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"The trouble I've seen": Visions and revisions of bondage, flight, and freedom in black American autobiography

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The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1988
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in The Department of English

by

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for Eileen
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Philippians 4:13

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Abstract

This dissertation, an historical overview of black American autobiography from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, examines a recurring pattern and two related themes in the genre. Ever since the escaped slave narratives established bondage, flight, and freedom as the three-part pattern of their organization, black autobiographers have employed these same elements to tell their life stories. The creation of the free "I" is the pervasive theme of black American autobiography, freedom being won and the autobiographical self established through a symbolic struggle against and victory over a powerful father figure. This figure may be the paternalistic white culture in which the autobiographer lives as part of an oppressed minority, the autobiographer's biological father, an older man who exerts great influence on the autobiographer's thinking, or the autobiographer's predecessor in the black autobiographical tradition. By striking out against the father, the autobiographer creates his own "imaginative space" and finds his individuality.

Chapter One traces the creation of the three-part pattern and its perfection in Douglass's Narrative. Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery is seen as an attempt by Washington to "tame" Douglass and to assume leadership of American blacks. Chapter Two examines W.E.B. Du Bois's challenge to Washington for that leadership, detailing how the two men waged a long literary war for Douglass's mantle.

Richard Wright's Black Boy is the subject of Chapter Three. Wright lashes out against white America for seeking to keep him in...
psychological bondage and traces his rebellion against the racist South and his flight to the North and artistic freedom. Chapter Four examines how James Baldwin attacks Wright and challenges him for artistic leadership among blacks; Eldridge Cleaver then uses similar tactics against Baldwin.

Chapter Five treats *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, examining Malcolm's struggle for intellectual freedom once he is ousted from his once-secure identity as spiritual son and heir apparent to Elijah Muhammad. Alex Haley's role as co-creator of the autobiography is also studied, and the dissertation concludes with a general treatment of black American autobiography's relationship to black culture, American autobiography, and autobiography as a whole.
Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Critics of Afro-American writing have discovered a wealth of sources which have contributed to that literature's richness. Some trace the African influence on black writers; others detect picaresque characters and plots. Many have noted elements of black folk culture in black writing: blues, jazz, spirituals, sermons, toasts, the "dozens," cautionary tales, trickster tales, legends, rural and urban speech patterns, folk beliefs such as voodoo and conjure, and standard folk characters. 1 Others trace the influence of American literature upon black writers—the 19th century romantic tradition emphasizing personal freedom and identity on slaves narratives, for example—while others examine black writing within the still broader context of Western literature, noting the impact of modernism and communist ideology on 20th century black authors. 2 Such studies help explain the distinctive character of Afro-American writing, while locating it within the larger canon of Western literature.

Afro-American autobiography (a term I shall use interchangeably with black autobiography, and a genre which I consider to be as fully literary as the black novel or black poetry) has also been subjected to source criticism. Two of the best-known full-length studies of black autobiography include identification of linguistic and literary influences on the form. Steven Butterfield notes the impact of biblical language and abolitionist rhetoric on the slave narratives, the first Afro-American autobiographies, and Sidonie Smith traces the

1
ongoing influence of the slave narrative's form and themes on black autobiographers from Booker T. Washington to Maya Angelou and Claude Brown.  

Smith and others also argue convincingly that the American myth of the successful self-made man epitomized in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* has helped shape the writings of blacks such as Booker T. Washington and Malcolm X.  

G. Thomas Couser detects the "prophetic mode" in the slave narratives, linking them with Puritan spiritual autobiographies, the Bible, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.  

A psychoanalytic study of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies uncovers in them evidence of the great primal myth of Western culture, the myth of the hero, and suggests that black American writers are as susceptible as anyone living the West to absorb and use that myth's plot and characters.  

These source studies of black autobiography serve it in the same way that source studies serve black literature on the whole. On the one hand, a distinctly black autobiographical tradition is recognized in which earlier works help shape later ones; additionally, some works from the tradition have influenced the general development of the modern autobiography: Douglass's *Narrative* and Wright's *Black Boy*, for example, both have affected white writers as well as black ones. On the other hand, black autobiography's position within the larger scope of American and Western language and culture is established: the form has been shaped by Euro-American Enlightenment and Romantic traditions, and even by mythic patterns whose origins are traceable to the earliest developments of Western culture.
Like the critics who trace influences on black fiction, those who identify sources in black autobiography customarily treat those sources as givens without evaluating them as good or bad, enabling or limiting to the autobiographer. A critic is understandably leery of passing judgment on the intrinsic value of a literary tradition or source, for such judgment may appear either irrelevant or presumptuous. It is far easier to judge what the writer accomplishes with the materials that influence him, whether that influence be conscious or subliminal. Scholars are rightly more interested in what Shakespeare does with Holinshed than with Holinshed himself, and the question, "Is it good that Shakespeare knew Holinshed, or would he have been better off without him?" hardly seems worth asking. We are content to have Lear and Macbeth and forego speculation about what Shakespeare might have done with different sources. When critics of autobiography do evaluate sources, they tend to see them as useful, at the least: in Patterns of Experience in Autobiography, Susanna Egan shows how often autobiographers employ elements of the monomyth--themes of anticipation, recognition, and fulfillment, formulas of separation, initiation, and return--suggesting that the mythic sources are vital because they enable the autobiographer to express himself in terms to which many readers will instinctively respond on a deep level.7

But do an autobiographer's sources always help him tell his story? Do the received traditions necessarily enrich his understanding of himself and help him express the meaning of his life? Not always. The autobiographical tradition in which a writer works can serve as a constraining force--previous autobiographers and their books, powers to
be overcome. That literary influence is not always benign is not a new idea—Harold Bloom is just one of the most recent proponents of the "anxiety of influence" mode of criticism.8 What Bloom suggests is the pattern of poetic history—"strong poets mark that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves"—I find to be true in the Afro-American autobiographical tradition. That tradition's dominant text is Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative, a work profoundly influential on later black autobiographies, and whose impact, it will be argued, is still felt today, as witness the cluster of autobiographies to come from the civil rights movement of the 1960's and 1970's. Douglass's Narrative deeply impressed Booker T. Washington and makes its presence felt in what is perhaps the second-most influential black autobiography, Up From Slavery. These two texts, Douglass's and Washington's, the second text shaped in part by the first, have been the works against which many later black autobiographers have had to struggle in their quest for "imaginative space" and individual self-expression. Black autobiography is therefore singular for two reasons: it has been dominated for a very long time (literally speaking) by a very small number of texts. The implications are intriguing for both the autobiographer and his reader. We must ask how the black autobiographer's vision of himself is shaped, limited, or enhanced by this narrow yet powerful tradition in which he works, and how our perception of the black American is affected by the work that the black autobiographer produces. In this study, I intend to offer some explanations for the continuing influence of Douglass and Washington on
black autobiography while tracing and evaluating the sources behind their work. By examining later autobiographies, I will show how the struggle to come to terms with the early, strong texts has shaped the visions black writers hold of themselves and has formed the manner of their expression. Although the struggle between the generations of black autobiographers is in part a product of the social, political, cultural, and philosophical development of black Americans—a development naturally traced in a study of black autobiography and one that I will treat in this paper as an important sub-theme—nevertheless, the antagonism found among black autobiographers is rooted in more than their changing world view. This struggle of later autobiographers against the archetypal texts, despite certain advances and an occasional victory, is today largely stalemated. The most recent cluster of black autobiographies—those arising from the civil rights movement—have much in common with the slave narratives, the earliest black autobiographies; they share a common theme and pattern, and even share internal sameness: the civil rights autobiographies tend to sound alike, as do the slave narratives. This repetition of the forms and themes of black autobiography over a 150-year span compels us to ask if the genre has exhausted itself in its struggle against its primary texts which, in their turn, seem now exhausted in their ability to give new shape and direction to contemporary work. The tradition seems more constricting than liberating, leaving the black autobiographer in an ironic position: he has made more advances in freeing himself socially and economically than he has from a literary tradition which can still impel him to tell his story.
according to a pattern a century-and-a-half old. Mythic patterns continue to recur in all autobiography, it is true, but black autobiography seems, to an unusual degree, locked into an exceedingly narrow range of themes and means of expression.

