December 1979

Introduction to Prosatori Negri Americani del Novecento, Translated by Patrick Brancaccio

Piero Boitani

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.
Introduction to
Prosatori Negri Americani
del Novecento

by PIERO BOITANI
TRANSLATED by PATRICK BRANCACCIO

Traditions, Problems, Early Developments

OLOUĐAH EQUIANO was born about 1745 at Essaka, near Benin, in what is now Nigeria. He was kidnapped and sold as a slave at the age of 11 or 12, but found a kind master, obtained his liberty, and settled in England. The two volumes of his autobiography, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oluudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the first substantial work in English prose by a black writer, appeared in London in 1789. As the author was born and raised in Africa, one would expect the book to contain a wealth of African elements in style and structure. Instead it is totally English in its approach, even though Vassa often indulges in descriptions of his native land. This is an extreme case, one may say, of a widespread condition among Afro-American writers, and I have chosen it precisely because it marks the beginning of black prose in the English language at a time when the existential tie of the author with Africa was still operative. Between Gustavus Vassa and the Dark Continent there do not exist the numerous generations of slaves which weigh on the black writers of the following two centuries. Yet nothing of Africa remains; Western culture has totally taken hold of him.

Notwithstanding the polemics of our own day, therefore, if one considers the "cultivated" elements in black American literature, one is inevitably led to the conclusion that the African tradition has been completely uprooted. However, there are significant exceptions: those cases which indicate an aspiration and an interior conflict in which the "cultivated" writer turns consciously to popular forms in order to exploit them—in a manner which is nevertheless typical of western culture.

The African element survives only in the popular tradition. Whereas it seems now demonstrated that the origin of folktales is not specifically
African, as was often believed in the past, all agree that African origins can be traced in black music, particularly in the Spirituals and the Blues: "It [Negro music] was the one vector out of African culture impossible to eradicate. It signified the existence of an Afro-American, and the existence of an Afro-American culture. And in the evolution of form in Negro music it is possible to see not only the evolution of the Negro as a cultural and social element of American culture but also the evolution of that culture itself." In attempting to define a cultural tradition which records the development of black prose, we require a summary of the principal features of the two musical forms which are so important to the inspiration and construction of the novels and stories we will discuss.

The Spiritual is born of the encounter between African and western culture. With time the slaves who were abducted to America lost the use of their native languages, but they preserved their vision of life for much longer: their religious practices, songs, poetry, and dances. Within the framework of their ideas and principles, they absorbed the new surroundings which they were forced to live in. Particularly important in many African cultures had been, and is, the ritual of initiation, a period of time in which a member of the tribe is considered "dead" and must undergo a number of trials before being "reborn" into a new life, with a new name and a new place in society.

"Nothing shows so clearly as the words of the Spirituals that the Afro-Americans saw slavery as such an initiation stage. There are constant references to death as the precondition for rebirth in the true life. The Christian idea of death and resurrection, and the African idea of death and rebirth, are not all that far removed from each other. So the latter could be expressed through the former; and conversely, bits of Christian eschatology were absorbed into African religious concepts." The Spiritual invokes a better future in a magical manner characteristic of African tradition. The religion of the Spirituals is not a religion of contemplation or adoration like that of the Christians, but one of evocation. Evocation and invocation are magical practices, and magic requires very precise techniques like the use of musical instruments, the drum, and dance. But because the drum was forbidden to the slaves, as was the practice of dancing, the Spiritual emerged by passing through the stage of the "ring-shout" (a dance in the round but performed with a drum): "The slaves found an opportunity to invoke a god in the new language by calling the name without drums ('Lord, Lord,' 'Jesus, Jesus'). They got to know Bible stories, put images and figures from the stories into their own setting of religious expression, and "africanized" the forms of worship in these services."

3. Ibid., p. 159.
In the course of this process of adaptation, a characteristically African “polymetry” was lost, but a “polyrhythm” was preserved (a single meter which is elaborated through a diversity of rhythmic variations scored by a group of different instruments). Also retained was the lyrical device of “statement-response,” the so-called “heterophony of variants,” fixed cadences, changes of tone, variations. The use of the word responds above all to the necessary “imperative” which is typically African: “They [the Spirituals] do not describe a world as it is, but demand deliverance from affliction. Basically, therefore, they have a single but universal theme.”

