms to heaven.

¹Countee Cullen, Black Christ, p. 38.

²Ibid., Cooper Sun, p. 70.

It is true, as one critic says, that Cullen sees life through the eyes of a woman who is at once shrinking, bold, sweet and bitter. Not only are these varying moods seen in his several different poems but they are most apparent in his long work entitled "Black Christ", wherein the poet's scope and limit are outlined. The dramatic and narrative powers of the poem are slight, its mood reflects bitterness and irony, but the varying concepts of God are none the less clear.¹

The story treats of an old Christian mother and her two sons. During childhood she tells them of the great God Who created everything by His Almighty Power, and she assures them that in any difficulty man may trustfully appeal to Him Who as man has suffered every pain of soul and body that a creature can endure. As these children of hers grew up, they saw men and women act inhumanly toward themselves and other members of their race; then the old mother experiences some difficulty as she attempts to make the truths in the following lines appeal to her older-grown lads:-

... ..

¹Redding, op. cit., p. 112.

Of hatred toward these men like beast
 She weeded out with legends how
 Once there had been somewhere as now
 A people harried, low in the dust;
 But such had been their utter trust
 In Heaven and its field of stars
 That they had broken down their bars,
 And walked across a parted sea¹
 Praising His Name Who set them free.

But Jim, the younger of the grown-up boys, could not understand how God Who is infinitely good, - he had been taught - could allow the grave injustices which he saw the Negro subjected to. His faith is harassed by doubt as Cullen shows in:

"Likely there ain't no God at all."
 Jim was the first to clothe a doubt
 With words that long had tried to sprout
 Against our wills and love of one
 Whose faith was like a blazing sun
 Set in a dark rebellious sky.

The thought continued to grow in spite of all the faith shining forth from his mother's eyes:

God could not be, if He deemed right
 The grief that ever met our sight.

Even more bitter does the other black boy become, and more confirmed in doubt is he when he sees his mother pray after his brother was taken to be hanged:

¹Cullen, op. cit. p. 109.

What child, creating out of sand
 With puckered brow and intent hand,
 Would see the lovely thing he planned
 Struck with a lewd and wanton blade,
 Nor stretch a hand to what he made,
 Nor shed a childish, futile tear,
 Because he loved it, held it dear?
 Would not a child's weak heart rebel?
 But Christ Who conquered Death and Hell
 What has He done for you who spent
 A bleeding life for His content?
 Or is the white Christ, too, distraught
 By those dark sins His Father wrought?

An atheistic strain evolves as the soul becomes tarnished, yea blackened, by the cruelties of the white man:

¹ Nay, I have done with deities
 Who keep me ever on my knees,
 My mouth forever in a tune
 Of praise, yet never grant the boon
 Of what I pray for night and day.
 God is a toy; put Him away.¹

Deeper did he sink as he let the wrong-doings of men embitter him. Now he sings with the idolater,

² Or make you one (God) of wood or stone
 That you can call your very own.....

To him there exists no Personal spiritual Being. The cruelties of life preclude such a one. Cullen loses faith in the promised Justice and Equality of heaven:

¹Cullen, op. cit., p. 83.

²Cullen, op. cit., p. 84.

¹Your God is somewhere worlds away
 Hunting a star He shot astray;
 Oh, He has weightier things to do
 Than lavish time on me and you.

In the next lines the slight return of faith proves but the faith of the Deist who believes that God creates and then leaves His creatures to care for themselves.

²Once we were blown, once we were hurled
 In place, we were as soon forgot.

Faith, however, does not go out of the soul completely. Although doubt and morbidity reign in the young Negro's soul, his knowledge of the Justice of God asserts itself.

³And I may swing, but not before
 I send some pale ambassador
 Hot-footing it to hell to say:
 A proud black man is on his way.

See in the lines below how the mind of the Agnostic is never settled; how the man who is thus afflicted knows nothing for certain.

⁴So much for flesh, I am resigned
 Whom God has made shall He not guide?

¹Countee Cullen, op. cit., p. 84.

²Ibid., p. 85.

³Ibid., p. 78.

⁴Ibid., p. 74.

But in the mind of the Christian, on the other hand, peace steals as the knowledge of the Saviour is recalled - even though the sufferings of life seem unbearable.

¹Since that befell which came to me,
 Since I was singled out to be,
 Upon a wheel of mockery,
 The pattern of a new faith spun,
 I never doubt that once the sun
 For respite stopped in Gabaon,
 Or that a Man I could not know
 Two thousand ageless years ago,
 To shape my profit by His loss,
 Bought my redemption on a cross.

The wonders of God's power, the glory of His King-ship is not past. In His own good time, even here on earth, He shall show forth His divine love and power. Then, praise must be given.

²Though with the praise some tears must run
 In pity of the King's dear breath
 That ransomed one of us from death!

And, sensing the miracle of His Love, the soul cries for mercy and pardon for its little faith - its doubt:

Cry mercy now before Him; kneel,
 And let your heart's conversion swell
 The wonder of His miracle.

... ..
 Now have we seen beyond degree
 That love which has no boundary,
 Our eyes have looked on Calvary.

¹Cullen, op. cit., p. 72.

²Ibid., pp. 107-108.

Yes, the figure on Calvary is more than friend. He is the brother of man - particularly of suffering, down-trodden man:

1

If I am blind He does not see;
 If I am lame He halts with me;
 There is no hood of pain I wear
 That has not rested on His hair
 Making Him first initiate
 Beneath its harsh and hairy weight.
 He grew with me within its womb;
 He will receive me at the tomb.
 He will make plain the misty path
 He makes me tread in love and wrath,
 And bending down in peace and grace
 May wear again my brother's face.