The beginning of black American autobiography may arbitrarily be fixed at 1760 with the publication in Boston of Briton Hammon's impressively titled A Narrative of the Uncommon Suffering, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man.--Servant to General Winslow, of Marshfield, in New England: Who Returned to Boston, after having been absent almost Thirteen Years. The full title continues for another hundred or so words, relating, in the florid style of the time, an outline of the book's contents. A steady trickle of narratives by slaves, many of them relating their escape from slavery to freedom, became an overflowing stream by the 1830's, and at least eighty such works were published between 1835 and 1865. Not only were many slave narratives published; they sold well, too. Josiah Henson's Life, published in 1849, is said to have sold 100,000 copies by 1878. Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave (1853) sold 27,000 copies in two years, and Douglass's Narrative (1845) sold 13,000 copies in its first year, 30,000 copies by 1850. The narratives were popular because they often made exciting reading, telling of inhuman treatment (often accompanied by graphic and gory illustrations), escape plots, flight and pursuit, close calls and hairbreadth escapes, with the traditional happy ending attached—the fugitive reaches safety and
freedom. More importantly, however, the narratives were read because they indicted the slave system and supported, implicitly at least, the abolitionist movement. Indeed, the slave narratives provided much of the grist for the abolitionists' propaganda mill, which had enormous impact on public opinion in America and Europe (Great Britain particularly) in the thirty years before the Civil War.

Their sponsorship and use by the abolitionist movement would explain in part the similarities among the slave narratives. These works were often dictated by illiterate or semiliterate narrators to abolitionist hack editors who cast their tales into standardized form for publication. Certain formulae of language, plotting, and structure were quickly found to be effective and were repeated numerous times for a public that never seemed to tire of the same story over and over again. James Olney has drawn what he calls a "master outline" listing the conventions of the slave narratives—elements both in the format of the printed work and in the narrative itself that recur time after time. He argues that most slave narratives are remarkably alike and that the greatest among them, Douglass's Narrative, is also a full representative of the narratives' master outline. If one desires to read a typical slave narrative and also the best one of them, he need read only the Narrative. Other critics find genuine merit in six or eight of the narratives; the rest of the works, whatever their value to the historian or sociologist, possess no enduring literary interest.
Benjamin Quarles states that the central theme of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* is struggle. Struggle could be identified as the theme of slave narratives as a whole, one which explains their original popularity. The narratives possess dramatic tension and are peopled with readily identifiable heroes and villains. Harriet Beecher Stowe undoubtedly used situations and characters already delineated in slave narratives for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; the phenomenal success of that novel only serves to underline the appeal of those narratives.

Without disagreeing with Quarles's assessment, I believe that freedom can be claimed as a corollary theme of the slave narratives, for these works deal with black people's struggle to be free. This further explains their early, great popularity, for the ideal of freedom loomed large in the American imagination. Readers of the slave narratives could in part identify themselves with the struggle of the black slave, for the flight from Europe to America for economic or religious freedom and the pioneering spirit of the move West were still fresh experiences in the early 1800's. Slaves escaping north were simply enacting a pattern familiar to everyone who had come to America from another place (or whose forebears had come), or who had moved west to find freedom and space away from the "crowded" eastern seaboard.

In *Where I'm Bound*, a study of the influence of slave narratives on later black autobiographies, Sidonie Smith describes a two-part structure present in many of the narratives. She finds the ex-slave telling of his break into a community that allows him to find authentic identity; this break occurs after the slave has escaped from an enslaving community that prevents self-expression and-relegates him to
a menial position outside society. This is correct and useful, but I would amend it slightly by expanding the structure to three parts: bondage, flight, and freedom. In her book Smith acknowledges this three-part structure at least implicitly, for two of her chapters, "Flight" and "Flight Again," treat the transitional phase between bondage and freedom. Although not all the slave narratives include an extended section dealing with flight (Douglass's Narrative being the most notable—it mentions scarcely any details of his actual escape from slavery, for reasons Douglass makes clear in the work itself), flight becomes an important idea in later black autobiographies, sometimes being transformed to flight, so the three-part form is significant.

The best way to illustrate the theme and structure of the slave narratives is to examine the work of Frederick Douglass who, in his Narrative, firmly establishes both the themes and the structure not only of the slave narrative but also of many black autobiographies that follow, with his Narrative the primary text of that autobiographical tradition.

Frederick Douglass made his escape from slavery to freedom on Monday, September 3, 1838. Using borrowed seaman's clothing and identification papers, Douglass took a train from Baltimore to Philadelphia, then continued on to New York City the following day. A few days later, his fiancée, Anna Murray, joined him, and the two were married. Fearing for his safety even in New York, friends sent him on
to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where for the next three years Douglass earned his living through various kinds of manual labor. During these years, Douglass found time to work for the church and to enlarge his reading. Already well-acquainted with the Bible and The Columbian Orator, a book of speeches by British speakers such as Sheridan, Pitt, and Fox, Douglass added Scott, Whittier, and Combe's "Constitution of Man" to the scope of his reading.13 Most importantly, however, he began reading William Lloyd Garrison's Liberator, the abolitionist newspaper that, as Douglass himself wrote, "became my meat and my drink."14 The Liberator itself first mentions Douglass's name in its March 29, 1839 edition, in its report of a meeting of blacks in New Bedford. Douglass is reported to have spoken in favor of a resolution condemning slavery and commending Garrison.15 We see, then, that Douglass became active in anti-slavery circles soon after his move to Massachusetts. A little more than two years later, on August 11 or 12, 1841, Douglass's public career as an anti-slavery spokesman began at a meeting in Nantucket. Asked by William C. Coffin to address a white audience, Douglass spoke briefly but powerfully of his experiences as a slave. Upon hearing Douglass's talk, Garrison followed with an impassioned address, and thus began a long, mutually influential relationship. As an agent of the abolitionist movement, Douglass travelled extensively, telling and retelling his story. Four years later, he published his Narrative, the book that first secured his fame and his reputation.