Protest and the hope for a better life after death coexist in the Spiritual, but in an organic rather than mechanical relationship: salvation and liberation are not projected into an eschatological future, but take shape in the present through ecstasy.

The blues are secular songs, solo rather than choral works, describing personal experiences that are typical of the community. The music and the words are improvised, but in obedience to very strict rules. The African device of statement-response functions here also. The second part must be, according to what Jahn calls “the logic of the blues,” a true response to the “statement” which constitutes the first part, either as an expansion, a justification, an explanation, or an antithesis of it. It is, in fact, a self-conscious, sophisticated form of popular poetry. It is rooted in an irony which often mocks the singer himself through exaggeration and understatement. It continues the African tradition of “praise songs” and “mocking songs.” It remains tied to the social background which produces it; it cannot present natural descriptions, and the feelings which it expresses are controlled, even in suffering, by irony and wit. Furthermore we must guard against looking upon the blues as a static form. In time it reached a classic structure (twelve beats divided into three verses with a rhyme scheme of A A B), and it also underwent changes following the shift in surroundings through the migration from country to city, and through the improvisations of individual singers. Blues and jazz, which are autonomous forms independent of each other, though also intimately connected, later give birth to incredibly vital creations such as those of Louis Armstrong.

In conclusion, in black music we have the fusion of distinct traditions such as the African, the American, and the French (New Orleans and original jazz). This fact has an enormous importance for the culture of the writers I am about to discuss, the best among whom strive to recapture the musical experiences which are so deeply rooted in the black spirit.

In New York in 1880 Joel Chandler Harris published the first volume in his Uncle Remus series. The event is a milestone in the history of

---

black literature because the stories collected in Harris's books constitute, together with music, the fulcrum of popular American black culture. Once again, let us summarize briefly the essential facts in this development in order to clarify the discussion which follows. I will rely on Dorson's theses about the origin of folktales because of the scientific rigor with which they have been worked out:

The first declaration to make is that this body of tales does not come from Africa. It does not indeed come from any one place but from a number of different points, as the comparative notes make clear. Many of the fictions, notably the animal tales, are of demonstrably European origin. Others have entered the Negro repertoire from England, from the West Indies, from American white tradition, and from the social conditions and historical experiences of colored people. Only a few plots and incidents can be distinguished as West African. . . . The conclusion emerges that the New World Negro repertoire falls into two groups of stories, one pointing toward Africa and one pointing toward Europe and Anglo-America. The Atlantic and Caribbean islands and northeastern South America comprise the first block and the plantation states of the Old South the second block. But both story stocks draw from multiple sources.  

But it seems more important to me to note, as Dorson does, that the characteristics of the folk repertoire underwent important mutations as social conditions changed, especially in the tendency toward an ever more open protest and toward a significant adaptation to the rhythms of the urban ghetto. Though the themes, the motifs, and types into which the folktales are classifiable are naturally quite numerous, it is not necessary to delineate them in a non-specialist work. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that the range is vast, from stories of animals and birds to those centered around relations between whites and blacks; from accounts of spirits, "hoodoos," miracles and horrors, to protest tales, the pranks of madmen, preachers, or Irishmen, to the so-called "lying tales." An extraordinary wealth of fantasy, of characterization, and of humor distinguishes all the best collections. Irony dominates almost everywhere. Characters like Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear, Old Master and John, witches, fools, and ministers of every sect, all merge with vitality to satisfy the end of all these popular stories, which is "entertainment." But we should not forget that folktales are, in fact, oral literature, and as such they possess quite strict rules, a body of devices which must be considered an art. This is one of the most important aspects of the thesis which I wish to propose, since black writers have doubtless been listeners to and in some cases imitators of the "storytellers." Above all, the connection between storytelling and folk music has been very close. Fragments of popular songs interrupt and make up an organic part of the story: "The intoned prayer, the rhythmic cry, the chanted phrase, and the religious lyric become the stock in trade of Southern Negroes, and their tales incorporate these posses-