Finally, man is only to be as Christ advised, - a simple child in his belief and in his trust in the infinite God Who is aware of every trial, suffering or injustice. When the Negro understands this Christian philosophy of life and practices it, - even while working with all his strength for advancement - then, the race will be safe. In "Black Christ" Cullen expresses it simply:

2

But he who seeks a thing divine
 Must humbly lay his lore aside
 And like a child believe, confide -

... ..

¹Cullen, op. cit., p. 109.

²Ibid., p. 86.

1
 The slave can meet the monarch's gaze
 With equal pride, dreaming to days
 When slave and monarch both shall be
 Transmuted everlastingly,
 A single reed blown on to sing
 The glory of the only King.

CHAPTER FIVE

From the preceding inferences it is evident that there is a struggle going on within the Negro's soul as he fights the battle of life; a struggle between an impulse of the will to love God simply by faith, and another impelling movement to deny Him because of the ungodly love and lives of other fellow-beings. Hence, it is conclusive, too, that the Negro is not as trustful as of yore and that his ideas of God are not so stable.

These truths are more forcibly brought out by the members of that group called the "New Negro". What will the works of McKay, Hughes and Brown tell about God? Will it differ from that of the "Old Negro" of yesterday?

He leaves the church, laughs at religion, and makes that which was the saving hope of his forefathers. Consequently, he loses his ethical sense and thus naturally becomes an easy prey to the lure of the unbelieving world.

See Harry Richardson, "The New Negro and Religion," *Christianity*, Vol. II (1933), pp. 21-22.

Stumpers Reading, II. 215-216, p. 115.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEW NEGRO

There is a great change in the soul of the "New Negro" relative to God and religion. In this new group, those who were born around the beginning of the present century and who have enjoyed the advantages of education and culture lack seriousness. The question arises: Is he fulfilling the hope of those who worked and prayed for this day of intellectual freedom?¹ This "New Negro", for some time, has been becoming cynical, has been definitely leaning to the side of "The Reds" - he leaves the church, laughs at religion, and mocks that which was the saving hope of his forefathers. Consequently, he loses his ethical sense and thus naturally becomes an easy prey to the isms of the unbelieving world.²

¹V. Harry Richardson, "The New Negro and Religion," Opportunity, Vol. XI (1933), pp. 41-42.

²Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 113.

But not all of the present day Negroes can be placed in the same category. Religiously, he may be put in one of three classes: First, those who pretend to profess the "ultra-modern, highly intellectual" religion. These number only a few; the reason given is, that not many can appreciate the concepts they hold.

The second class comprises the materialists, who try to persuade themselves that they have no use for spiritual things; church-goers, to them, are fools who follow a worn-out custom, and God, is only a mythical figure;- if they go to any house of worship it is purely for entertainment. The majority of those so classed, it appears, have had only very slight, if any, courses in religion - a condition which is most possible in non-sectarian colleges, where Negroes are probably more intelligent but have no regard for dogma. Theirs is a strange, purely human reasoning: Religion has no power, they say, because it has not wiped out race prejudice; whence they conclude that religion is a mere superstition that has come from a debased, ignorant past and that atheism is the product of education and culture.¹ And what, we ask, is the Church doing to bring back these apostate and straying children of God?

¹v. Harry Richardson, op. cit., pp. 41-43.

What is needed, says William Ferris, "is a higher creed than get bread and nothing but bread." "Yet," he continues hopefully, "The Negro will never lose completely his rich gift of emotionalism, but he will direct this endowment by intelligence and control it by the will."¹

The third group to be discussed are the few religious souls who remain faithful in spite of being heavily burdened both by the problem of religious difficulties and by the attitude of their white brethren. If the Church wishes to draw the Negro into her fold, she must meet squarely - she must challenge uncompromisingly, the arch-enemy to the Negro's acceptance of Catholicism: Segregation within her sacred portals. No religion, we know, should be measured by the unchristian practices of a few of its members who, unlike Christ, are not big enough to embrace all men equally. None the less, how the youth of tomorrow will look upon the non-adjustment of this anti-Christian attitude - so prevalent in many a Christian Church - remains an unsolved but serious problem. Communism proposed a solution thereto, but the day of its glamor is passing; the Negro is gradually learning that such a doctrine can never remedy his unfortunate condition. There must be

¹William Ferris, op. cit., p. 254.

found, therefore, an answer to the oft-repeated question of the black youth: Why does he experience a greater degree of love or charity from the gambler or "sporting class" than from white and black Christians?¹

That the changes of attitude of mind mentioned above influence the literature of the day, is especially apparent since the World War. Thereafter, literature became realistic and analytical: That which suggested "the primitive" seemed to attract both the writers and their readers, the latter demanding the "exciting and exotic." At this period, too, the Negro yielded to self-pity and introspection which, incidentally, led to the creation of "the blues." This new awakening of Negro genius had both a good and a bad effect: law and order no longer prevailed, everyone was free to follow what he willed, conventions were done away with even in regard to religious tenets. Therefore, the poetical themes used savored of the sordid, the unpleasant and the forbidden. Each writer strove for an effect that gave an impression of unnaturalness.² In this manner he

¹John T. Gillard, op. cit., p. 374.

