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ABSTRACT

Negro literature in the ante-bellum period had as its main goals promoting emancipation of the slaves and protesting disenfranchisement of the free Negroes. To achieve these goals, it was necessary to disprove the widely-held concept of natural inferiority of the Negro race. Negro authors in their writings attempted to prove that their race was equal to their white countrymen in intelligence, abilities, and talents, and was as loyal, responsible, and patriotic. They endeavored to show that Negroes had made worth-while contributions to the development and establishment of the United States as a nation and thus were deserving of the full rights and privileges of American citizenship. This paper surveys some of this literature and discusses in detail four examples: an essay, poetry, a history, and an autobiography, to determine whether and how and if the authors fulfilled their purpose--to further abolition and enfranchisement for their race.

NEGRO ABOLITIONIST LITERATURE OF THE ANTE-BELLUM PERIOD

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In August, 1619, a vessel sailed into the bay of Jamestown Colony with twenty African natives bound in chains in the hold.[1] The captives, brought ashore and sold into slavery, became the first Negro slaves in the New World. Slave trade in the English colonies began at that moment.

The early Negro importees shared substantially the same rights and privileges as the indentured English bondsmen and convict debtors, as all had the privilege of reselling their labor by contract and purchasing their own freedom through individual enterprise.[2]

Originally, then, slavery was not primarily a difference of race; it was simply the result of undemocratic ideas and class distinctions prevalent in the society of the time. During the next 250 years, however, slavery as a particular condition of the Negro alone found its excuse in the "black exception" and the "apologia for slavery," the doctrine of Negro inferiority.[3] Under this doctrine, slaveholders and others in both the North and the South could claim to believe in the fundamental principles of American democracy, while at the same time defending

slavery, even though slavery and racism of any kind obviously contradicted these principles. They could do this because the doctrine held that Negroes were not human beings, that their unusual ability to bear pain and heat, their lack of emotions, seeming unhuman docility, and lack of ambition were the results of their sub-human nature. Thus even though the Constitution guaranteed equal rights for all men, Negroes were not considered men and, therefore, the constitutional right to freedom did not include them. So if slavery was ever to be abolished in America, strong voices not only had to protest its inhumanity and point out its incongruity with the principles of democracy. They also had to break the barrier of race prejudice and disprove the "apologia," the belief in the doctrine of Negro inferiority.

There were many men, white and Negro alike, who realized the above requirements and battled in the antislavery crusade. This paper, however, will be concerned only with the literary contributions made by Negroes in their struggle for freedom and tolerance for themselves and their race.

From the late eighteenth century until the Civil War, there was a great deal of writing by Negroes which was devoted to the fight against slavery. Their essays, their

poetry, their histories, their autobiographies--all were part of the struggle for freedom. And in all of these different kinds of works one can see that the Negro writers were aware of their goals and of what means must be employed if the goals were to be achieved. The goals were the abolishment of slavery and the elimination of civil and political disenfranchisement of free Negroes. The means, which often show that Negroes were aware that the doctrine of the "apologia" must be refuted, included the following: refuting the concept of racial inferiority itself; publicizing the talents and activities of great Negro leaders; pointing out the dehumanizing effect of slavery on both the slaveowner and the slave; demonstrating that Negroes had intellectual and artistic capabilities equal to those of their white countrymen; and arguing that slavery was not only unchristian but undemocratic and unAmerican.

The introductory chapter of this essay will be devoted to a survey of such Negro literature, considering first the tracts and pamphlets, then poetry, histories, and autobiographies in turn.

The first recorded protest against slavery known to have been written by a Negro was a tract titled "an Address to the Negroes in the State of New York," by Jupiter

Hammond, a slave who had gained recognition in his community as a poet.[4] This historic first protest was originally presented in the form of a speech to a meeting of the African Society, an organization of free Negroes. Published in 1787, the speech expressed Hammond's strong opposition to slavery and his insistence that all young Negroes should be freed. In his book, The Negro Genius, Benjamin Brawley claims that this address undoubtedly had something to do with the fact that in 1797 the state of New York took formal action looking toward gradual emancipation of the Negro.[5] (Full emancipation was proclaimed in 1800.)

Many anti-slavery and anti-inferiority protests were written by Negroes during the early nineteenth century which can not be listed here because of limited space. These anti-slavery works were neither designed nor intended to be read by the slaves. Their purpose was to influence the white population in behalf of the slaves. But in September, 1829, a pamphlet written by David Walker and designed to be read by and to influence the slaves was published.[6] The tract, now called David Walker's Appeal, marked a transition from the gentle persuasion and thoughtful, reasonable pleas of the Quakers and early Negro spokesmen to the more militant tone typical of the northern abolitionist. (This fiery, aggressive protest against slavery and in defense of insurrection will

be discussed more fully in Chapter II of this paper.)

By 1840 the agitation over slavery had become nation-wide, and the period 1840 to 1860 is characterized by a wide variety of literary undertakings by Negro writers who were especially prolific in their anti-slavery protests. While there were a few Negro authors who still counseled forbearance and patience, they were outvoiced by the more combative writers and leaders. Many of these men collaborated with the American Anti-Slavery Society (founded in 1833) and learned the arts of writing, platform debate, and public-speaking.[7]

One of these anti-slavery authors was Hosea Easton, a free Negro born in Massachusetts. Easton published, in 1837, a tract, A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the United States and the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them.[8] His reason, he stated, was "an earnest desire to contribute my mite for the benefit of my afflicted brethren.../and to do/ what I could to effect the establishment of righteousness and peace in the earth."[9]

In his treatise Easton disputed the doctrine of Negro inferiority through a review of the origin of man, of the various races, and of ancient civilizations, and demonstrated that Negroes were not inferior, and, in fact, in ancient times, were actually superior in political and

cultural advancement to the whites. His summary of European and American history concluded with his statement that the "European branch of Japtheth's family have but little claim to superiority over those of Ham" because of their long history of "heathenish barbarity."[10]

Slavery violated the Constitution of the United States, the Articles of Confederation and the Bill of Rights, Easton argued, and he insisted that Negroes born in America were "constitutionally" Americans.