This brings us directly to the cante-fable which combines narration and song. The art of storytelling is not made up solely of inventions, but also, and to a large degree, of an imitative capacity: mimicry, dialogue taken from life, alterations of tone, of rhythmic sounds, the sounds of bewitched places or of machines, voices in falsetto. All of these play an important role in narration. Naturally, idiomatic language bestows on the story a flavor all its own. The vocabulary is rich and spicy, the imagery is bold, there are numerous newly-coined terms, and the use of speech excites the narrator who gives vent to inventive expression and the most original definitions, based on metaphors mainly drawn from nature. Finally, the reciting and acting out with gestures of the most exciting part of the story is a device often used by the best of storytellers. The custom of storytelling is very widespread in the South, and it is thus relaxed and free from personal complications or tensions. Storytelling is an integral part of the daily social life: "it is not a talent of the few, but an ability possessed by the many."

Music and the folktale constitute the background against which the better part of what black prose has given us has been formed, especially in our century. It is clear, however, that the western literary tradition, and in particular the Anglo-Saxon, had a determining influence on autobiography, short stories, and novels, the three major genres cultivated by black prose writers. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, black cultural history witnessed the slow but constant expansion of its literary horizon. Limited—even linguistically—to a certain part of the English tradition which is still late Romantic or Victorian, it came to incorporate a more decidedly American element only at the beginning of the new century. Yet the influence of the black middle class exerts a braking force in this direction, especially in the novel, which remains tied to abolitionist and protest literature.

To DuBois at first, and then to the circle of writers in the Harlem Renaissance, can be ascribed the merit of initiating a process of renewal which moved in one direction towards the philosophical and literary experiences of Europe—sociology, Marxism, symbolism—and in the other towards black popular tradition. The case of Jean Toomer, even though it is exceptional in its magnitude, well illustrates the attempt to adapt black prose to the contemporary literary milieu. The movement of the black masses to the urban ghettos in the North diverts attention first toward the American and then toward the continental naturalistic tradition. Even those writers of the twenties and thirties who, like Steinbeck, look more closely into social and proletarian reality, begin to circulate among black literati. The example of Richard Wright is, in this context, emblematic. In the years of World War II it seems that the influence of the literature of the early decades of the century comes to

6. Ibid., p. 49.
the fore: Joyce, Kafka, and Eliot exert formative influences on the new writers of the post-war period, along with Dostoievski, whose importance, as I will demonstrate later, is fundamental for Wright and Ellison.

The process of updating is completed in the fifties. Existentialism influences the later Wright and the essays of James Baldwin. In Paris black American writers encounter the Négitude movement, and an important set of exchanges and debates is begun. Ideology, with ninety-year old DuBois once more at the forefront, followed by various liberation movements, turns towards the extreme left. The black writer of our own day is in full possession of the western literary tradition, and seeks to free himself from an influence which has too often dominated him or absorbed him indiscriminately. This fact forces a confrontation with the racial problem which has been undoubtedly the most serious one for the black writer, and also for the critic of black literature. Can one, must one speak of black writers in terms of how much they do or do not belong to the black race? Can one and must one judge them on the basis of whether or not and to what degree they adhere to the cause of their people, in terms of their betrayal or their courage?

A European is probably both at an advantage and at a disadvantage with respect to an American, whether he be white or black; the relative distance from the social problem of race perhaps permits Europeans a greater critical detachment, but at the same time it prevents the more direct contact which is highly useful for understanding certain attitudes and events. I have prepared these essays in America, forcing myself to verify my approach in the light of what I have seen. My reply to the question posed a little while ago might be the following: first, one may speak of black writers insofar as they belong to a tradition which is their own and is not that of all American writers, but without forgetting that there are important points of contact between the two lines. Thus, a particular attention to the changes in black ideology is both justified and necessary. Second, these writers cannot be judged only in terms of their relationship to the black problem, but they must be considered and evaluated on an historical basis and on the basis of whether or not they respond to reality. A specifically political judgment cannot be completely eliminated since its absence would create an incomplete picture of historical and literary reality. My work deals with essentially three principal aspects of black prose: autobiography, the short story, and the novel. The consideration and evaluation of ideological tendencies and political attitudes are reserved for the first two categories where, it seems to me, they are more relevant to the artistic success of a work. This attitude has been maintained with great flexibility even in the consideration of novels where it seems to me that literary criticism should be uppermost and determining. Finally, I have kept constantly in mind that interior drama which all major black prose writers have suffered
and suffer, that intricate and dramatic complex which we can call "race."