²Benjamin Brawley, Negro Genius, pp. 232-234.

told what he had done, and what he hoped to do.¹

One of the most vigorous writers after the World War was Claude McKay. Although he is a native son of Jamaica, and much of his time was spent in European cities, he, in the early years of the twentieth century - about 1912 - adopted America as his country and came to the United States to further his education. While studying here, many of his poetical works gained publicity; and now, all American anthologies list him with the Negro poets of the present century.²

McKay, then, is the post-war group's most powerful voice; he is, as it were, the poet of rebellion - more than any other he has reflected in verse the feelings and reactions of the American Negro of that era. For his medium he chose to use the English sonnet - a form which sounds most suitably the notes he wished to convey. In this way he produced what are called³ "sonnet tragedies." He broke away from the conventional moods of the day and drew a picture of the "New Negro" who could hate, who could feel resentment, who could brood over intellectual

¹Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 96.

²Countee Cullen, op. cit., Caroling Dust, pp. 81-82.

³James W. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 165-166.

sarcasm and who could feel contemplative irony. Indeed, McKay gave the Negro himself a vivid reflection of the black man. Sometimes, however, he became too bitter and then showed a lack of the native touch of the American Negro;¹ nevertheless, he did not always write in the same strain nor in the same field. During his early years he showed forth more clearly his gifts as a poet who is observant of nature: his works portray "love of color, rich imagery and sensitive massing."²

There is no doubt that McKay is an artist, or, that he attains his artistic ends by means of his poetical insight.³ Brawley says that he discovered for himself the way to the mastery of poetical form - no matter what subject he treats, there is in his poems intense feeling, vivid sympathetic appeal. Being masculine, his poetry is strong and direct; it moves the pulse and brings forth action. Yea, this poet of passion makes one feel these strong emotions both in his lyrics and in his sonnets of rebellion.⁴ Even his short pieces "glow with genuine poetic fire."⁵

¹Locke, "Sterling Brown- The Negro Folk Poet," Negro Anthology, p. 115.

²Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 101.

³Robert Kerlin, "Negro Poets and Their Songs, p. 129.

⁴James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 167.

⁵Benjamin Brawley, English Journal, p. 197.

A contemporary, Sterling Brown, says that McKay's poetry belongs to the best Negro productions of our times; that, from his very out-set in this country, he became a poet of the people. As a matter of fact, not only the educated class, but even the working men and women - who one would naturally think were too busy to read - knew his works. They probably received him thus warmly because in his works he is so deeply concerned with the actual happenings of life.¹

Biographers make no mention of McKay's early religious training. While going out to school with an older brother in a small town in the northwestern part of his native island, this boy of fourteen read freely the books available there. Such authors as Haecbeb, Haxley and Matthew Arnold were read with as much interest as were Shakespeare and other great English poets. Influenced, unfortunately, by the works of the first three, he became a free-thinker,² and in after years would not frequent any church whatever. His poem, "The Lynching",³ gives some idea of the trend of his thoughts.

¹Sterling Brown, "A Poet and His Prose," Opportunity, Vol. X, August 1932, p. 256.

²Countee Cullen, op. cit., p. 81.

³(Ed.), Negro Caravan, pp. 350-351.

His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven,
 His Father, by the cruellest way of pain,
 Had bidden him to His bosom once again.
 The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
 All night a bright and solitary star
 (Perchance the one that ever guided him,
 Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
 Hung pitifully o'er the swinging chair.

Unlike the old Negro slave who trusted in God even as he bore the great agony of pain, the Doubter - the Agnostic - goes alone. Does he go thus because he feels the need of God but will not ask it? Or, because he feels self-sufficient, as the poem, "Baptism," would indicate?

Into the furnace, let me go alone,
 Stay you without, in terror of the heat.

... ..

I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
 You will not note a flicker of defeat.

McKay, happily, does not always show so vehemently great resentment for the wrongs suffered by his people. Sometimes his cry is "plaintive, mildly remonstrating, satirical, and broadly human."¹ Here he sees a kinship between the gentle Christ and his people; he sees Christ as our Brother in "Simon the Cyrenean Speaks:"²

¹Robert Kerlin, op. cit., p. 274.

²Ibid., p. 293.

But He was dying for a dream,
 And He was very meek,
 And in His eyes there shone a gleam
 Men journey far to seek.

In "Judas Iscariot"¹ several attributes of the God-man are artistically pictured: His Mercy, Love, Holiness and Power. They are seen reflected in the disciple's heart.

And Judas in those holy hours
 Loved Christ, and loved Him much,
 And in his heart he sensed the
 dead flowers
 Bloom at the Master's touch.
 Then, Judas, you must kill
 One Whom you love, One Who loves you
 As only God's Son can.
 This is the work for you to do,
 To save the creature man!

Though strange, the story in the above poem is very tenderly told. Could it be the product of a free-thinking mind? or is it the reflection of a charitable soul? The other stanzas tell of the work allotted to each of the twelve chosen men of God - the death of Christ, which had to be suffered for man's redemption, being Judas' task,- as the last lines above clearly indicate.

In "Equality"² the Justice of God is portrayed; not, however, in the soothing tones of the early poets,- the

¹Robert Kerlin, op. cit., pp. 274-295.

²Ibid., p. 274.

lines express bitterness instead:

Your body's got to die, and rot
 To nothing, just like mine.
 Up at the Great Recorder's gate,
 We both shall wait to sign;
 And there your record will be read
 And judged, the same as mine.