It is difficult to determine precisely which items in Douglass's reading had greatest influence upon the Narrative. Douglass himself
tells us how greatly he was moved by the speeches printed in The Columbian Orator, which came into his possession when he was twelve, for the book's speeches against slavery helped give shape to thoughts already in his mind. As Douglass puts it, "These documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery."16 Douglass also knew the Bible, but one finds little use of its speech patterns or themes in the Narrative. Scarcely a phrase is reminiscent of Scripture, and there are no direct quotes from it in the work. Other slave narratives may have helped Douglass shape his own story, but the case for influence could more easily be argued the other way: Douglass's work antedates all the other narratives usually most highly regarded—those of William Wells Brown, Charles Ball, Henry Bibb, Josiah Henson, Solomon Northup, J.W.C. Pennington, and Moses Roper all were published after 1845.17 We may conjecture that Douglass became familiar with some of the narratives circulating among abolitionist circles, but a strong, direct line of influence seems impossible to establish. Some critics of Douglass sense the presence of Puritan spiritual autobiography behind the Narrative, but again, whether Douglass knew Cotton Mather and company before 1845 is open to question. What does seem apparent, however, is the sense of the growth and maturation of the narrator in both the spiritual autobiographies of the Puritans and of Douglass in his work, a quality which places them, along with the autobiographies of Franklin and Henry Adams, in the larger tradition of American spiritual autobiography.18

At least three sources do inform Douglass's Narrative. The first is Garrison's Liberator, which Douglass first saw in 1839 and read
regularly thereafter. From the paper Douglass learned the abolitionists' arguments against slavery as well as the rhetorical patterns effective in its denunciation. A second source for the *Narrative* is Douglass himself—not only in the sense that the work is truly his, and not the product of a ghost-writer—but the product of Douglass's telling and retelling his story countless times between 1841 and 1845. During these years, Douglass travelled thousands of miles on behalf of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society, visiting Rhode Island, Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Indiana. Urged at first to simply "tell his story," Douglass soon felt the need to interpret his experience, to wield his own story as a weapon against slavery rather than allowing others to do it for him. He writes, "It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them." The *Narrative* is written in a straightforward style that may be the result of its origins in spoken language. It is the product of the give and take of the lecture platform, and shows the polish of an experienced communicator. Douglass the speaker is indeed one source for Douglass the writer.

In addition to these textual sources, one might speculate on a third powerful document behind the *Narrative*: the Declaration of Independence. The likelihood that Douglass knew the document by 1845 is great, given the resemblances between it and his autobiography. Reading the Declaration and the *Narrative* shows that the two works share common structural elements. The Declaration begins by stating that when a people needs to separate from another nation, the reasons.
for the division ought to be given. The body of the piece gives the colonies’ reasons—a lengthy list of grievances against the King of England for his abuses of the American colonies. It states that the colonies should be “free and independent states,” possessed of the rights and powers of such states. The document concludes with a sacred pledge by the signers to strive for freedom, and is completed by the famous signatures. Much of Douglass’s Narrative resembles the central section of the Declaration, for it is a list of grievances supporting his contention that his freedom is justified. He brings his work to a fittingly stirring conclusion, making conscious use, I believe, of the rhetoric of 1776:

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging myself anew to the sacred cause,—I subscribe myself,

FREDERICK DOUGLASS.

"I subscribe myself"—by thus affixing his signature to the Narrative, Douglass evokes the revolutionary patriots who declared their freedom, and he identifies himself as one with them. In this case, freedom for the black man is the issue, not only for Douglass, but for those still in bondage. Douglass makes the Narrative a Declaration of Independence for himself and for his race, drawing upon the wealth of associations clustering around the earlier document to give his own work added force.
No one can say that the Narrative is greater than this source, nor would the comparison be very appropriate, given the different character of the two works, but the Narrative does surpass all its other direct sources, the abolitionist documents and the earlier slave narratives that now lie largely unread. The Narrative, however, has been constantly read and constantly reprinted. And, as this study will show, it has been enormously influential on later black writers.

What makes Douglass's work the supreme achievement among the numerous accounts penned by escaped and former slaves? One quality that sets it apart from its fellows is its intrinsic literary merit. Critics of black literature have recognized its excellence for years. Benjamin Quarles praises it for having a "readable prose style, simple and direct, with a feeling for words. It was absorbing in its sensitive description of persons and places."22 Philip Foner calls it "by far the most effective" of all the autobiographies of fugitive slaves, and quotes from a review of the work that rings true today: "Considered merely as a narrative, we never read one more simple, true, coherent, and warm with genuine feeling."23 Houston Baker calls the Narrative "a consciously literary work of the first order."24 The unusual excellence of the Narrative becomes apparent when one compares it with some of the other so-called "best" of the genre. Douglass's achievement becomes even more remarkably clear when one recalls that the Narrative is not ghost-written (no critic or historian has ever produced evidence to the contrary) but is the work of a man with little formal education who writes better than the white ghost writers
who helped produce such stilted pieces as the "autobiography" of Josiah Henson. 

Not only is Douglass's Narrative extraordinarily well written, but it also bears the distinguishing mark of genuine autobiography: the author's successful transformation of the bare facts of his life into a narrative that delineates the intellectual, emotional, and moral growth of the self which is his subject. Other slave narrators fail to achieve such a synthesis, but Douglass shapes the incidents of his life to reveal his transformation from slave to public figure, orator, and champion of human rights. Douglass can tell the external events by which this startling metamorphosis occurred, but he also traces the inner changes that produced the unexpected result--a man with his own mind and voice.

Related to this process of growth in the Narratives is a second quality, one which James Olney finds essential to autobiography: unlike other slave narrators, Douglass distinguishes between the person written about, the Frederick Douglass of the Narrative, and the person writing; the Frederick Douglass of 1845 looks back at the man he was, but no longer is. This distinction is important because it highlights the process of growth which is a key element in autobiography. Other slave narratives lack these qualities and therefore hardly qualify as autobiography in the deepest meaning of the term.

Besides the Narrative's widely acknowledged literary excellence and its superiority as autobiography, I find a third reason for its greatness, a reason I shall call resonance. Douglass's work stirs us as other slave accounts do not because it suggests other, greater
meaning beyond itself in ways that Douglass consciously intended and also in (at least) one way that I believe he was completely unaware of.

G. Thomas Couser treats the first of these resonances in *American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode*. Discussing Douglass’s *Narrative*, he interprets it as standing in the tradition of the spiritual autobiography with its roots in the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and sermonic rhetoric. This interpretation places the *Narrative* within the conversion narrative genre so important and popular in early American literature. This conversion motif agrees with the view of the *Narrative* that sees it as a document revealing the spiritual growth of the narrator. Couser notes Douglass’s use of conversion language in what is perhaps the work’s central incident, Douglass’s fight with, and victory over, Covey the slave-breaker. Of that struggle, Douglass writes:

I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.

Douglass describes this incident in language redolent of Christian conversion and thereby consciously awakens in the reader a deeper sense of the meaning of the event. The fight with Covey is more than physical, it is spiritual—the soul’s victory over satanic forces and its rising to new life. (In Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom*, this motif is suggested all the more strongly through Douglass’s repeated...
reference to Covey as "snake-like," thus identifying him as the devil.)

By expanding the meaning of the incident from that merely of a slave fighting a vicious handler to the Christian soul battling Satan, Douglass deepens the meaning of the event and makes it universally applicable.

A second resonance I have already mentioned—the indirect reference to the Declaration of Independence. By closing the Narrative with rhetoric reminiscent of the great document and by affixing his name in the manner of John Hancock, Douglass makes his Narrative a Declaration of Independence for black Americans as the document of 1776 was for whites, although it claimed to speak for "all men." He reminds all his readers, black and white alike, that freedom is the reason for the existence of the nation and that slavery in America is itself a contradiction in terms. To his contemporary readers, Douglass made his work both an indictment of an unjust system and an appeal for the nation to come to its senses and make its stated principles reality for all its people. For subsequent readers, the Narrative stands as one in a long series of documents that have defined, pleaded for, and celebrated freedom.

The third resonance in the Narrative, the one more than any other which gives the work its greatness and enduring importance, is one of which Douglass probably had little conscious awareness. In an article analyzing from a psychoanalytical perspective Douglass's autobiographical handling of his childhood, Steven Weissman notes how Otto Rank first pointed out the role of the Freudian "family romance"—particularly the conflict between father and son—in the ancient myth.
of the birth of the hero.²⁸ Weissman describes in detail the mythic elements in Douglass's recounting of his childhood but restricts his discussion to that first phase of Douglass's life. Once mythic patterns are identified, however, one is prompted to investigate whether similar patterns recur throughout Douglass's autobiography. A comparison of the Narrative with the myth of the hero in its entirety reveals a remarkable phenomenon: the story of Frederick Douglass, as he tells it, fits the myth of the hero again and again, thereby becoming mythic itself with its protagonist very much in the ancient, glorious mold.

Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces is the standard treatment of the "monomyth"—the story found in every culture throughout the world, the tale relating the exploits of a hero who sets off on a quest, battles hostile forces, seizes a prize of immense worth, and returns to his people to share with them the fruit of his struggle. Campbell anatomizes the myth into its component parts, illustrating each aspect with copious examples from world folklore, mythology, and religious writings. Here is how he summarizes the myth:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his common-day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadowy presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of
unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), or his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again—if the powers have remained unfriendly to him—his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero reemerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).29

Douglass's career parallels the hero myth in so many ways that the similarities are worth noting in detail.

In the chapter called "Childhood of the Human Hero," Campbell mentions that the mythological hero is often born an exile or in despised circumstances, often to parents of low degree. Sometimes his father is hinted to be of high birth, perhaps even a divinity who has impregnated the hero's mother while in some disguised form. Douglass was born to a slave woman, one of the outcast and despised of her time and place, but his father was a white man, perhaps even his own master.
Douglass, mythologically speaking, has in him both the lowly (his slave mother) and the exalted (his powerful white father).

The hero begins life in modest but recognizable and reasonably stable conditions. But he is soon set off on adventure. For Douglass, the adventure began with his removal from his grandparents' home to the great Lloyd plantation. Douglass had already lost his mother, but since she had not raised him, her death, as he reports it, evoked in him only "much the same emotions I should have felt at the death of a stranger."30

The young hero is often marked by a perception and sensitivity beyond his years. Douglass notes in My Bondage and My Freedom that his aversion to slavery and his unanswered questions about his condition dated from very early in his life. After relating how he witnessed some cruel beatings, particularly the savage whipping of his Aunt Esther by Captain Anthony, Douglass remarks, "The incidents . . . led me thus early to inquire into the origin and nature of slavery. Why am I a slave? Why are some people slave and others masters? These were perplexing questions and very troublesome to my childhood."33

This beating of his Aunt Esther, which in My Bondage and My Freedom is offered as one of two incidents of beatings that first awoke the very young Douglass to the cruelties of slavery, is, in the Narrative, the initiatory experience of Douglass's life in the nightmarish world of bondage, the field of his trials from which he later makes his triumphant escape.

Most of Douglass's Narrative describes the young hero's life in the world of his great adventure. It is complete with wondrous new
landscapes (the great house of the wealthy Lloyd family, the sea journey and the city of Baltimore); hostile forces (wicked overseers with appropriate names such as Severe and Gore; his various masters, Captain Aaron Anthony, Hugh Auld, and Thomas Auld); a kind helper, Sophia Auld, who treats him as a son and begins teaching him to read and write until stopped by her cold-hearted husband, Hugh; and tests to be passed. As I interpret it, the supreme event of Douglass's "wanderings" is his fight with the slave breaker, Covey.

Douglass's year with Covey, 1834, marked the nadir of his career, a time of never-ending physical toil such as Douglass had never known before, and, for the first eight months, regular, severe beatings. The situation between Douglass and Covey (to whom he had been sent so that his spirit might be made tractable) came to a head in August of 1834 when Douglass suffered a sunstroke while winnowing wheat. Unable to continue work, he was attacked by Covey, struck in the head with a heavy slat, and abandoned. Douglass fled seven miles back to his master, Thomas Auld, hoping for sympathy and relief but was ordered to return to Covey. On his return to Covey's farm, Douglass met a certain Sandy Jenkins, who might be seen in the role of helper who lends the hero magical aid, for Jenkins presented Douglass with a talisman—a root, which, if Douglass would carry it on his right side, would prevent Covey, or any white man, from whipping him. "Soon after, the virtue of the root was fully tested," as Douglass writes, for Covey ambushed Douglass in the barn and tried to tie his legs and hands in order to administer a beating. But Douglass resisted and battled Covey in hand-to-hand combat for two hours, drawing blood from his
oppressor's throat with his fingers and stopping only when Covey, exhausted, called the fight to a halt. This was Douglass's supreme test, and his victory over Covey marked, as Douglass writes, "the turning-point in my career as a slave." Never again was Douglass whipped, although he remained a slave for four more years. More important, a great change came over him. He writes: "I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN." As Campbell might express it, Douglass, through his victory over Covey, wins the boon he has entered the world of slavery to attain: the prize is the expansion of consciousness from the self-image of slave to that of free man, an equal with others. From this point on, Douglass is actually free, although he must still wear for a time the trappings of the slave.

It is not too much to assert that Frederick Douglass's fight with Covey is not only the central mythic event in his own autobiography but is also the central mythic event for black autobiography as a whole. The struggle repeats itself endlessly in varied forms as the black hero, held in bondage (literal, social, or economic), finally determines to fight against his oppressors, almost always in the form of white men who control the social order. The determination to fight asserts personhood, manhood; the act establishes individual, adult identity. This prize cannot be wrested away once it is won; external freedom may be denied for a time or forever, but the spirit soars free even within physical chains. The black American's struggle has from
the first taken the outward form of conflict with a white oppressor; inwardly, the struggle has been one for identity—to discover what it means to be a black and an American both. Douglass asserts that "slave" and "American" are contradictory terms, but "black" and "American" are not.

If the victory over Covey marks Douglass' hero's theft of the boon and its attendant expansion of consciousness, the flight from the underworld of slavery into external freedom has yet to be made. The mythic hero's flight back to the world of men finds easy parallels in the slave's journey to freedom; Douglass's *Narrative*, however, reveals a deeper truth, for it shows that freedom is already won when the mythic prize is obtained in the "underworld," not in the flight out of it. The hero carries freedom with him—he does not find it only when he returns to his own people. He returns to bestow on others the boon already obtained, not to find the boon itself. Unlike many other escaped slaves who made their way north in order to receive something (food, clothing, jobs, a new life), Douglass fled to give something—the great awareness that each individual who undertakes the heroic quest attains: "I am a man."

Douglas made two attempts to reach external freedom through flight. The first was undertaken in April of 1836, in conjunction with a small group of fellow-slaves. The plot was discovered before it could be enacted, and Douglass spent some time in jail; he could have been sold south (a common penalty for attempted escapees), but was sent instead back to Baltimore by Thomas Auld, who apparently sensed that Douglass was marked for better things than a field hand's life.
Douglass’s second escape attempt, this one successful, was accomplished virtually alone, as if the hero, having entered the underworld alone and having won his victory by himself, now had to find his means of escape through an act of self-dependence, as well. Douglass did have a helper, the black sailor who lent him clothes and papers, but Douglass undertook the short train ride from Baltimore to Philadelphia alone. In the *Narrative*, Douglass gives no details of his flight, explaining that to do so would jeopardize his fellow slaves still in bondage who might use the same means he did to get to freedom. Only later in his life, after the Civil War, did Douglass disclose the details, at a time when the information could neither harm a potential runaway nor help a master seeking to prevent his slaves from escaping or searching for any who had managed to flee north. Actually, though, the escape itself is of minor importance for the *Narrative* since the true break to freedom has already been accomplished and told in detail in Douglass’s battle with Covey.