From the point of view of literary history, all of this involves an exact verification of the movement of black prose between literature, where the esthetic function is foremost, and communication, where the documentary function dominates. It is evident that, in this sense, the oscillation is greatest in the field of the essay and autobiography, and minimal in the field of narrative.

In Booker T. Washington, in DuBois, in the Wright of Black Boy, and in Baldwin as an essay-writer, we shall note, in each individual case, the importance of the communicative function and/or the esthetic, but in time there develops a progressive predominance of the latter over the former.

From the stylistic point of view, it is clear that a constant oscillation between the two functions in essay writing implies a prevalence of oratory and of emotional language—as in fact occurs in DuBois, in Baldwin, and, to a lesser degree, in the autobiographical work of Wright—and the emergence of a tradition the roots of which can be found in the black sermon, in the literature of abolitionist propaganda, and in the works of Frederick Douglass. Once again, in the search into the origins of black prose, the oral tradition assumes primary importance; the art of the black sermon is in fact composed essentially by those devices which allow the preacher, by means of the word, to excite the audience, sometimes even to the point of ecstasy. The African heritage, intermingled with Biblico-Christian elements, re-emerges in the black homiletic tradition in America. The style of the sermons is picturesque and even ecstatic. Rhythm, repetition, questions from the preachers and answers from the congregation, laments, gestures, idiomatic language, speech delivered in a sing-song, whispered, or intoned manner, and the chants themselves, are the salient characteristics of the sermon. It is not the sole creation of the preacher, but results from the "involvement" of the individual worshipper and the mass of worshippers. The crescendo which is ever more intense and compact, in which all the elements are brought progressively into play, finally invokes the God of the Bible and provokes ecstasy. I have mentioned the Bible on purpose, for the central themes of the black sermon are traditionally the same as those we find in the Spiritual: the epic-dramatic theme of the Flight from Egypt or of Jerusalem or of the Messiah, finds a correspondence in the spiritual state of the Afro-Americans, who often identify religiously with Israel persecuted, dispersed and expectant, in the Old Testament.

When the sermon comes to be written, the better part of the African elements are lost. The sermons of Haynes, of Cannon, of Absalom Jones, of Peter Williams, of Alexander Crummel, are all formally “European.” Only The Rise and Progress of the Kingdom of Light and Darkness of Lorenzo Dow Blackson possesses the originality and the force of the live sermon and shows typically African characteristics. The sermons are founded on religious motifs from the western tradition mixed with gestures and characteristic attitudes from the African tradition. The peculiar oratory which is a result of this mixture is of fundamental importance in the writing of black authors, especially the most recent ones, as in the case of Baldwin in The Fire Next Time.

The literature derived from abolitionist propaganda—especially from white abolitionists—stresses this religious element; on the other hand, that which derives from black abolitionists includes a typically American rhetorical element which is related to the Declaration of Independence and the Founding Fathers. The birth of the black novel is tied to abolitionism, and particularly to Harriet Beecher Stowe. Abolitionism, and especially black abolitionism, brought about the flowering of autobiography, and the birth of the essay a little later. Ever since 1788 the blacks had started something which, though not quite abolitionist, can be called anti-slavery literature. The November-December issue of the American Museum of that year published an article entitled, “An Essay on Slavery,” signed by “Othello,” a free Negro. On the 19th of August, 1791, Benjamin Banneker sent Thomas Jefferson a famous letter, published in Philadelphia the following year, in which he condemned the degradation and barbarism of slavery and asked for equality and the recognition of “human nature” for the “African race.” It is the first classic of black protest and confirms the origins of this vein in the ideology of the Revolution and of the Founding Fathers.