Finally, McKay is best known by his cry of defiant desperation in "If We Must Die,"¹ a poem he wrote in 1919 when race riots were occurring in different sections of the country.² Herein he shows the first signs of rebellion, as well as bitterness, and he urges black men to fight rather than die like cowards.³

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

¹(Ed.) Negro Caravan, p. 350.

²James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 167.

³Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 256.

Another poet belonging to this post-war period is Langston Hughes, who is the most prolific and most representative of the group called the "New Negro."¹ He seems to emphasize the racial idea, and thus proves himself the exact opposite of our earlier poet of note - Countee Cullen; he is a man of the race who has both taught and lived a life of rebellion against conventionalism.² Perhaps this can be accounted for by the fact that before he was out of his teens he was fighting the world for a livelihood, and before he was twenty-one he had seen and experienced the harsh things of life.³

Yet, he has a special gift for realizing and expressing the soul of the Negro.⁴ He has given us the emotional color of Negro life, - finding a flow and rhythm in the new city Negro and replacing the plantation type for the jazz personality.⁵ Moved with the racial thought and feeling of the different classes of the race, he carries one through the varying moods from sorrow to joy, with all the

¹Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 115.

²Benjamin Brawley, Negro Genius, pp. 246-247.

³James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 233.

⁴Ibid., p. 166.

⁵Alain Locke, op. cit., p. 115.

slight variations between. Sometimes, however, he is not sincere; then his creations are experiments. He uses a dialect, but it is the common living speech of the Negro race in certain walks of life;¹ none since Dunbar had tried the language problem.

He is not concerned with form, but makes his design fit his material. He feels in his racial rhythm; he does not think.² Often, however, he gets away from these limits, and then love, beauty, a sense of humor, zest for adventure, a pride in his own race, and faith in humanity run through his works. Therefore, young people generally like Hughes.³

Some critics call him a rebel because he will not be bound by poetic forms and traditions. He is also styled a cosmopolite because he takes his themes from any level of life that interests him. Judging from his poetry, he seems to prefer the lower levels, and in dealing with such standards his forms are generally free. He gives the picture of life as he sees it, and he has the power of giving a cynical twist to his themes. In fine, he has developed and perfect-

¹James W. Johnson, op. cit., Preface, p. 4.

²Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 116.

³Langston Hughes, The Dream Keeper, Introduction.

ed his own personal technique.¹

Hughes is a success. His works are in great demand. His "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" ranks him with the lyricist of the highest type. To attain the height he has, he must have worked hard; and in consequence he can and does appreciate young poets. As a generous crusader for the race and as a fellow artist, he is a popular and an engaging guest.²

There is, unfortunately, not much religion in Hughes. Perhaps his early training in non-sectarian schools and his early acquaintance with the hard knocks of life made him bitter and hopeless. He says in one of his poems:

³Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Bitter and vindictive with the agnostic, he, in "Song for a Dark Girl," cries out in the person of a girl whose lover had been hanged:

Way down South in Dixie
(Bruised body high in air)
I asked the white Lord Jesus
What was the use of prayer.

¹James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 223.

²Verna Arvey, "Langston Hughes: Crusader" Opportunity, Vol. XVIII, 1940, pp. 363-364.

³Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 250.

There is less bitterness, and more of the submission of the doubter who seeks to know, in "Prayer:"¹

I ask you this,
Which way to go?
I ask you this,
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know, Lord God,
I do not know.

But, gone from the soul is the slight acknowledgment of the existence of God, in "Big City Prayer;"² an unbelieving spirit seems to take possession of the writer:

Gather up in the arms of your pity
The sick, the depraved, the desperate,
 the tried,
All the scum of the weary city,
Gather up in the arms of your pity.
Gather up in the arms of your love -
Those who expect no love from above.

Daringly, full of defiance, expounding a doctrine believed only by the atheist - in tones never sounded except in McKay - the poet writes: "A New Song:"³

¹Langston Hughes, Negro Caravan, p. 369-370.

²Langston Hughes, "Big City Prayer", Opportunity, Vol. XVIII, 1940, p. 305.

³Langston Hughes, "A New Song," Opportunity, Vol. XI, 1933, p. 23.

Bitter was the day, I say,
 When the lyncher's rope
 Hung about my neck,
 And the fire scorched my feet,
 And the white world had no pity!
 And only in the sorrow-songs
 Relief was found;
 Yet, not relief,
 But merely humble life and silent death
 Eased by a Name
 That hypnotized the pain away -
 O, precious Name of Jesus in that day!
 That day is past.

And finally, the "New Negro" bids Christ out of his life completely; he dreams the bad dream that created man, finite beings, can live and find rest in life without the God of Providence. He alienates from his thoughts, words and deeds the only Friend of "those who labor and are heavily burdened",- the only Solver of his difficult problems, the only Leader Who has ever known the intense pain of prejudice, injustice and hatred in an infinite degree. Like the deluded unfortunates personified in Hughes' poem so titled, he says "good-bye" to Jesus Christ, the Savior. Happily, however, the poem does not represent the author's personal trend of thought; and misinterpretation thereof caused him later to publicly retract it.¹

Pondering this "New Negro", one asks: What would the old slave - trusting, loving and submissive to God, his Deliverer, say, if he lived to hear the words of this new poetry? One

¹See Appendix: Concerning "Goodbye Christ".

who scans these productions, asks the question: Has the Negro allowed suffering to crush him? to make him a godless creature, or a warrior unable to endure the wounds of battle, which a Great Creator, no doubt, would use to enrich his treasures in the hereafter?