His arguments against slavery were legalistic, intricately detailed, and he also used powerful, descriptive, and emotional language, and vivid figures of speech to emphasize its evils. He effectively portrayed the injustices free Negroes in free states suffered because of the prejudices of the white population and drew what the Negro historian, R. B. Lewis, stated was a "true sketch of the condition of the colored population" of that time.[11]

In addition to the speeches, tracts, treatises, and the like which have just been discussed, other kinds of literature were published during the struggle for freedom. One of these was poetry. Perhaps the first Negro poet was Jupiter Hammond whose speech in 1787 has been discussed above.[12] The first Negro woman poet was Phyllis Wheatley, a slave who had been brought from Africa as a young girl.[13] Miss Wheatley published a collection of

poems, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, in 1773 in England where she had been sent for her health. In order to forestall any doubt as to their authenticity, the publisher obtained proof of her authorship from Governor William Hutchinson, John Hancock, and others. In the early years of the nineteenth century some of the Wheatley poems were included in school readers. Although this poet permitted herself no specific identification with the abolitionist movement in her poetry, interest revived in her book just before the Civil War when anything showing ability on the part of the Negro was received with eagerness. As Butcher comments, "The most constructive contribution of the poetry of Hammond and Wheatley was chiefly in the evidence they gave of the artistic and intellectual capacities of the Negro."[14]

The first Negro poet who openly protested his status was George Moses Horton, whose first book of poems, The Hope of Liberty, was published in 1829, and whose second, Negro Genius, in 1831. Even the titles of these collections illustrate their all-pervasive theme. Perhaps it was the passion aroused by the "message" which inhibited Horton, or perhaps he was simply a mediocre poet, but, in any event, Frazier described Horton's poetry, and that of other Negro poets such as Alberry Whitman, Charles

Reason, James Madison Bell, and James Whitfield, as being "stilted, imitative, and conventionally religious."[15] (This same comment, of course, has been made of much of the white poetry published during this same period.)

Another Negro woman poet published a collection of poems in 1854. This poet, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, has been termed the "most popular Negro poet of her time," in the anthology, The Negro Caravan.[16] Mrs. Harper was an active participant in the abolitionist movement and her fervent devotion to the cause is reflected in her poetry. (A more detailed discussion of her poems will be found in Chapter III of this paper.)

Another form of literary effort which appeared during this period, also a part of the continuing attempt to refute the hypothesis that Negroes were substandard in intelligence, inferior in talents and capabilities, and inhuman in emotions and feelings, was books of Negro history written by Negro authors. All were written to demonstrate that Negroes had a just claim to full emancipation and complete suffrage.

One of the first of these histories, Rights of Colored Men to Suffrage, Citizenship, and Trial by Jury, by William Yates, was published in 1838.[17] In 1851, William C. Nell, also a Negro, published his first review of Negro service in American wars.[18] A larger work by

Nell, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, was published in 1855.[19] (A more complete discussion of this last history will be found in Chapter IV of this paper.)

Another historian, R. B. Lewis, who described himself as a "colored man," in 1851 published Light and Truth, Collected from the Bible and Ancient and Modern History, Containing the Universal History of the Colored and Indian Races. The author declared that he had written his history with a "determination that a correct knowledge of the colored and Indian people may be extended freely."[20] This chronicle reviewed the origin and history, of the Negro and Indian races, as Lewis saw them, compiled, as he said, from the Bible and ancient and modern writings. Unfortunately Lewis apparently wrote this book not so much to extend knowledge as to answer attacks made upon his race. Since much of the above literature had been long used by slavery proponents to support their position, Lewis used these same sources to answer their arguments by pointing out the intellectual, cultural, and political accomplishments of Negroes throughout history. He developed an impressive argument regarding ancient Egyptian exploits which he used to disprove the inferiority concept. And he protested disenfranchisement of the Negro by including a section on the activities of the "colored soldiers of the

Revolution," which was intended to show that Negroes had demonstrated their love and patriotism for their country and thus were entitled to all the rights of citizenship. Although Lewis's history, Light and Truth, is erroneous and inaccurate, full of half-truths and unsupported assumptions made on the basis of ideas taken out of context, disorganized and repetitious, it does by its very scope and content reveal an erudite author with a knowledge of ancient literature and history equal or superior to that of many white readers of his day.

The final kind of literary effort to be discussed in this paper, and, according to Margaret Just Butcher, "one of the most unique and effective contributions of the Negro to the liberation struggle," is the slave narrative.[21] These narratives hastened the end of the slavery policy, Butcher added, by revealing the human equation behind the so-called "chattel principle" of slavery. There were three classes of such narratives--the fictionalized, the dictated and edited, and the genuine autobiographies.

The first of the genuine slave autobiographies was published in England in 1790, long before formal abolitionist activity began, by Gustavus Vassa, an escaped slave. Within five years after its publication, this slave narrative was in its eighth edition and its popularity

resulted in arousing anti-slavery sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic. There is no doubt, claims Brawley, that Vassa's life story, The Interesting Narrative of Gustavus Vassa, had a causative effect on the abolition of slavery in England. (In 1790 Vassa personally presented a petition to Parliament for the suppression of the slave trade.)[22]

Probably the most effective slave autobiographies and certainly the best known were the narratives of Josiah Henson and Frederick Douglass, both lecturers and leaders in the abolitionist movement, and ex-slaves upon whose experiences Harriet Beecher Stowe based her novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. One of the incidents in Henson's life, one which he narrated in his autobiography, Father Henson's Story of His Own Life, published in 1849, became the basis for Mrs. Stowe's character, Uncle Tom.[23] Both Henson's and Douglass's narratives are genuine slave autobiographies. (A more detailed discussion of Douglass's autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, will be found in Chapter V of this manuscript.)