Freedom’s Journal, founded by a group of blacks in 1827, marked the official birth of black abolitionism. The Liberator, which was published for the first time on the first of January, 1831, set white abolitionism in motion. Though the Appeal of David Walker (1829), the first and most widely circulated abolitionist pamphlet, was written by a black, it was not until the forties that black orators were used extensively as speakers at abolitionist meetings. Theodore Wright, James Forten, Robert Purvis and Charles Lenox Redmond, the few speakers of the thirties, were followed by Henry Bibb, Lunsford Lane, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and above all, Samuel Ringgold Ward, William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass. It was they who were to create black oratory:

In their speeches . . . Negroes provided the most compelling propaganda against the institution of slavery, the fugitives serving as a constant reminder of the millions of slaves who had not been able to run away. Audiences flocked to hear these speakers describe the whippings administered by the overseers, the separation from loved ones . . . and the
often hectic efforts to get beyond the reach of slave catchers and bloodhounds. In the most personal terms they told exactly what slavery meant to them, and, speaking of what they had seen and experienced, they were deeply convincing.8

The salient characteristics of this oratory are therefore autobiography, sentimentality, and a romanticism typical of the romance genre: ‘‘I was free, but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land,’’ said Harriet Tubman, recounting the outcome of her own flight to the North, and revealing in this manner the whole stylistic bent of her oratory.

Up until the forties, however, the white abolitionists held the field: Garrison and Whittier, the two major exponents of the movement, exerted a determining influence: ‘‘I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. . . . I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.’’ Thus wrote Garrison in The Liberator on January 1, 1831; it was he who introduced into abolitionism its puritanical element, a quality as much moral as it was religious. He was ‘‘an ascetic who cared nothing for ease or preferment; a pacifist who fought only with the sword of the spirit; a stern moralist prophesying wrath upon a nation of mockers, and pronouncing doom on a people who had forgotten God . . . an agitator fashioned after the ancient Hebrew pattern.’’9 Much more gentle was Whittier whose pamphlet of 1833, Justice and Expediency, reflects the Quaker spirit which inspired his ideas of non-violence and his goal of a political solution. Because of this philosophy he broke with Garrison, who had been converted to ‘‘spiritual anarchism.’’ Of Whittier, Parrington says: ‘‘Not with musket and ball would he fight, like old John Brown; but with the sword of the spirit. The solution must lie with the conscience of the American people. As a Friend, a man of peace, he would not deal harshly with the supporters of slavery; he would not counsel violence. But as a Yankee with a gift for politics, he would use political means to jog a slothful conscience and marshal its forces.’’10 Even though it took place in the preliminary decades of the 19th century, the division between the two anticipated the ideological dilemma typical of black intellectuals, alternating between protest and persuasion, revolution and political solutions, violence and non-violence. The study of this dilemma will be the constant theme of my work.

The climate of abolitionism, both white and black, gave birth to the two main works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851–52) and Dred (1856). She derives her themes, characters, and plots from puritan religious fanaticism and from the accounts of ex-

slaves. The pathos of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is too well known to stress here, but less well-known perhaps is the theme of *Dred*, which is derived from *The Confessions of Nat Turner* of 1831. For that matter, the character of Uncle Tom is derived from the *Autobiography* of Josiah Henson of 1851. But what interests us most today is what Harriet Beecher Stowe makes of her sources, the method which she follows in her treatment. Concerning this method, Ellen Moers observes: “The method and naivete derived from Scott, her favorite and most closely studied predecessor among novelists. She seems to have steeped herself in the writings of fugitive slaves and other documents of slavery; then she concocted from what she had learned and learned to feel an imaginary society of blacks, improbably colorful, and presented her creation as ideally representative of complex reality; that is, as ‘absolute truth.’”

Here we find the central equivocation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novels, and that of all those black narrators who unconsciously follow her example, until the beginning of the twentieth century, that of creating a one-dimensional world which is offered as “absolute or essential reality.” It is the error of Scott and of the Romantics, and Stowe’s novels are, in fact, romances with their idealization of people, their aristocratic heroes, and their pathos. All of this is true of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as it is of *Dred*; and the first, as I have noted, had created a literary figure, a type, a myth which weighs on all the following black writers, determining their attitude in facing “the problem.” Adherence to or reaction against the figure of Uncle Tom defines, in a certain sense, the writing of Booker T. Washington and of Richard Wright, just to cite the two extreme cases. The Uncle Tom complex also operates in Ellison’s novel and in the essays of Baldwin.