Once the hero has made his way from the world of his adventure, he must return to the workaday world of common experience. The world of the North that Douglass encounters is not the same world he has known; it is new; however, this world is the way a world ought to be, according to Douglass’s description of it: “Every man appeared to understand his work, and went at it with a sober, yet cheerful earnestness, which betokened the deep interest which he felt in what he was doing, as well as a sense of his own dignity as a man.”34 (emphasis mine) Douglass feels that he has “come home” to a world of men like himself, where others share what he has found in his personal
quest—the sense of self-dignity. He learns later that this new world is not a completely benign place, but its deficiencies only help him understand his responsibility as boon-giver.

As Douglass enters upon his freedom, he undergoes the rite of initiation long recognized and commented on by escaped slaves themselves and by critics of the slave narratives: he changes his name to reflect his new status as a free man. Like so many others before and after him, Douglass leaves old names behind him, changing from Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey to Frederick Johnson, and finally to Frederick Douglass, taking his last name from a character in Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. No longer does he have to accept a name given him by a master—he can accept a name suggested by a friend instead.

The hero who has fulfilled his quest and returned to the world with his prize is often rewarded a bride, as Campbell notes in his chapter, "The Hero as Lover." After Douglass escapes to the North, he immediately sends for his betrothed, Anna Murray, and the two are married less than two weeks afterward. The hero who has proved his potency through struggles against all hostile forces now may use and enjoy that male potency in the bridal bed.

More important in Douglass's case than his role of hero as lover is the role of hero as warrior. The victorious, returning hero may also assume this guise; his mission as warrior is distinctly defined in the myth. Campbell describes that mission like this:

For the mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming; the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the
monster of the status quo: Holdfast, the keeper of the past. From obscurity the hero emerges but the enemy is great and conspicuous in the seat of power; he is enemy, dragon, tyrant because he turns to his own advantage the authority of his position. He is Holdfast not because he keeps the past but because he keeps.35

Frederick Douglass's Narrative ends with Douglass the hero-as-warrior poised at the beginning of his career as combatant against the "holdfast" of his time: the institution of slavery, personified by the southern slave holder. Like the mythological hero, he too has emerged from obscurity, a seemingly puny assailant, a David against Goliath, but confident of his power because he fights on the side of divine right. In the last paragraphs of the Narrative, Douglass introduces the name of the abolitionist newspaper that inspires him: Liberator. He embraces the cause the paper espouses and begins his own career as Liberator of his people in the North as well as in the South. To close the last chapter of his work, Douglass tells of his first speech for the cause—his opening sally in his individual war against the giant Holdfast. Writing four years after that first speech, years of constant public speaking, writing, and traveling on behalf of freedom for slaves, Douglass finishes: "from that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren—with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide.36 The Narrative ends at an appropriate place—at a beginning point, not an ending, and Douglass, skillful autobiographer that he is, knows also how to lead his reader on, fully aware that most of the
first readers of his book are indeed well-acquainted with his labors during the four years that separate the narrative's end and the date of its publication. He thus manages to give this part of his life story a satisfactory sense of closure while simultaneously pointing ahead to say, "This is not the end of the story, just the beginning." The hero has further exploits; his task is nothing less than awakening the mundane world to the deeper truths and insights he has gained during his adventures. To accomplish this, to awaken the dulled senses of a nation apathetically ignoring the principles of freedom upon which it was founded, Douglass takes up the role of warrior-prophet to accomplish what Campbell calls the "great deed of the supreme hero": "to come to the knowledge of . . . unity in multiplicity and then make it known." That unity, for Douglass, is the brotherhood of all people, despite their racial diversity. This truth he has learned for himself, and it is this truth he is to bring to his benighted nation.

As hero, Douglass won for himself the prize of self-awareness and spiritual freedom. This prize he took with him to bestow upon the nation through his career as speaker for the abolitionist groups of the North. But even as Douglass gave the boon to others, he kept the freedom and independence he had striven hard to attain. Indeed, his later career shows that this retained independence of thought and action allowed Douglass to perform one feat of mastery after another, overcoming all the powerful father-figures with whom he later associated. He had defeated the tyrant Holdfast in all his guises of southern slave owner; he had beaten Covey and escaped from Thomas and Hugh Auld—these were the representatives of the status quo, the powers
against change. When he went North, Douglass encountered strong father-figures especially dedicated to change: they were the enemies of slavery and its proponents. But Douglass stood against the forces for change when he felt them to be wrong, just as he had stood against the powers of inertia when he knew them to be in error. He thereby showed himself free indeed, even free to stand against those with whom he was in basic agreement.

After Douglass achieved his physical freedom by escaping from Baltimore to New York, he quickly came into contact with the abolitionist party. In 1841 his association with William Lloyd Garrison began. For a time, Douglass was the famous abolitionist’s protege in a relationship that appealed to Garrison. But the younger man, newly arrived from slavery, within a short time was thinking for himself and interpreting his experiences as well as simply retelling them. In 1847 Douglass began printing his own newspaper despite Garrison’s objections, thereby straining his friendship with the older man. The final break between the two occurred in 1851 in a dispute about the advisability of political action to end slavery. Douglass, by opposing Garrison, asserted his freedom of thought and incurred Garrison’s wrath; the abolitionist was so furious with Douglass that he thereafter refused to speak with him or even be in the same room. Garrison apparently resented Douglass’s independence, and he seemed to believe that Douglass owed him loyalty for what he had done for him. A subtle paternalism, if not racism, may have been at work in Garrison. Douglass, for his part, while acknowledging his debt, nevertheless followed his own instincts and made his own decision.
Some years after the break with Garrison, Douglass met another powerful father figure, John Brown. The two knew each other for ten years before Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in October, 1859. Once again, in his relationship with Brown, Douglass showed his independent spirit. He supported Brown's early plans to set up guerilla-style encampments in the Virginia mountains to contact slaves and help them escape into freedom. But Douglass disagreed with Brown's later decision to seize Harper's Ferry and hold its prominent citizens for ransom. He resisted Brown's appeal at a secret meeting in Chambersburg, Pa., on August 20, 1859. Again, Douglass resisted the appeal of a charismatic leader and long-time friend to follow his own beliefs.

If Douglass achieved mastery in the world of men, showing himself capable of independent thought and action even under pressure from friends, he achieved an equal, if not more impressive mastery in the written and spoken word. By all accounts, Douglass was a compelling orator, impressive of appearance and voice as well as powerful of message. He spoke often during his early years as abolitionist orator, and he attracted crowds everywhere he went. But his powerful use of words appears not only in his speeches, but in his writing as well, and the Narrative is the most extraordinary example of his achievement. Self-taught, without life-long immersion in the written word, Douglass yet managed to write an autobiography that not only is the supreme achievement of its particular genre, but also, through what I have termed its various "resonances," is one of the greatest autobiographies of the world.
Douglass fits well the role of mythic hero, for he is a masterful personality, master over other men (whether it be in hand-to-hand combat or on the speaking platform); over himself (he never doubted or shirked his call as spokesman, servant, and leader of his people); and over the literary forms he chose to use (he took the slave narrative and made it better than it ever had been, and no other writer surpassed his achievement). But in achieving mastery, he became a master himself, a potent father figure, a folk hero, for black Americans of his own and succeeding generations.