Henson wrote his autobiography, he stated in his closing sentence, "to inspire a deeper interest in my race," an interest which he hoped would result in what he called "activity on their behalf."[24] He said that he did not attempt to appeal to sentiment in his book but the

incidents he included of his slave life, while understated and undetailed, portrayed a bitter life under the slavery system. Perhaps the bareness of the descriptions of the cruel and unjust treatment more effectively aroused horror at the system which perpetrated and defended such evils.

Henson, a fugitive slave who had escaped into Canada with his family, became a leader of the other fugitives there, helping to found the Dawn Institute and Community in Ontario. Its purpose was to educate and train young Negroes and to provide jobs and training for the escaped slaves. Henson's account of his own activities and those of others in this effort was undoubtedly effective in proving that Negroes not only had the spirit and ambition to become free but also the practical and intellectual abilities needed to support themselves. Or as Professor Walter Fisher, editor of a current edition of this narrative, wrote in his introduction, their activities proved "manliness and the ability to get along."[25]

Henson also promoted his goal and that of all the other Negro authors of this period--abolition of slavery--by disputing the doctrine of instrinsic inferiority through the narration of his struggle for freedom, education and self-improvement, through his activities in the Underground Railroad and the anti-slavery crusade, and by demonstrating

his own abilities. He did not hesitate to discuss the emotions he had as a slave nor refuse to moralize on the evils of the slave system, but mingled incident with argument freely in order to most effectively emphasize these evils.

This completes the introductory survey of the kinds of literary works which Negro writers used in their fight against slavery. Over a period of 60 years and in a variety of literary forms they tried to point out that slavery was inhuman, unchristian, unAmerican; that Negroes were human beings, not inferior to whites; that by their contributions to American progress the Negroes merited full citizenship privileges; and that they had the "manliness," the spirit, ambition, and ability to provide for themselves.

The remainder of this essay will be devoted to a more detailed examination of typical examples of each of the literary forms discussed above. David Walker's Appeal will serve as an example of anti-slavery tracts and essays, the poems of Frances E. W. Harper will exemplify abolitionist poetry, Colored Patriots of the Revolution by William Nell will be used to illustrate the anti-inferiority purpose of the history books, and the autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, will illustrate the anti-slavery purpose of the so-called "slave narratives."

Chiefly the concern will be to discuss these works in terms of their contribution to the struggle against slavery. But some attention will be given to more strictly literary concerns, and perhaps it can be shown that such merit as these works possess in a literary way contributed to their effectiveness in the struggle which was, after all, their chief reason for existence.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Benjamin J. Brawley, Negro Builders and Negroes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945, p. 7.

[2]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 9.

[3]Butcher, p. 9.

[4]Benjamin J. Brawley, The Negro Genius (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1937), p. 19.

[5]Brawley, Genius, p. 20.

[6]David Walker, Appeal to Coloured Citizens of the World, ed. Charles M. Wiltse (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. ii.

[7]Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 66.

[8]Hosea Easton, A Treatise on the Intellectual Character and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the United States and the Prejudice Exercised Toward Them (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837).

[9]Easton, p. 3.

[10]Easton, p. 18.

[11]R. B. Lewis, Light and Truth; Collected from the Bible and Ancient and Modern History, Containing the Universal History of the Colored and the Indian Race, From the Creation of the World to the Present Time (Boston: A Committee of Colored Gentlemen, 1834), p. 330.

[12]Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (eds.), The Poetry of the Negro (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1949), p. viii.

[13]Butcher, p. 117.

[14]Butcher, p. 118.

[15]E. F. Frazier, The Negro in the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 98.

[16]Sterling A. Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee (eds.), The Negro Caravan (New York: Citadel Press, 1941), p. 293.

[17]Charles Wesley, "Creating and Maintaining an Historical Tradition," Journal of Negro History, XLL, Number 2 (January, 1964), p. 22.

[18]Wesley, p. 18.

[19]William C. Nell, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, with Sketches of Several Distinguished Persons, to Which is Added a Brief Survey of the Conditions and Prospects of Colored Americans (Boston: Robert F. Wallcutt, 1855).

[20]Lewis, p. iii.

[21]Butcher, p. 146.

[22]Brawley, Genius, pp. 23-30.

[23]Henson, p. 51.

[24]Henson, p. 212.

[25]Henson, p. ix.

CHAPTER II

APPEAL TO COLOURED CITIZENS OF THE WORLD, BY DAVID WALKER

The goals of the anti-slavery forces were emancipation of the slaves and civil and political enfranchisement for the free Negroes. The purpose of much of the literature written by Negroes in the ante-bellum period was to promote these goals. This was done in several ways: through attacks on the doctrine of Negro inferiority, through efforts to portray the humanity of the Negro, and through attempts to expose the contradictions between democratic ideals with slavery. The literature was written to demonstrate the artistic and mental capacities of the Negro, to deny that docility was natural to the black man, and to warn that the longer the evil of slavery existed, the more dangerous it became to the principles acclaimed by the American public.