Incontestably, we answer, the young Afro-American has drifted away from God. Many of his poetic creations have convinced us of this. Yet, great thinkers tell us that America is on the verge of a Spiritual awakening. That being true, the "New Negro" will return to his faith and trust in God; like his country-men of lighter hue, he will inevitably come forth from spiritual darkness - since he reads the same literature, thinks the same thoughts as all Americans of his own cultural standing, and consequently experiences the same helpful or evil effects. We pray God to hasten the day when "all things shall be restored to Him through Christ."

Meanwhile, the Church must meet this bruised, straying creature and give all the aids that Christ has left at her disposal, - for the Negro needs religion. Being highly emotional by nature, he leans on subjective religions and - whether or not he acknowledges it - he wants

those deep feelings of his warmed by love, and he wants his faith strengthened by help from above.¹ The Church, which will never die - even though all the forces of evil combine to crush it - is an Institution of which the Negro is proud. Most of the denominations to which he once adhered have lost contact with this new group because its intellectual growth has been too slow;² but a new day is dawning, - even in the works of Hughes there are a few lines which tell of God. Is there not a slight acknowledgment of belief in?...

³And as in great basilicas of old,
The search was ever for a dream of God,
So here the search is still within the soul
Some seed to find to nourish earthly sod,
Some seed to find that sprouts a holy tree
To glorify the earth - and you and me.

In his "Song to a Negro Wash-Woman"⁴ he compliments her for all she has done by her laborious work, - sending her children to college and building homes. In his praise he acknowledges the Holiness of God:

¹Richardson, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

²Ibid., p. 44.

³Langston Hughes, "Terminal", Opportunity, Vol. X (Feb. 1932), p. 52.

⁴(Ed.) "Negro Caravan," pp. 373-374

I know how you build your house
 Up from the washtub and call it home,
 And how you raise your churches
 From white suds for the service of
 the Holy God.

Farther on in the poem, he assures her that her reward for her sacrifices will be great. He promises her, too, that some day the Good God will give her white soul its long-deserved rest.

Then, in two of his dialects he sings of God's mercy; in another, he tells of the great friendship between God and man:

FEET O' JESUS¹

At de feet o' Jesus
 Sorrow like a sea.
 Lordy, let yo' mercy
 Come driftin' down on me.

The soul - in his poem, "Sinner" - humbly pleads for mercy and pardon for sin. May God hear the cry!....

Have mercy Lord!²
 Po' an' bowed
 An' humble an' lonesome
 An' a sinner in yo' sight.
 Have mercy, Lord!

The poem, "Ma Lord"³ is probably the echo of the

¹Langston Hughes, Dream Keeper and Other Poems, p. 51.

²Ibid., p. 52.

³Ibid., p. 55.

prodigal who has strayed far from the Changeless Friend. The answer in the last line is, indeed, Christ's very ready answer to all, no matter how far they may have strayed:

Ma Lord aint no stuck-up man
 He's a friend o' mine.
 When He went to heaben,
 His soul on fire,
 He tole me I was gwine.
 He said, "Sho you'll come wid me
 An' be ma friend through eternity."

Though Hughes, in many of his works, wanders away from the path to God, there is hope that he will eventually come back permanently to Christ, "the Hound of Heaven," Who night and day pursues the straying soul throughout life's long or short span. Surely the All-Knowing God, Who understands this suffering black son of His, will give sufficient strength to His creature to enable him to come back completely - and not half-heartedly - as Hughes has done in several of his poems.

And now we shall focus our mind upon Sterling Brown, the last poet under consideration in this work, the artist who stands in the front ranks of present-day Negro writers of verse. Although he is a young man, there is a note of

Louis Untermeyer, "New Negro Verse in the U.S.A.,"
 Spiritually, August 1922, Vol. 1, No. 230-231.

maturity in his works.¹ He neither clowns nor shouts² - instead, he labors so seriously that little or no falsity is found in his poetry. Gathering his material from the rich mine of Negro folk poetry, he has raised it to a work of art, multiplying its meanings and implications. Using his own unique technique, he has done a wonderful thing: he has absorbed the spirit of this poetry and, without detecting it, has made it his own.³

Brown has a racial touch that is not colored by dialect; he writes as his muse directs him, sincerely, but free from all persuasion; he laughs at both white and black - laughs and chides at the same time - and does not deal with false sentiment to win the audience of the white race.⁴ Going deeper than his predecessors, he has found certain basic, sober, persistent qualities of Negro thought and feeling, and by means of this discovery, he has established a happy medium between the old and the new Negro. We can then say that he has ushered in a "new era in Negro-

¹Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 253.

²Alain Locke, "The New Negro-Folk-Poet," Negro Anthology, p. 111.

³James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 247

⁴Louis Untermeyer, "New Light from an Old Mine," Opportunity, August 1932. Vol. X, pp. 250-251.

folk expression, and brought in a new dimension in Negro-folk portraiture.¹

Untermeyer, reviewing Brown's "Southern Road" - a collection of his poems - says: "The book is full of color. There is deep suffering and high laughter of workers in cabins and cotton fields, and in gangs and gutters; but it vibrates with less obvious glow,- a glow which, however warmly it may be defined, is immediately perceived and ultimately recognized as poetry." Comparing the young artist with McKay and Cullen, he continues: "Brown cultivates and achieves a detachment which the former, for all his ardor, or Cullen, for all his fluency, never achieves. It is a detachment which allows Brown to expostulate without ranting or even raising his voice, and to laugh without adopting the comic attitude too often expected of the Negro as entertainer. His humor is significant."² The diction he uses is not that of the plantation Negro, but the idiomatic speech of the black man or woman in certain stations of life.³ In his road songs he shows how the woe of the race may be sung without offence to any race or

¹Alain Locke, op. cit., p. 115.

²Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., pp. 250-251.

³James W. Johnson, op. cit., Preface, p. 4.

class of people. There is never a feeling that an apology is necessary, - his works themselves assure patronage.¹

This is true: Although his great contribution has not been put into classical English verse, he has, in ordinary English literature, made use of universal characters pictured by literary artists.²

Brown himself tells us that he has a deep concern with the development of a literature worthy of the Negro's past and of his destiny; that he also has a deep concern with the development of an audience worthy of such a literature; and that, without a worthy literature, the Negro certainly can never come to much.³

A discovery of Sterling Brown's idea of God - gained by an examination of his poetry - will enable one to see the re-kindled religious trend of the New Negro. One writer says that his poem, "When De Saints Go Ma'chin' Home",⁴ is worth a treatise on religion. If that be so, the Negro

¹Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 233.

²James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 254.

³Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 254.

⁴Sterling Brown, Southern Road, pp. 12-18.

still believes in the Justice of the Personal God Who created him. In the story which the poem tells, the doctrine of God's Providence, Justice and Supreme Authority still claims the poet's adherence. Of course, he uses the natural as a means to see and understand the supernatural, and he judges the happenings in heaven by those on earth:

An' de little brown skinned chillen
 Wid deir skinny legs a-dancin',
 Jes a-kickin' up ridic'lous
 To de heavenly band,
 Lookin' at de Great Drum Major
 On a white hoss jes a-prancin',
 Wid a gold an' silver drumstick
 A-waggin' in his han'.

... ..

Whiffolks sho' to bring nigger out behin',
 Excep' - When de saints go ma'chin' home.

Again the Providence of God is sung in the poem, "The Young Ones,"¹ which tells of the life of a Negro family. Everyone who is able works in the cotton field - still there is little money for support. Although the children are underfed, old and young have no place where to play or go, mother is ill and a new baby has come, - Papy is happy and trusting:

¹ Sterling Brown, "The Young Ones," Poetry, July 1938, Vol. LII, pp. 189-190.

But their papy's happy
 And they hear him say:
 The good Lord giveth,
 And taketh away - -

... ..

It's two more hands
 For to carry a row
 Praise God from Whom
 All blessings flow.

"Sister Lou"¹ is beautiful in its simplicity, and it, too, tells of the Goodness and Justice of God. To those who look on death as a horror, the poem is a sweet balm. The author makes the speaker almost childish in her concept of God and heaven - it is seeing heaven with the eyes of earth. The little ones saw it, who ask, "Will I get all I want in heaven?"

Honey, when de man
 Calls out de las' train
 You're gonna ride,
 Tell him howdy.

Gather up yo' basket
 An' yo' knittin' an' yo' things
 An' go on up an' visit
 Wid frien' Jesus fo' a spell.

Show Marfa
 How to make yo' greengrape jellies;
 An' give po' Lazarus
 A passel of them Golden Biscuits.

¹Sterling Brown, "Sister Lou," Opportunity, Vol. X, Jan. 1932, p. 11.

Scald some meal
 Fo' some right down good spoonbread
 Fo' li'l box-plunkin' David.

An' sit aroun'
 An' tell them Hebrew chillen
 All yo' stories.

Honey, don't be feared o' them
 pearly gates,
 Don't go roun' to de back;
 No mo' dataway -
 Not evah no mo'.

Let Michael tote yo' burden
 An' yo' pocketbook an' evahthing
 'Cept yo' Bible.
 While Gabriel blows somp'n
 Solemn but loudsome
 On dat horn of his'n.

Honey, go straight on to de Big House
 An' speak to yo' God
 Widout no fear an' tremblin';
 Then, sit down
 An' pass the time of Day awhile.

Give a good talkin'to
 Yo' favorite 'postle Peter;
 An' rub the po' head
 Of mixed up Judas,
 An' joke awile wid Jonah.

Then, when you get the chance,
 Always rememberin' yo' raisin,
 Let 'em know youse tired -
 Just a mite tired.

Jesus will find yo' bed fo' you,
 Won't no servant ever bother wid yo' room.
 Jesus will lead you
 To a room wid windows
 Openin' on cherry trees an' plum trees
 Bloomin' everlastin'.

An' dat will be yours
 Fo' keeps.
 Den take yo' time,
 Honey, take yo' blessed time.

From the inference above there is no doubt that the Negro believes in God, appreciates His great friendship, His mercy, His goodness, His tender love, even as the Infinite perfections are contemplated. There is no disrespect of His endless Power, or His Kingship; nor of His Leadership as Master of heaven and earth, or of His kindness so tenderly expressed in the preceding poem.

Sterling Brown, as the spokesman for the present-day educated men and women of the dark race, tells without a doubt that the Negro is coming back to his own, that he is revealing again an innate faith and love of God, not as childishly confiding as the old slave, but filially, as befits one who has greater understanding and appreciation.

In the years of Negro bondage in America, God spoke to the impressionable hearts of song-loving "black bards", and their response to His words came forth in folk songs that tell the world of their thoughts, beliefs, deeds and aspirations.