Douglass's growth into myth stature has deep implications for later black writers, but even he seems somehow overwhelmed by his achievement in the Narrative. Douglass wrote two later autobiographies, My Bondage and My Freedom (1855) and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881, revised 1892); neither approaches the excellence of the Narrative. In the case of My Bondage and My Freedom, this decline in quality might be attributed to Douglass's disillusionment during the decade between the writing of the two works: Douglass encountered racism in the "enlightened" North, and triumph of the hero who stands at the end of the Narrative on the brink of a new career as spokesman for freedom is tempered by Douglass's honest narration of the mundane conflicts the hero meets in a society not altogether sympathetic to his message or person. Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, written many years after Douglass's "glory days" as champion of Emancipation, may reflect a hero's sense of loss of destiny or special calling once his life's greatest goal has been attained. Another dynamic, however, may better account for the inferiority of Douglass's later autobiographies: he
might have suffered from a private "anxiety of influence" as he regarded his Narrative. If that is so, the younger Douglass looms ironically over the older man who cannot match his achievement. If the Narrative was for Douglass a burden and a challenge, we can understand how he himself became the father figure for later black writers to overcome as they sought their intellectual and spiritual freedom.

In 1856, one year after the publication of My Bondage and My Freedom, Booker T. Washington was born in Franklin County, Virginia. Like Douglass, whose life his paralleled in many ways, Washington was destined to be a leader of his people. Like Douglass, Washington accomplished great things for a man born into such unpromising circumstances. And like Douglass, whose work influenced him from an early age, Washington wrote autobiographies, one of which has become even more famous than the Narrative. Up From Slavery has probably been read by more people than any other book by a black American. Its influence has been enormous, and the controversy it has created has been both great and lasting.

In another autobiographical work, My Larger Education (1911), Washington acknowledges Frederick Douglass's influence on him. Reflecting on his childhood, he writes:

Even before I had learned to read books or newspapers, I remember hearing my mother and other coloured people in our part of the country speak about Frederick Douglass's wonderful life and achievements. I heard so much about Douglass when I was a boy
that one of the reasons why I wanted to go to school and learn to read was that I might read for myself what he had written and done.40

It is hardly surprising that Douglass inspired Washington; he must have served as model for many blacks of the generation that followed him. By the time of Emancipation, Douglass was internationally famed as author and lecturer, friend of politicians and humanitarians, and adviser to Abraham Lincoln himself. Well might a young black boy born into the poverty and degradation of slavery look to Douglass as the model of the black man who had successfully lifted himself from the lowest rung of American society to the highest.

Inspired by Douglass, Washington set out from West Virginia in 1872 for the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia, a school for blacks run by General Samuel C. Armstrong. Driven by an intense desire for knowledge and success, Washington did well, graduated, and after teaching in West Virginia for three years, attended seminary in Washington, D.C., before being called back to Hampton to work with Armstrong.

In 1881 the Alabama legislature voted funds to establish a school on the model of Hampton in Tuskegee, Alabama; the citizens of that city asked General Armstrong to send them a man to get the project under way. He sent Washington, and the saga of Washington and Tuskegee began.

Washington undertook his work with definite ideas about the kind of education the school should offer. He saw around him many poor, unskilled, young blacks, and he determined to provide them training in
practical arts as well as academics. Consequently, the institute developed a curriculum teaching, among other things, carpentry, blacksmithing, farming, tailoring, dairy farming, brick manufacturing, masonry, and home economics. Washington believed that the black American should work his way up from the bottom of the heap where he found himself; to make himself indispensable to the economy of the nation, he must equip himself with a host of agricultural skills. Through hard work, the black man would win the respect of the community while improving himself economically and socially. Washington propounded his philosophy of education, economics, and society many times, but nowhere more eloquently than in his address to the Atlanta Cotton Exposition in 1895. Speaking to a large audience composed primarily of white southerners, Washington pleaded for a cooperative effort between white and black southerners in all matters economic while omitting a call for full social equality between the races. The most famous and often-quoted sentence from the speech summarizes his view: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." This position, called accommodationist by Washington's critics because it seemed to open the door to social persecution of blacks in the South while attempting to placate southern whites fearful of the intermixing of the races, resulted from a complicated set of forces at work on Washington. On the one hand, he believed in the appropriateness of the education Tuskegee was offering. He realized most blacks would benefit more from industrial and agricultural education than from pure academics, for the community had only limited...
need of teachers, preachers, and other scholarly professions. Second, he was willing to wait for social equality for blacks because he could afford to alienate neither his southern neighbors nor his northern benefactors, few of whom were ready at the time to grant equal social status to blacks, no matter how well educated they were. Washington must have felt that social privileges were a fair trade-off for the moment if only his school and his programs could exist and continue their work. If Washington was later grieved by the abuses against his people, abuses brought about at least in part because of his accommodationist policies, and hurt by the severe criticism of a young generation of black intelligentsia, he never publicly abandoned his policies or programs. He did, however, undertake a secret campaign on a limited scale to help blacks in trouble and worked privately to eliminate the scourge of lynching.

If Frederick Douglass was one of Washington’s inspirations during his rise to national prominence, he was not the only one. Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography also helped mold Washington’s thinking, as did the rags-to-riches tales of Horatio Alger. Franklin’s Autobiography, long one of the most influential of all American books, embodies, like Douglass’s Narrative, a myth with broad appeal. Whereas Douglass unconsciously taps the monomyth that touches universal human issues, Franklin gives words to the peculiarly American version of the myth of the hero—its domesticated embodiment in the person of the Self-made Man.

Franklin’s story is well known. In a famous passage, he describes his arrival in Philadelphia—a young man with little money and no
friends in the great city, looking for work and hoping to make his fortune. Here is the mythic hero on his quest, away from home and in a strange place populated by potentially hostile strangers, a man who must, by his wits, luck, and hard work, find his fortune and establish himself in society. But if the pattern is recognizable, the stakes involved are deflated: instead of exotic landscapes filled with terrifying monsters, we have the city populated by greedy merchants and snobbish aristocrats who look down upon hicks from the country. Instead of the prize beyond price—self-knowledge, divine wisdom, or (as in Douglass’s case, freedom and the realization, "I am a man"), we find material wealth and social respectability the boons to be won. Instead of a message of universal spiritual truths, we have Poor Richard’s homely advice and a list of virtues to be followed if one is to be successful. He preaches thrift, cleanliness, and honesty, but often for self-interested purposes.

Franklin demonstrated by his own life that the virtues he practiced and preached could lead to success, American style. He later became the most prominent citizen of the town he entered as a naive boy. His Autobiography traces his rise from obscurity to fame and offers the picture of the self-made man who, having attained success through virtuous living, crowns his virtues with those of public service. Once he becomes financially secure and socially prominent, the hero of his American saga freely devotes himself to helping others, to living a useful life.
Booker T. Washington knew Franklin's Autobiography and consciously connected his life with that of the earlier man. Sidonie Smith notes how Washington echoes Franklin's entry into Philadelphia in his description of his own entry into Richmond on his way from West Virginia to Hampton. Washington carefully points out that he arrived in Richmond with even less than Franklin had when he came to Philadelphia. This makes his rise even more spectacular than his predecessor's—the reader, of course, knows that Washington has another burden to bear that Franklin did not: his color. Washington draws another parallel between Franklin and himself when he uses some of Franklin's famous Thirteen Virtues as guiding principles for himself and for his students at Tuskegee. In an article that draws many parallels between Washington and Franklin, Stephen Whitfield notes how Washington stresses, as did Franklin, industry and prudence, humility, sincerity, and cleanliness as keys to success personal and public. It seems clear, as Sidonie Smith states, that Washington is giving us "the black version of a well-known formula."