One of the most valuable of these literary contributions to the cause of emancipation and enfranchisement, not only because it was among the first, but because it was the boldest and most direct plea for freedom, was David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, published in 1829. "If any single event may

be said to have triggered the Negro revolt, it was this publication," stated Charles M. Wiltse, who edited a recent edition of this most unusual tract.[1]

Walker, the free son of a slave father, had acquired a deep feeling of indignation toward the enslavers of his race and became involved in what was at the time still an unorganized abolitionist movement.[2] Although most of the anti-slavery literature being written was not intended to influence the slaves themselves, Walker wanted, as he stated it, to awaken in his "afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry" into their slave condition.[3] He, then, addressed his essay to the slaves and stuffed his pamphlet into the clothing purchased from his used clothing store by sailors leaving for the South. There the tracts were distributed by friendly sailors or by other clothing dealers who were sympathetic to the cause.[4]

The Appeal caused violent reaction in the South. Stringent laws were passed to prevent its circulation. Georgia provided the death penalty for anyone caught distributing anti-slavery literature among the slaves, and forbade the teaching of reading and writing to either slaves or free Negroes. North Carolina, Louisiana, and Alabama made it a criminal offense to teach a Negro to read. Virginia offered $4000 for the arrest of William

Lloyd Garrison who had reprinted the Appeal in his newspaper, The Liberator, but promised $10,000 for the capture of Walker alive, $1000 dead. Southern slaveowners became more aroused against Walker than against any other Negro in the anti-slavery movement.[5]

The tract apparently was widely circulated, as copies were found in nearly all the slaveholding states and three editions were published before Walker's suspiciously sudden death in 1830 at the age of 44.[6]

The main source of the power and influence of David Walker's Appeal was that it was the first sustained written assault upon slavery and racism made by a Negro in the United States. It was an uncompromising attack on the hypocrisy of a nation and a devastating denunciation of American Christianity. Walker, in his Preface, gave his reasons for writing this inflammatory pamphlet:

> To demonstrate in the course of my appeal...that we Colored People of these United States are the most wretched, degraded, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began...and that the white Christians of America (...or pretenders to Christianity) who hold us in slavery treat us more cruel and barbarous than any Heathen nation did any people whom it had subjected.(p. 621).

In other words Walker proposed to demonstrate the inhuman and unchristian character of slavery in America.

In his treatise, Walker explained his proposition that Christian America was more cruel to its slaves than

any other nation in history. He contrasted the generous treatment which the Israelites received from their heathen masters, the Egyptians, with the unjust treatment received by American slaves from the white Christians in America (pp. 71-73). He discussed the horror which many Americans expressed at the barbarous way the Turks were treating the Greeks and compared this treatment with the barbarity displayed by the slavemasters in the South (p. 75). He illustrated the disparity between the kindness displayed by "Pagans, Jews, and Mahometans" toward their religious converts and the cruel treatment American Christians gave their convert slaves (pp. 76-77). As one reads these contrasts, it becomes easier to understand why later in his pamphlet he prayed that the Lord should forbid such Christianity from being introduced into the African colonies (p. 133).

Walker condemned the Christians in America for condoning the unchristian system of slavery, and accused them of denying and oppressing religious teaching and training among the slaves. He predicted violence and destruction unless Americans repented. "Will God," Walker asked, "not cause the very children of the oppressors to rise up against them and oftentimes put them to death" (p. 105)?

Walker was bitter and revealing in his portrait of the ignorance in which the Negroes had been forced to live and forceful in his insistence that ignorance and treachery were not natural characteristics to the race. White people forcibly denied learning to the Negro because they realized that educated men would not submit to slavery, he said, and also because then the white man's deeds of cruelty could be and would be made known to the world (p. 96). Walker belabored those slaves who sought the favor of the whites by betraying their fellow slaves and declared that this deceit and treachery were the result of the ignorance in which they were kept, not of inherent inferiority (p. 84).

Negroes were human beings, not inferior beings, he said, and there was no special docility or passivity in Negro people as contrasted with all the other peoples of the world, a docility which made them seem less than human, and which had been the cause and the excuse for their enslavement (p. 94). The passivity theory was repudiated even more forcefully when, in more aggressive mood, he instructed the slaves that if they commenced an escape or an insurrection they should do a good job of it. His instructions were forceful and explicit:

> Do not trifle for they will not trifle with you ...they think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition of slavery--therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, KILL OR BE KILLED (p. 89).

It is no great cause for astonishment that these impassioned words and the hatred and power which they conveyed struck terror in the hearts of slavers and racists in both the South and the North (p. 139).

Walker was bitter in his opposition to the colonization plan which proposed that all freed Negroes should be sent to a colony in Africa, as he realized that separating the free Negroes from the slaves would perpetuate slavery forever. There would then be less clamor for emancipation and less encouragement to the slaves to escape or revolt. He was convincing and reasonable in his argument that Negroes were not only human beings but also American citizens and therefore should not leave their country (pp. 131-135).

The incongruity between the democratic ideas and ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence and the unjust treatment given the black "citizens" was revealed in the conclusion of Walker's Appeal; and violence seemed to be advocated again in his prediction that "God will dash the tyrants into atoms and rescue the slaves" (pp. 139-144).

Although Walker's tone was militant, passionate, incendiary, his arguments were reasonable, original, and factual. His style was forceful, his words vehement, his

emotions fervent. He used effective literary techniques, varying them to most effectively emphasize his point.

Rational argument intermingled with angry protests characterize the Appeal but another literary technique which Walker used effectively was sarcasm. For example, he seemed to have quite conciously used sarcasm as well as rational argument and angry protest during his vehement denial of the allegations of Negro inferiority which Thomas Jefferson had made in his Notes on the State of Virginia. While discussing the cruelties and injustices inflicted by white owners on the Negro slaves, Walker remarked: "I advance my suspicion of them /the whites/, whether they are as good by nature as we /the Negroes/ are or not" (p. 80). Jefferson used nearly these same words forty-four years before in his treatise on his home state of Virginia: "I advance it as a suspicion... that the blacks...are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind."[7]

The sarcasm of this similarity between the two statements is as close to humor as anything in Walker's manuscript.