In the romanticism of the novel we see therefore a confluence of the abolitionism of Harriet Beecher Stowe—with all the slave narratives of the nineteenth century which inspire it, as we have seen—and the oratory of the black abolitionists—with all its tradition of autobiography, and later of the essay, to which it is connected.

The three editions (1845, 1851, 1881 with three different titles) of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* bring black prose of the nineteenth century to its apex. It is not accidental that large sections of this work are cited by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; the puritan authoress takes the figure of Douglass as a model for the characters of George Harris and Harry Gordon in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dred* respectively. These give an external demonstration of the confluence of which I have spoken. For an internal confirmation, we have the image of himself which Douglass offers in the *Narrative*, irrefutably romantic in its account of the sufferings, battles, and escapes.

which shaped his personality. The battle for liberty, and above all, for idealism, is the central theme of the book. If we stop to consider the style, it is very clear that the substance of democratic oratory is closely allied to the "romantic dithyrambs of the Founding Fathers," which was to be the style of Abraham Lincoln himself. On the other hand, it is obvious that the entire long tradition of black autobiography influences the structure of Douglass's work: from the Narrative of Briton Hammon in 1760, to the autobiography of Vassa, to those of Moses Grandy and Lunsford Lane, protests, detailed descriptions and adventure stories provide the key for the genre. The esthetic and the documentary functions come together in the emotional language of Douglass. The Narrative of William Wells Brown (1848), the Autobiography of Josiah Henson (1851), the similar works by Henry Bibb, Lewis Garrard Clarke, Julius Melbourne, Solomon Northrup, James Pennington and Austin Steward, all appeared between 1848 and 1857, and confirm the convergence of abolitionist literature, the novel, and of oratory which I have described.

In 1853 the first novel written by a black author, Clotel, by William Wells Brown, appeared. The work was intended to arouse the sympathy of English readers (it was published in London) for the abolitionist cause, and it was, needless to say, a romance. Clotel is sold as a slave together with her mother and her sister, and after suffering the vicissitudes of slavery and flight from a group of slave chasers, she throws herself into the Potomac not far from the White House. The irony of the conclusion rests on the author's declaration that the heroine is the illegitimate child of Jefferson; the romantic manner is evident, and the propagandistic intention is openly declared.

The flowering of autobiography, the birth of the novel, the development of abolitionist literature, these are the three facts which define what seems to me the central mode of black literature between 1845 and 1855, a little before, and then contemporaneous with, the American Renaissance.

The figures of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe dominate the scene. Though different because Douglass adheres to secular democracy and Stowe to puritan religion, they are closely related in their use of romance: the former in the use of emotional and propagandistic oratory and the latter with her reliance on pathos. In the decade between 1845 and 1855, the esthetic and documentary functions which I have been stressing reach their point of equilibrium, and for the first time define clearly the two horns of the dilemma of black ideology, found in the work of two whites, Garrison and Whittier.

The second "explosion" of black prose took place during the years from 1898 to 1903. This time the novel flourished more than the essay or autobiography. Dunbar's The Uncalled appeared in 1898, Sutton Griggs's Imperium in Imperio in 1899, Chestnutt's The House Behind
the Cedars and *The Marrow of Tradition* in 1900 and 1901. *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington appeared only in 1901 and in 1903 DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. While the major part of the following chapter is devoted to Washington and DuBois, a preliminary mention of the characteristics of this type of narrative is indispensable for an understanding of subsequent developments. This division is intended only for convenience. From an historical point of view *Up From Slavery* returns to the nineteenth century, the period of the novels already cited. Because I wish to compare them and to project them into the transition from one century to another, I will treat Washington and DuBois in the same essay. The background against which this black narrative of the turn of the century forms itself consists of the birth and the affirmation of a colored middle class, with all of the ideological ambiguity which is peculiar to it. The desire for integration and protest leads the writer toward the use of melodrama which, more than any other “tonality,” adapts itself to the moral need of the black to divide humanity into the “just” and the “wicked.” Assimilation thrusts them toward the *romance* and the “genteel tradition” in style—revealing also the bankruptcy of the form which speaks of revolt and protest in Victorian tones—and toward the use of “folk” material exclusively for comic purposes. The tragic figure of the mulatto, inherited from writers like G. W. Cable, W. D. Howells and Mark Twain, recurs often in these narratives. The central problem remains that of creating black characters who are “rounded.” The central characters in three of the four novels by Paul Lawrence Dunbar are white. The romantic attitude and the provincialism of the author are evident throughout. Racial protest is so “carefully veiled that only the most subtle readers grasp the point.” Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* is openly “nationalistic.” The black protest which is here displayed is both violent and absolute. Thus we arrive at the other extreme of the oscillation which I have already mentioned.