Washington's vision of himself as a self-made American in the line of Benjamin Franklin served him well and fit comfortably with the age in which he lived. The last decades of the nineteenth century, the "Gilded Age," saw the rise of many self-made Americans and the establishment of great fortunes based upon hard work, tenacity, shrewd dealing, and--sometimes--corruption and exploitation. Men who became wealthy and powerful could (and would) resort to whatever means necessary to reach the top and stay there. Franklin might have been horrified at the abuses to which his prescriptions for success were
subjected in the 1880's and '90's, but he would have had to admit his part in forming the values of a later century. Washington, naturally gifted with qualities necessary for success in his age, cultivated those qualities and used them to maintain the power he had gradually amassed. In the standard biography of Washington, Louis R. Harlan explores at length the machinations Washington used to extend his influence into every area of black American life as well as into many areas of white life. If the resulting portrait of Washington is not altogether flattering, it does acknowledge the man's devotion to his cause and testifies to his truly amazing success as a shaper of the black community. Like Franklin, Washington presents a public image of community servant, an image he worked hard to maintain, believing that he and other blacks had to keep the aura of usefulness about them if they were to be tolerated by the white community.

Although Washington may have at heart felt a closer philosophical kinship with Benjamin Franklin than he did with Frederick Douglass, still he desired to identify himself with the older man, the acknowledged leader of the black American community. Such identification presented problems, though; Douglass, famous and respected as he was, was out of step with the mood of the times. By the 1880's, he must have seemed to many of the younger generation, Washington included, to be a revered relic of the past. Robert Factor notes the apparent contradiction between Douglass's popularity and prestige, which never waned during his lifetime and have hardly been tarnished since then, and his disaffection from the powerful organizations and popular ideas of the late 19th century.
used neither the church nor the black fraternal orders as power bases, for he had philosophical problems with them both. Nor did he grasp political power easily within his reach. Factor notes the various ways Douglass was either behind or out of touch with his times and concludes, ‘Douglass’ thought did not correspond with the prevalent mood or strategy of labor, capital, farmers, expansionism, urban migration, or racial thought. He was an American at odds with his country, a Republican opposed to his party’s policies.’47 Yet he was honored and revered, and anyone aspiring to leadership in the black community would have done well to identify himself with Frederick Douglass.

As it turns out, Booker T. Washington easily drew a connection between himself and Douglass, between Douglass’s values and his own. Even though, as Factor points out, Douglass was in the 1880’s in many ways out of step with the times, he had spoken on behalf of some causes dear to Washington’s heart and expressed ideas in writing and on the lecture platform that allowed Washington to see several links between the two men’s thinking.

As I noted earlier, Washington acknowledged Douglass’s influence over him in My Larger Education. After remarking that he had heard of Douglass early in his life and wanted to attend school so that he could read for himself what Douglass had written and said, Washington continues: “In fact, one of the first books that I remember reading was his own story of his life, which Mr. Douglass published under the title of ’My Life and Times.’ This book made a deep impression upon me, and I read it many times.”48 This passage is noteworthy because it
catches Washington in a slip of memory. He states that the book he read and reread was *My Life and Times*. As we have noted, Frederick Douglass did write a book with a similar title—his third autobiography, first published in 1881 and reprinted and updated in 1892. But by 1881, the year of the book’s first appearance, Washington would have been twenty-five years old and just beginning his career at Tuskegee. The book Washington knew as a young man was either Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* or *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). The similarity of titles—*My Life and Times* (actually, the title is *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*) and *My Bondage and My Freedom*—leads me to believe that Washington probably thought of *My Bondage and My Freedom* as the book he had read as a boy. But why confuse the title? Washington certainly knew *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* as well as the earlier autobiographies, so he may have inadvertently supplied a garbled title, confusing a book more recently read with one read many years earlier. But if Washington is caught by a faulty memory, there may be a good reason why he unconsciously claims to have been deeply impressed by *'My Life and Times.'* This Douglass autobiography best fits how I believe Washington preferred to look at Douglass; the book also presents a portrait of a self-made man turned public servant that supplies the model Washington would have felt most comfortable with himself.

*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* was written partly to make money for its author; it did not. It is a curious and unsatisfying book, particularly for those who know the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass was never averse to quoting verbatim passages
from his earlier autobiographies in his later ones: in My Bondage and My Freedom, he does this several times and unabashedly informs the reader when he does so. The first two autobiographies differ in many ways; an informative study could be made detailing such differences. But the differences between My Bondage and My Freedom and Life and Times are few and insignificant. Douglass does abridge the narrative of his early life to make room for events in the latter part, but the reader does not sense any reshaping of Douglass's vision of his childhood and youth. Life and Times virtually quotes My Bondage and My Freedom with some stylistic changes and omissions. The earlier book is not rewritten; it is copied into the later autobiography. We can assume either that Douglass had wearied of retelling his early life (how many times did he tell the tale while on the abolitionists' lecture circuit?) or that he was well satisfied with the written form of the account as it appeared in My Bondage and Freedom. At any rate, the first part of Life and Times is a repeat of the earlier book.

When Douglass begins to recount his life after about 1854, the last year covered by his second autobiography, the reader detects a change in the writing. Gone is the intense passion that sparked the Narrative; gone, too, is the heroic imagery that holds the Narrative together and still informs, though to a lesser degree, My Bondage and My Freedom. These losses are perhaps inevitable, for Douglass, writing in 1881, is recalling events from many years earlier. Although he tells stories of stirring events and famous people, the fire is largely gone. Additionally, Life and Times was written after the end of slavery, and Douglass's greatest work, it can be argued, was on behalf
of abolition. When he wrote his two earlier autobiographies, slavery was intact, and his works still served as weapons against it; by the year of Life and Times' publication, slavery was a thing of the past—the war had been fought, and the abolitionists' cause had proved victorious. The plight of many southern blacks was still desperate, but their literal enslavement was ended.

Two other factors may account for the quality of the second half of Life and Times. Douglass's recollection of his later life begins to read like a list of honors received and positions held; since Douglass did rise to the pinnacle of national fame, he could hardly tell his story without mentioning the public offices he held and the recognition he received. If Life and Times begins to sound like "first I did this, then I held that post, then I traveled there," it is because Douglass's later life was characterized by such constant activity. But the practice of listing—one event strung behind a previous one without any ordering shape except for that of chronology—may result from another phenomenon occurring frequently in autobiographies of older writers as they move forward in time toward their most recent experiences. As James Olney notes, many such autobiographies degenerate into chaos (he cites Rousseau's Confessions as a prime example) because the writer is too close to the events he narrates to be able to give them shape. An ordering metaphor is lost, and the work lapses into a series of events ordered by time only. This happens to Douglass with an attendant loss of form and interest. The young Douglass was able to write his Narrative as a cohesive whole, united by the mythic element, but the
older Douglass was unable to achieve a similar vision in his final autobiography.

Douglass's *Life and Times* is his least satisfactory autobiography, but I believe it is the one Booker T. Washington felt most comfortable with, for the image of Douglass portrayed in it—the underprivileged youth who rises to prominence and devotes himself to a life of public service in the manner of Benjamin Franklin—was the image Washington adopted for himself and worked to maintain all his adult life. Douglass himself helped make Washington's image of him possible, for not only in his last autobiography did Douglass work with the picture of the self-made man, but he also used the theme in a speech he delivered on the lecture circuit over many years. When Washington invited Douglass to deliver the commencement address at Tuskegee in 1892, Douglass chose his "self-Made Men" speech to deliver to the graduating class—a topic that accorded well with the philosophy of the school's president. Douglass also spoke at a dinner honoring Washington in 1891, and Washington, in turn, sponsored dinner meetings honoring Douglass on three occasions, contributing one hundred dollars at each dinner.49 Douglass endorsed Washington when he addressed the Bethel Literary and Historical Society in Washington, D.C., and advocated his policies before its intellectual and influential members.50 The two men seemed to have agreed on some important principles of self-help for the black man.