David Walker was unusual in many ways, and especially in his learning. Though he claimed he had written his book in "language so simple, that even the most ignorant

who can read at all, may easily understand," the fact is that his vocabulary was extensive (p. 136). His allusions to ancient history, classical literature, and the Bible were frequent and apt. He was an alert observer of contemporary events, commenting with some knowledge on the situation then existing in Spain (p. 104). And he had singular insight into the long-range effects of slavery. In the Appeal, which he wrote in 1829, Walker demonstrated this insight plus prophetical wisdom when he stated that slavery and racism was then and would continue to be a detriment to the future of the United States diplomatically and internally. He foresaw that slavery and the Republic could not both exist at the same time, either on the continent or in the world. Finally, he had a vision of the "complete overthrow" of slavery in all parts of the country and predicted that the colored people would not be able to achieve "full glory and happiness" except with "entire emancipation" of the enslaved all over the world (p. 93).

Although Walker wrote his treatise to influence the slaves, the Appeal could not help but affect the white population by its exposure of the evils of slavery and racism. The author's illustrations of the inhuman and unchristian practices which were inherent in the slave insitution were persuasive and effective. And he was

effective too as he conveyed the awful quality of insult and indignity that racism entailed and lay bare for all to see the cruelness, outrageousness, and degradation which were its natural results.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Charles M. Wiltse, (ed.), David Walker's Appeal to Coloured Citizens of the World (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. ii.

[2]Wiltse, p. iv.

[3]Herbert Aptheker, "One Continual Cry" David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829-1830) (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), p. 62. Subsequent references to Walker's work will be from this edition and pages will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

[4]Aptheker, p. 46.

[5]E. F. Frazier, The Negro in the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 97.

[6]Aptheker, p. 53.

[7]Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 213.

CHAPTER III

THE POETRY OF FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

In The Negro Caravan, an anthology of Negro literature from its earliest beginnings in America through the 1930's, the editors remark that the poetry written by the Negro ante-bellum poets had one main purpose: "To serve as an instrument to hasten the unshackling of their enslaved brethren."[1] These poets thus wrote for the same reason as other Negro writers of the time, to further the crusade for emancipation.

Since enslavement of the Negro was defended by its proponents with the excuse that Negroes were intrinsically inferior, disproving this accusation became a major target of all abolitionist writers. To do this they felt they must show that Negroes could produce the same type of literature as their white compatriots. As the anthology expressed it, "They had to be living proof that the race was capable of culture." Consequently it is natural they would imitate closely the literature written by the whites, and this, no doubt, explains the conventionality, the strict conformity to the prevailing modes in the poetry of the day, which later critics often mention as characteristic of all Negro literature, especially

poetry (p. 257). This conformity, and perhaps the fact that the "message" seemed to dominate the form, may be the reason why their work was poor poetry.

One of the most popular Negro poets of this period was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who was also popular as a lecturer and who, like many other Negro writers, participated in the anti-slavery movement as an orator and a worker in the Underground Railroad. Her first volume of poetry, Poems of Various Subjects, was published in 1854 soon after she began her activities as an abolitionist (p. 293).

While by today's standards, this poetry might be considered "staid," "stilted," and "imitative," and, like the poetry of other Negro poets, was not concerned with the concrete details of Negro life and character but rather with abstractions such as freedom and slavery, liberty and bondage, virtue and villainy, underneath its veneer of imitation and decorousness and its abstractions, it contained a genuine passion in its vehement protests against slavery (p. 257). And if the poetry seems abstract, it may be remembered that the basic purpose of her poetry, as of theirs, was to advance the fight for emancipation, which was in itself a battle between two abstractions: freedom and slavery.

One of Mrs. Harper's strategies in the fight was to try to disprove the theory on which slavery was based, the inferiority of the Negro race. She did this by demonstrating that the Negro slaves felt the same emotions as their white masters--yearnings for freedom for themselves and their children, love for children, love between husband and wife, and concern for their fellow men.

In "Eliza Harris" Mrs. Harper described the deep yearnings for freedom and a better life which the Negroes had for their children. The stanza in which the mother, Eliza Harris, endangered her own life and that of her child in a daring escape demonstrated the strength of this desire:

> She was nearing the river--in reaching the brink
> She heeded no danger, she paused not to think
> For she is a mother--her child is a slave--
> And she'll give him his freedom, or find him a
> grave (p. 294).

In "Bury Me in a Free Land" the speaker, supposedly a slave, voiced his passionate longing for liberty by begging that the freedom he desired be given to him in the grave even though he does not attain such deliverance during his lifetime. The last lines of the poem expressed this longing:

> I ask no monument proud and high
> To arrest the gaze of the passersby
> All that my yearning spirit craves
> Is bury me not in the land of slaves (p. 296).

The last stanza in "Eliza Harris" is a rather maudlin example of the love that slave mothers had for their children:

> With the rapture of love and fulness of bliss
> She placed on his brow a mother's fond kiss
> O poverty, danger and death she can brave
> For the child of her love is no longer a slave
> (p. 295).

In the poem, "The Slave Auction," Mrs. Harper portrayed the sorrow the slave mothers experienced as their children were sold away from them, and the pain caused by the separation by sale of husbands and wives (p. 297).