The two novels of Chestnutt mentioned above are without doubt better than those of Dunbar and Griggs; but even they move in the ambience I have sketched. The figure of the mulatto, a melodramatic tone, an excessive “gentility” of style are sure signs of the narrative world of the turn of the century. This world is still tied, because of all this, to the abolitionist tradition, and in particular to the *romance* of Harriet Beecher Stowe. The one-sidedness of *Uncle Tom* and *Dred* recurs in the black narrative of this second “explosion.” On the other hand, the short stories of Chestnutt himself, collected in *Wife of His Youth* (1899), deserve to be noticed separately. Completely new themes such as the power of dreams, or, more importantly, of relations between the races, emerge for the first time in black prose. Even the style, while

it retains some "genteel" elements, makes use of traditional models for
the inclusion of ironic comments, unexpected conclusions, anticipa-
tions, and records the "soft, easy flow of the on-the-porch-in-the-
evening storytelling." And from the line which Chestnutt follows in
his stories, a current of black narrative is formed which, together with addi-
tional elements, leads us to the names of James Weldon Johnson and
Jean Toomer.

We have thus uncovered numerous important roots of the black prose
of our century: music, folktales, the western literary tradition, the
sermon, abolitionism, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass,
the autobiography and the romance. We have also revealed the adher-
ence of black writers of the nineteenth century to documentary and
esthetic aims and the establishment of a certain equilibrium between
emotional language and a "genteel style" in the decade 1845–1855 and
in the five-year period 1898–1903.

We can now turn to the following essays, in which black prose of the
twentieth century is treated in separate chapters, each of which is dedi-
cated to one or more authors. But I must first explain my principle of
selection and the numerous gaps I have left between one writer and
another. I did not wish to construct a literary history of black American
literature in this work. These histories already exist for the novel in
America and for the literature of the nineteenth century, and there is no
reason to reproduce theses that have been already elaborated. I wish
rather to speak in greater depth about certain works of twentieth cen-
tury black prose each taken by itself, but clearly tied to a certain
tradition and to a certain problem. The division into monographic
essays, with the addition of this introduction which sketches in the past
as background to twentieth century literature, serves, I hope, this pur-
pose.

The selection of the authors is (as in the final analysis are all selec-
tions) arbitrary. I can only say that in my judgment each of these
authors represents an important stylistic and ideological moment in
black prose-writing of our century. Conversely, the gaps in my treat-
ment are also arbitrary, especially in the field of the novel. There are
works in this genre which belong to the tradition I have identified and
which have enriched it. For example, the Harlem Renaissance, a varied
and multi-faceted phenomenon, is here represented by Jean Toomer. A
treatment of the poetry of the movement would be very useful, and
there is a series of very significant prose works which form a part of it:
Claude MacKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana
Bottom* (1933); Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930); and
Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven* (1932). Moreover, there are
authors who stand out on this background, such as Arna Bontemps (I
particularly regret not having treated his first-rate novel, *Black Thun-
der*, 1939); William Attway (*Let Me Breathe Thunder*, 1939, and *Blood
on the Forge, 1941); Chester Himes (*If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945, *Lonely Crusade* and another thirteen novels up until 1966); Willard Motley (*Knock on Any Door*, 1947); and William Demby (*Beetlecreek*, 1950). Even a necessarily limited discussion of each of these authors would have produced a handbook of literary history, which was just what I wanted to avoid. For the present, I have sought to provide my readers with a bibliography of the essential information needed to deepen and integrate this work. I hope that Black Studies will spread in Europe and maintain the level which has already been reached by the works of Jean Wagner and Janheinz Jahn.

*University of Perugia*

*Italy*