The Negroes' ideas of God and of spiritual things had degenerated into superstition in the long years before the first slave ship reached American shores, and their owners, thereafter, were apparently in no hurry to set aright the distorted beliefs of these poor sheep grazing just outside the Shepherd's fold. God, however, making use of varied agents - the hearts of religious leaders of different sects - sent the Gospel to these soul-hungry slaves and thereby gave them a true knowledge of Himself and of man's relation to Him.

Though the intentions of some of these messengers of God were purely human and therefore very imperfect, the united efforts, labors and sacrifices of them all reaped a blessing. There resulted a people who looked to the All-Powerful for help in their every need of soul and body; a people whom, in time, this same God

set free and to whom He gave a priceless heritage - great peace of soul under any and all circumstances.

After emancipation the Negro experienced a greater need for help and guidance, and here again he could only look toward Heaven. Hence, two poets of that era - Phillis Wheatley and Hammon, her predecessor - manifest in their writings perfect confidence and childlike trust in God. Dunbar's work, however, shows that the way to God and Heaven was not always clear. Instead, it was sometimes clouded by the inexplicable delay of Divine Providence in measuring out Justice to all men here in this world.

Later, when the world armed itself to fight for freedom and justice, the Negro awoke; he became conscious of the need for such warfare; he grew vindictive; and he resolved that, with God's help, he, the oppressed black man, would fight, too, for freedom and justice. Armed with the weapon of education and a determination to win, the Afro-Americans, James Weldon Johnson and Countee Cullen, put into their literary productions a

advancement, equality and justice: Christianization of

new spirit, and brought into being a resolute people eager to fight and to win with God's help. In Cullen's poetry, however, the Negro wavers in his concept of God. The injustice that reigns in the world and which affects the Colored man particularly, obstructs his vision and causes him to question the possibility of a good and just Being.

Then, in the presence of opportunities denied him solely on account of the deep pigment of his skin, the Negro mistook the creature for the Creator and voiced his wavering faith in bitter accents found in some of the poems of Langston Hughes. The so-called cultured of the race no longer found solace in the Church - the old Institutions could no more satisfy the emotional soul of this people of African descent. They, therefore, sought substitutes in blues, high life and the like.

Today, these latter attractions are beginning to fade. The black artists in the different fields are seeing more clearly that "the ways of God are not like unto man's." He realizes that there is but one answer to advancement, equality and justice: Christianization of Man.

When the handiwork of God, therefore, becomes obedient to Him Who is Master and Friend, Lord of Justice even as He sits as King and Shepherd over His people, then will social problems be solved. When art, the true expression of the universal spirit of humanity, is guided and enriched by true, religious principles, then will its sentiments be those of a Christian Democracy.

(My Longton Signet for AMF)

Almost ten years ago now, I wrote a poem in the form of a dramatic monologue entitled "The Church" with the intention in mind of shocking into being in religious people a consciousness of the admitted shortcomings of the church in regard to the condition of the poor and depressed of the world, particularly the Negro people.

Just previous to the writing of the poem, in 1911 I had made a tour through the heart of our industrial Southland. For the first time I saw poverty written on the faces of the children of the white children and of the Negro children (both of whose parents work and pay

APPENDIX

CONCERNING "GOODBYE, CHRIST"

Noted Poet Explains Poem That Irked Aimee Semple McPherson and Was Reprinted Unauthorized in Saturday Evening Post.

(By Langston Hughes for ANP)

Almost ten years ago now, I wrote a poem in the form of a dramatic monologue entitled GOODBYE, CHRIST with the intention in mind of shocking into being in religious people a consciousness of the admitted shortcomings of the church in regard to the condition of the poor and depressed of the world, particularly the Negro people.

Just previous to the writing of the poem, in 1931 I had made a tour through the heart of our American Southland. For the first time I saw peonage, million dollar high schools for white children and shacks for the Negro children (both of whose parents work and pay

taxes and are Americans), I saw vast areas in which Negro citizens were not permitted to vote, I saw the Scottsboro boys in prison in Alabama and Colored Citizens of the state afraid to utter a word in their defense. I crossed rivers by ferry where the Negro drivers of cars had to wait until the white cars behind them had been accommodated before boarding the ferry even if it meant missing the boat.

I motored as far North as Seattle and back across America to New York through towns and cities where neither board nor bed was to be had if you were colored, cafes, hotels, and tourist camps being closed to all non-whites. I saw the horrors of hunger and unemployment among them in the segregated ghettos of our great cities. I saw lecture halls and public cultural institutions closed to them. I saw Hollywood caricatures of what pass for Negroes on the screens that condition the attitudes of the nation. I visited state and religious colleges to which no Negroes were admitted.

To me these things appeared unbelievable in a Christian country. Had not Christ said, "Such as you do unto the least of these, ye do it unto Me?" But almost nobody

seemed to care. Sincere Christians seeking to combat this condition were greatly in the minority.

Directly from this extensive tour of America, I went to the Soviet Union. There it seemed to me that Marxism had put into practical being many of the precepts which our own Christian America had not yet been able to bring to life, for, in the Soviet Union, meagre as the resources of the country were, white and black, Asiatic and European, Jew and Gentile stood alike as citizens on equal footing protected from racial inequalities by the law. There were no programs, no lynchings, no jim crow cars as there had once been in Tzarist Asia, nor were the newspapers or movies permitted to ridicule or malign any people because of race. I was deeply impressed by these things.