Another of Mrs. Harper's strategies in the fight against slavery, a strategy closely related to the preceding one, of course, was to emphasize the inhumanity of the slave system. One of the stanzas in "Eliza Harris" illustrated this inhumanity:

> But she's free--yes, free from the land where the
> slave,
> From the hand of oppression must rest in the grave,
> Where bondage and torture, where scourges and chains
> Have plac'd on our banner idelible stains (p. 295).

In these lines Mrs. Harper was emphasizing that the only place where the slave could be secure from whippings and bondage was in death. The inhumanity of the slave system provided for no other place of safety: the laws of slavery provided no recourse for the slave against even the cruelest and most unjust master, and permitted him to execute on the spot a slave who defended himself.[2]

"The Slave Auction" also pointed out the inhumanity of slavery by showing the ruthlessness and cruelty of the slave trade. Mothers and children, husbands and wives, were separated, often forever, at such a sale (p. 297).

The inhumanity of slavery was revealed by Mrs. Harper not only in the themes of her poems but also in the words and phrases which she used to render them. As an example, "Bury Me in a Free Land" is full of such phrases as "trembling slave," "the tread of a coffle gang to the shambles led," "mother's shriek of wild despair," "babes torn from her breast," "bay of bloodhounds seizing their human prey," which formed a horrifying description of the inhumanity of the slave institution (p. 296). Most of Mrs. Harper's poetry contained equally horrifying and revealing words and phrases.

"Poem Addressed to Women" was a rebuke to American white women for weeping over the suffering of mothers in foreign lands while millions of Negro women in their own country endured even more injustice and sorrow. The last two lines of this poem repeated the warning which other writers before her had given:

> But weep for your sons who must gather
> The crops which their fathers have sown.[3]

Mrs. Harper was promoting emancipation through her prediction, which was similar to Walker's, that war and

destruction would come unless the evil of slavery was abolished.

In addition to promoting emancipation through efforts to disprove the doctrine of race differences, and to show the inhumanity of such a doctrine, Mrs. Harper also protested against slavery by insisting that it was unpatriotic, immoral, and irreligious. Some of the stanzas in "Eliza Harris" were obvious appeals to patriotism. Such an appeal is evident in the following lines"

> O how shall I speak my country's shame?
> Of the stains on her glory, how give them their name?
> How say that her banner in mockery waves--
> Her 'star--spangled banner'--oe'r millions of slaves
> (p. 294)?

In "Bury Me in a Free Land" she wrote of young girls bartered and sold for their "youthful charms," emphasizing the immoral purpose for which the young women were sometimes used (p. 296). In "The Slave Auction" the unchristian nature of enslavement of the Negro because of his "hue" was pointed out and condemned; for, the poet said, color was the will of God, "the impress of their Master's hand" (p. 297). All men are brothers in God's eyes, she reminded her readers.

The last poem by this poet which was included in the anthology was "Let the Light Enter" (p. 297). Probably not many of the white people who defended slavery on the basis of alleged Negro inferiority were cultured enough

to realize that this "inferior" Negro poet was using as the title of her poem the dying words of the great German poet Goethe.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (eds.), The Negro Caravan (New York: Citadel Press, 1941), p. 276. Subsequent references to this edition will be added to text.

[2]R. B. Lewis, Light and Truth (Boston: Committee of Colored Gentlemen, 1844), p. 330.

[3]W. F. Calverton (ed.), Anthology of Negro Literature (New York: Modern Library, 1929), p. 176.

CHAPTER IV

COLORED PATRIOTS OF THE REVOLUTION

Negro histories, another form of abolitionist literature written by Negro authors of the pre-Civil War period, were written not only to deny the theory of natural inferiority, but also the substantiate the claims of the free Negroes to United States citizenship. Colored Patriots of the Revolution was such a history.[1] Published in 1855 by William C. Nell, it was a series of brief sketches and stories of Negroes who had participated in American wars, and of other Negroes whose actions or stories Nell believed should be recorded. The book began with an account of the death of Crispus Attucks in the Boston Massacre of 1770, and concluded with a summary of news items which, Nell seemed to believe, demonstrated improvement in the conditions of the colored people in the United States of the 1800's (pp. 14, 337). His history was written, Nell admitted, to "preserve from oblivion the name and fame" of those colored soldiers who had served their country in time of war and "to deepen in the heart and conscience of this nation" that sense of justice which would result in abolishing the slavery of his people and establishing their rights as free

citizens of America (p. 9). Here then is another Negro author whose goals were those of the other authors discussed in this paper--emancipation and enfranchisement. (Although Nell forcefully urged the abolition of slavery, his history seemed, to this reader at least, to be mainly a protest against disenfranchisement.)

Colored Patriots is a rather unusual history book in that it is not a continuous systematic record of events or of a people or of a nation. It is instead, as stated above, a series of brief sketches of individuals and their activities. The individuals were of all kinds, including military men, poets such as Phyllis Wheatley and Frances E. W. Harper, newspapermen, loyal slaves and leaders of slave escapes and revolts, writers such as David Walker and Hosea Easton, and abolitionist leaders such as Frederick Douglass, and the activities ranged from military service to anti-slavery efforts. This history is exactly what Harriet Beecher Stowe described it in her introduction--"a little collection of interesting incidents" (p. 5).

These incidents and the Negroes involved in them were listed under state names which resulted in some confusion in organization and chronology. The book was, however, a detailed record of most of the events and people important to the story of the Negro in America

fron the late eighteenth century until the 1840's.

The first of the events related by Nell is concerned with Crispus Attucks, a mulatto who was in the forefront of a band of colonists protesting against the presence of British soldiers in Boston on March 5, 1770. The soldiers fired and Attucks was the first to die in the Boston Massacre, becoming the first martyr in the American struggle for independence (p. 14).

Lemuel Haynes was another Negro who served in the War of Revolution. Haynes enlisted as a Minute Man in Connecticut in 1774. After the battle of Lexington he joined the Revolutionary army at Roxbury and served during the remainder of the war. He volunteered to join the expedition to Ticonderoga which stopped the advances of Burgoyne's army (p. 123).

Many such military men and their exploits were sketched in this history, and several lists of Negroes who served their country during war time were also included. Like the other writers discussed in this paper, Nell was attempting to further the twin goals of emancipation and suffrage by disproving the doctrine of Negro inferiority. His reports of Negro servicemen and their acts of bravery portrayed Negroes as patriotic, brave, and responsible, in contrast to rumors to the contrary. He was explicit in his effort to prove that

Negroes were not "deficient in energy and courage" as they had been accused of being (p. 3).

In his account of the earliest anti-slavery activities, Nell makes clear how early in the Movement Negroes began to take an active part. According to him, the first abolition meeting ever held in the United States took place in New Jersey, on July 4, 1783 (p. 164). It was only thirteen years later that the first Negro anti-slavery organization was formed, the African Society, in Boston, in 1796 (p. 97).

At the first abolition meeting in New Jersey, a Dr. Bloomfield lectured against slavery and then concluded by freeing his fourteen slaves, who were present on the platform with him. The lecturer reportedly offered to maintain one of the elderly freed men if the man should ever become too ill to support himself. The old man answered that he would never need support as long as he retained any part of his fingers (p. 164).

This incident and many others too numerous to summarize here was part of the evidence Nell presented in support of his proposition that Negroes desired and appreciated freedom, and in this longing for freedom, they were equal to their white countrymen.

Nell's lists of men important in Negro history included the leaders of slave revolts and escapes. One

leader of an unsuccessful insurrection in 1822 was Denmark Veazie, an ex-slave who had been able to purchase his liberty by winning a lottery. For four years, Veazie and his followers planned a revolt against their white enslavers in Charleston, South Carolina. Their plan was to seize control of the arsenal and then "sweep the town with fire and sword, not permitting a single white soul to escape." The freed slaves could then head for the north and freedom without fear of recapture by their white masters. The plan was betrayed by a Negro. Of the 135 "blacks" who were arrested, thirty-five were executed, fifty-nine transported, and the rest acquitted (pp. 254-55).

Nell's narration of this revolt and of others, while preserving a record of these events, also was intended to show that Negroes not only were not inferior to the whites in their desire for freedom, but also were equal to them in spirit and courage.

The history contains a seemingly complete chronicle of the events, laws, and decisions which resulted in the disenfranchisement of the free Negroes. Some of the laws and decisions did not directly concern franchise but constituted a series of blows tending to relegate the Negro to an inferior position, to treat him as something a little less than a citizen. In 1790 Congress passed an act prescribing the manner in which an alien might be

naturalized. Any alien could receive naturalization if he were a white person (p. 311). In 1792 an act was passed providing for organizing a militia which was to consist of "each and every free ablebodied white citizen" (p. 311). This law was especially bitter to the Negroes, Nell emphasized, because during the Revolutionary War, free Negroes were recruited, and slaves were promised "absolute freedom" if they enlisted. The government purchased them from their masters and emancipated them after their period of service (pp. 121, 150). In 1810 a law was passed in Congress forbidding anyone but a free white person from being employed in carrying the United States mail (p. 312). In 1842 a bill regulating enlistments in the Army and Navy was passed. It provided that only white men were to be allowed to enlist. In 1854 the Homestead Bill was passed but it granted land to white persons only (p. 315).

Also there were laws passed which struck directly against the right of the Negro to the franchise. Although some of the states, of course, had never given free Negroes the right to vote, others had. But in the early 1800's prejudice mounted against the free Negroes in some areas and many privileges of citizenship which they had previously enjoyed were now denied them. Pennsylvania, for instance, adopted a new state constitution in 1838

which denied suffrage to all colored residents of the state. For forty-seven years prior to this convention free Negroes had enjoyed this privilege of citizenship (p. 141).

Although colored men in New York had retained the right of suffrage, they were also subject to a property qualification of two hundred and fifty dollars, a qualification of which did not apply to white men. Here Nell inserted one of the better of the moralizing comments which he interspersed throughout his chronicle. He drily commented:

> Plutus must be highly esteemed where his rod can change even a negro into a man. If $250.00 will perform this miracle what would it require to elevate a monkey to this enviable distinction (p. 155)?

Nell undoubtedly included the accounts of these discriminatory laws, not only because they were intensely important to Negro history, but also to point out the contrast between their injustice and the patriotic contributions made by the Negroes during the war, which he had previously and lengthily discussed.

As has been noted previously, Nell interspersed incident with argument, moralizing comments with historical events, in his efforts to influence his white readers in behalf of their Negro countrymen. He protested against the military restrictions, opposed the colonization plan, argued against the Fugitive Slave Law and the Missouri

Compromise, and complained bitterly about the prejudice displayed toward him and others of his race. He advocated the education of his people as a means of overcoming this prejudice, warned against segregated schools and other institutions, and recognized that what was needed for the complete destruction of this prejudice was "political influence" (p. 341).

Although Nell tended to stress the nobleness of the black man under the cruel treatment by the white man, his book does fulfill the purposes which abolition literature had set as its goals: to promote emancipation and oppose political and civil disenfranchisement.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William C. Nell, Colored Patriots of the Revolution (Boston: Robert F. Wallcutt, 1855). Subsequent references to this edition will be given in text.