It was then I wrote GOODBYE, CHRIST. In the poem I contrasted what seemed to me the declared forthright position of those who, on the religious side in America (in apparent actions toward my people) had said to Christ and the Christian principle "Goodbye, beat it on away from here now, you're done for." I gave to such religionists what seemed to me to be their own words merged with

the words of the orthodox Marxist who declared he had no further use nor need for religion.

I couched the poem in the language of the first person, I, as many poets have done in the past in writing of various characters other than themselves. The I which I pictured was the newly liberated peasant of the state collectives I had seen in Russia merged with those American Negro workers of the depression period who believed in the Soviet dream and the hope it held out for a solution of their racial and economic difficulties. (Just as the I pictured in many of my blues poems is the poor and uneducated Negro of the South and not myself who grew up in Kansas).

At the time that GOODBYE, CHRIST first appeared, many persons seemed to think I was the characterized I of the poem. Then, as now, they failed to see the poem in connection with my other work, including many verses most sympathetic to the true Christian spirit for which I have always had great respect - such as section of poems, FEET OF JESUS, in my book, THE DREAM KEEPER, or the chapters on religion in my novel, NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER

which received the Harmon Gold Award from the Federated Council of Churches. They failed to consider GOODBYE, CHRIST in the light of various of my other poems in the ironic or satirical veins such as RED SILK STOCKINGS - which some of my critics took to be literal advice.

Today, accompanied by a sound truck playing GOD BLESS AMERICA and bearing pickets from the Aimee Semple McPherson Temple of the Four Square Gospel in Los Angeles, my poem of ten years ago is resurrected without my permission and distributed on handbills before a Pasadena Hotel where I was to speak on Negro folk songs. Some weeks later it was reprinted in The Saturday Evening Post, a magazine whose columns, like the doors of many of our churches has been until recently entirely closed to Negroes, and whose chief contribution in the past to a better understanding on Negro life in America has been the Octavius Roy Cohen stories with which most colored have been utterly disgusted.

Now, in the year 1941, having left the terrain of "the radical at twenty" to approach the "conservative of forty" I would not and could not write GOODBYE, CHRIST, desiring no longer to epateur le bourgeois. However,

since those at present engaged in distributing my poem do not date it, nor say how long it was written, I feel impelled for the benefit of persons reading the poem for the first time, to make the following statements:

GOODBYE, CHRIST does not represent my personal viewpoint. It was long ago withdrawn from circulation and has been reprinted recently without my knowledge or consent. I would not now use such a technique of approach since I feel that a mere poem is quite unable to compete, in power to shock, with the current horrors of war and oppression abroad in the greater part of the world. Furthermore, I have come to believe that no system of ethics, religion, morals, or government is of permanent value which does not first start with and change the human heart. Mortal frailty, greed, and error know no boundary lines. The explosives of war do not care whose hands fashion them. Certainly, both Marxists and Christians can be cruel. Would that Christ came back to save us all. We do not know how to save ourselves.

634 St. Nicholas Avenue,
New York, 30, New York,
June 21, 1945.

Sister Mary Helena,
Convent of the Holy Family,
New Orleans, La.

Dear Sister Mary Helena,

I would be happy to have you use my statement concerning the poem, GOODBYE CHRIST in your thesis. The statement was released following my being picketed by Aimee Semple McPherson in Pasadena, California, in the fall of 1940, and was released through the Associated Negro Press to more than two hundred weekly Negro papers in which it appeared during, I believe, the month of December of that year. I am sorry I do not have clippings available at the moment to give you exact dates. A further oral statement was delivered at Wayne University in Detroit in April of this year when Gerald L. K. Smith's America First group threw a picket line around the college on the day I was speaking there. I said then that I considered the poem as not anti-religious but anti those who misuse religion, anti those who preach Christ and yet in thousands of churches throughout America today, do not and will not receive Negroes in the congregations, anti those also, both Negro and white, who use the church as a racket as did Rev. Becton of the Consecrated Dime and, as I believe, certain of those who have picketed me on account of the poem do.

I said at Detroit (as was reported in the press) that I have only the greatest of respect for sincere religionists of all denominations. I have written many other poems paying tribute to sincere and humble devotion to the principles of Christ, particularly as expressed in the Negro spirituals. (A section of these poems are to be found in my book, THE DREAM KEEPER.) What the poem really tried to say - unsuccessfully to be sure since it was written many years ago - is that those who misuse the church for purposes of bigotry, greed, and the carrying on of racial hatreds and

divisions are really pushing Christ from His own temple and, speaking satirically, ironically, He might as well go along, bidding the Pharisee farewell.

Those who attacked my poem so vigorously apparently have not read my novel, NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER, with its picture there of the devoted Aunt Hager, nor any of my other poems on religion. However, the reactionaries in our American churches, upholding as they do the color bar, are I fear more interested in attacking Negro progress than in attacking the ugly social conditions that breed such riots as those in Los Angeles recently against the Mexican people and today in Detroit against the Negroes. I have never heard of either Aime McPherson or Gerald L. K. Smith doing anything about Jim Crow. (Both are ministers of the gospel.) Which doesn't mean there aren't fine ministers and priests, too, and genuinely good Christian people. There are, as we both know. Incidentally, one of my dearest friends who has done much to help me with my literary work is a devout Catholic, as were the three wonderful old Mexican ladies who, in Mexico City, looked after me as a child and of whom I write in my book, THE BIG SEA.

With kindest regards to you,

Sincerely,

LANGSTON HUGHES

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