CHAPTER V

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A noteworthy addition to the compaign literature of abolitionism was made in 1845 when Frederick Douglass, Negro orator and ex-slave, published his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.[1] This slave autobiography belongs to the heroic fugitive school of literature, although it is considered superior to other slave accounts because of its simple style and the deep feelings expressed by the author (p. xvi). Its purpose, as Douglass himself stated, was to aid in "hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds" (p. 162). Thus Douglass's goal too is the goal of most other ante-bellum Negro literature: to promote emancipation.

Disproving the doctrine of Negro inferiority was a very basic and necessary step toward this goal, and in his autobiography Douglass attempted to prove that Negroes had the intelligence and desire to learn. He detailed how he taught himself to write and finished learning to read, in spite of the opposition and interference of his masters. His accounts of his attempts to escape are demonstrations that Negroes had the desire and the spirit to be free and

were not docile and passive, as slavery proponents claimed, hence inferior and deserving of slavery. His activities in the anti-slavery cause as a lecturer and writer were proof that Negroes need not be inferior to whites in such matters as poise, responsibility, loyalty, concern for others, or public speaking, debating, writing, or in education and culture.

The reason Douglass wrote the story of his life is in itself a refutation of the doctrine of Negro inferiority. In 1838, he had escaped from his Maryland owner to New York where he found work in the docks. It was not long before he became interested in the Anti-Slavery Society and its activities, and for four years, under the tutelage of William Lloyd Garrison, he traveled and lectured against the slave system. During this time he had not revealed any facts about his life in slavery because he realized that such disclosures would enable his former masters to discover his whereabouts and perhaps force his return to bondage. But his self-education in the meantime had become so complete, his speeches so eloquent and learned, that many people began to doubt he had ever been an uneducated slave, and he was in danger of being denounced as an impostor. As a result he felt he had to write his autobiography, and when the truth of his life became

known, it was an effective argument against the inferiority theory (p. iv).

A significant point which Douglass made in his autobiography concerned the "soul-killing" effects of slavery rather than just the usual cruelties and inhumanities. He tried to arouse opposition to the slave institution because of the blighting effect it had on the human spirit. His description of himself after a few months of discipline at the slave-breaker's is an example of this blighting effect. The slave-breaker, Mr. Covey, was a farm-renter who had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, training them through severe discipline to be spiritless, passive, brute-like, without desire for education or self-improvement. Douglass wrote:

> Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute (pp. 94-95) !!!

The contrast between the brute he had become and the man he had been, a man with a thirst for education and a desire for self-improvement and freedom, was a clear demonstration of the dehumanizing effect that slavery had on those who were caught in its chains.

According to Douglass, slavery also had a "soul-killing" effect on white slaveowners. His characterization of one of his mistresses, Mrs. Auld, was illustrative of this influence. Mrs. Auld, before Douglass came to her home as a young slave, had never had complete control over a slave, and thus she had been preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. She was a good woman with a kind heart who at first treated the slaves as if they were human beings and not the "chattel" they were commonly regarded to be in the South. But then what Douglass called the "fatal poison of irresponsible power," the power over another, the power to control a life, soon began to corrupt her. Soon Mrs. Auld not only ceased to instruct him in reading but became violently opposed to his own attempts to learn to read. His description of this previously kind lady rushing at him "with a face made all up of fury" to snatch from him the newspaper he had been reading is an effective portrayal of the dehumanizing influence of slavery on white owners as well as Negro "property" (pp. 63-64).

But Douglass was effective too in his descriptions of the usual cruelty and inhumanity of slavery. One such illustration is the story of the murder of Bill Demby, a slave who had jumped into a stream to escape a cruel whipping and was then shot in the head by an angry overseer

(p. 47). Another horrifying picture of the white man's inhuman cruelty to his black slaves is the story of the whippings suffered by a young Negro woman because she continued to see her Negro lover against the orders of her master, who, Douglass inferred, had immoral designs on her himself (pp. 29-30). Douglass's account of his life at the "nigger-breaker's"--the daily scourgings, the starvation diet, the long hours of back-breaking, spirit-crushing labor with little time to sleep and almost no time at all to eat--was another vivid demonstration that slavery was inhuman and inhumane (pp. 99-108).

It is obvious that Douglass was trying to stir anti-slavery sentiments in his readers with these stories, and they, together with his passionate and vivid recollections of his desperate search for freedom, should have caused much agitation for the abolition of an institution which could perpetrate such evils. Certainly the passage in which he described watching the sails of ships sailing out of Chesapeake Bay was meant to arouse strong feelings against a system which regarded one human being as the property of another and bound him to slavery forever (pp. 95-96).

Benjamin Quarles stated, in his introduction to the 1960 edition of the Narrative which he edited, that this autobiography was in many respects "symbolic of the Negro's

role in American life." Its central theme is struggle; it is a "clear and passionate utterance both of the Negro's protest and of his aspiration" (p. xviii). And it apparently was influential in its time. According to Quarles, the publication of the Narrative gave Douglass widespread publicity in America and Great Britain (p. vii). Its initial edition of 5000 copies was sold in four months. In the next year, 1846, four more editions of 2000 copies each were published, and there were two additional editions in 1848 and 1849. By 1850, nearly 20,000 copies had been sold in America, and it received good notices not only in the "reformist" papers but in the more conservative newspapers as well (pp. xiii-xiv).

Although Frederick Douglass published his autobiography when he did because it had become necessary to prove he had been a slave, he obviously wrote it not just for this purpose alone but also to arouse abolitionist sentiment among his readers. His descriptions of the brutality of the slave system, his disclosures of his own fear, horror, and hatred of slavery, and of his desperate longings for freedom were all meant to stimulate sympathy in his readers and arouse in them the desire to abolish slavery forever.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Edited by Benjamin Quarles (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960). Subsequent reference to this edition will be given in the text.

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