Frederick Douglass died on February 20, 1895. His death left a void of leadership among blacks, for although Douglass was not the primary shaper of black values and opinion in his later years, he was
still the "grand old man," revered as one who had lived through slavery and freedom, who had given his life for the cause, and who had attained heroic size in the minds of the people. As many critics and historians have noted, it hardly seems coincidental that in September of 1895, only a few months after Douglass's death, the mantle of black leadership was assumed by Booker T. Washington. He became the acknowledged leader of black American through the single act of delivering his address at the Atlanta Exposition. In it Washington urged blacks to "cast down your bucket where you are," that is, to stay in the South and make friends with whites by a process of gradual economic and social advancement, a process to be achieved through the kind of education Washington was offering at Tuskegee. Washington also stated, "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing."51

Such ideas were nothing new from Washington, but they made him famous overnight. Southern whites delighted to hear such words, for they were easily construed to mean that the black man would be content to "keep his place," to stick with manual labor for industry and agriculture and not to agitate for an equal status with whites—at least not in the foreseeable future. As we have noted, Washington's philosophy was much in keeping with the Gilded Age—an era that stressed economic success rather than ideals. Not that Washington was a man without ideals, but he held to his position during years that saw
blacks stripped of their rights, that saw the loss of advances made immediately after the Civil War. His Atlanta speech could be, and was, interpreted as giving assent to racial segregation.

Critics of Washington, and there are many, make a great deal over the Atlanta speech that came fast on the heels of the death of Douglass. Philip Foner, for example, in his biography of Frederick Douglass, concludes his work with a comparison of the two leaders, one that praises Douglass for his uncompromising stand against segregation and condemns Washington for playing into the hands of racists. Of Douglass, Foner writes:

In his phenomenal rise above some of the restrictions of the American caste system, Douglass consistently fought for those who were trapped in its tentacles. He bitterly denounced the unjust and brutal treatment of the mass of his people. Never fearing whom it might offend, he unflinchingly raised the cry for equality.52

But of Washington, he writes that "[he] recommended 'acquiescence or at least no open agitation,' for civil and political rights. The Negro could be happy in the South as long as he was subservient." 53 Foner goes on to relate an anecdote which, for him, summarizes the difference in philosophy between Douglass and Washington:

In the early days of 1895, a young Negro student living in New England journeyed to Providence, Rhode Island, to seek the advice of the aged Frederick Douglass who was visiting that city. As their interview drew to a close the youth said, "'Mr. Douglass, you have lived in both the old and the new dispensations. What
have you to say to a young Negro just starting out? What should he do?' The patriarch lifted his head and replied, 'Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!'"

In 1899 the same youth posed the identical question to Booker T. Washington who answered, "'Work! Work! Work! Be patient and win by superior service.'" These two positions are simplistic, for Douglass also valued education for the black man and Washington worked behind the scenes for racial justice, but the anecdote illustrates how many people have come to view the differences in belief between the two men. Douglass believed in the integration of the races (his second wife was his white secretary, Helen Pitts) and predicted equality through intermarriage. Washington, on the other hand, worked to avoid antagonizing whites and genuinely seemed more content to wait for equality to come more through a natural evolution than through force. Those who revere Douglass and despise Washington, as Foner does, can almost suggest that Washington kept his true beliefs under wraps until Douglass was dead, then sprang his doctrine on the country at the same moment that he took the leadership of blacks upon himself. This scenario is certainly too Machiavellian to be completely accurate, but the close coincidence between the passing of the older leader and the ascendancy of the younger remains a tantalizing development. Did Washington feel free after Douglass's death to espouse his own economic and racial views? Would the Atlanta Exposition speech have been different if Washington had known that Frederick Douglass would read it? We cannot say, but certainly 1895 marked the passing of an old order and the rise of a new.
Booker T. Washington's first autobiographical work, *The Story of My Life and Work*, was published in 1900. Written largely by a ghostwriter of only moderate competence and published by an inept printing house, it displeased Washington although it sold well for several years. In an apparent attempt to supercede the mediocre work with a better product, Washington pushed into a second autobiographical effort, this time with a good ghost writer, Max Bennett Thrasher, a white man, and a competent publisher. He supervised this second effort much more closely than he had the first, and he approved the finished product. By publishing *Up From Slavery* in 1901, Washington may have set some sort of record for speed in producing autobiographical works: two full-length self-portraits in two years.55 For this study, we will concentrate on *Up From Slavery*, for of the two books, it has been by far the more famous and influential.

When Washington came to write his life story, he had to face the problem that every autobiographer confronts: into what form or mold would he cast his narrative? Not being a genuinely creative writer, Washington looked about for forms of autobiography already established. As we have seen, he was influenced by Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, but the form he chose for recounting the story of his life is not Franklin's. Instead, he turned to the autobiographies of his own race, and to one in particular—the autobiography of his childhood idol, the leader with whom he wished to be identified, no one other than Frederick Douglass.
A reader who turns to *Up From Slavery* after having read other slave narratives, Douglass's in particular, is immediately struck by the many ways Washington casts his first paragraphs into pre-established molds. Houston Baker notices the similarities, stating that the first chapter of *Up From Slavery* is "almost an imitation of Douglass's Narrative."56 Indeed, Washington covers much of the same information found in the first chapter of the *Narrative*: as does Douglass, he begins, "I was born," and proceeds to tell the place of his birth, that the exact date is unknown to him because accurate records were not kept for slaves, something about his parents—his mother a black slave and his father a white man of unknown identity. The kind of information given in Washington's first chapter recalls Douglass, but the tone is different, as noted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

Douglass's neatly structured, uncompromising antitheses and his multiple use of the trope of chiasmus become qualified in Washington's saga by curiously compromising and demeaning parenthetical "explanations" of his assertions. "My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings," Washington assertively enough begins his second paragraph. Then he qualifies this: "This was so, however, not because my owners were especially cruel, for they were not, as compared with many others."

Furthermore, in his first paragraph, Washington transforms Douglass's magnificently determinant rhetorical gesture into a poor attempt to amuse. Douglass writes, "I was born in Tuckahoe,
near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slave thus ignorant." Washington's revision confirms the presence of a drastically altered rhetorical principle: "I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. I am not sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth, but at any rate I suspect I must have been born somewhere at sometime."57

Gates's close analysis identifies the "drastically altered rhetorical principle" that seems to inform Up From Slavery: Washington adapts Douglass's forms, but time after time recasts the content, everywhere softening the harshness, downplaying the brutality, flattening the emotion. He seems to be correcting the strong anti-slavery views of the earlier writers, replacing them with a milder version of the institution of slavery, a vision popularized by later writers of the romantic southern fictional tradition. Washington wants to please his reader any way he can, sometimes by telling the reader what he believes he wants to hear, at other times by his attempts at humor. Although Washington's first chapter tells of harsh living conditions—life in a primitive, cold cabin, long hours of hard work, poor and insufficient food—he studiously avoids mention of physical violence perpetrated by whites against black slaves. Having been only nine years old when slavery was abolished, Washington may have witnessed few violent acts
or remembered few that he may have seen, but his opening chapter contrasts sharply with Douglass's in his recollection of the relationship between blacks and whites in the antebellum South. Douglass closes his first chapter with a whipping—the event which he calls "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass." The beating of his Aunt Hester by Aaron Anthony—the young woman stripped to the waist, arms tied above her head, mercilessly flogged by the white man in a scene of thinly veiled sexual violence—serves Douglass as a primal scene epitomizing the essence of slavery: the brutal mishandling of the helpless by the powerful and vicious. Hester's beating foreshadows Douglass's own beatings at the hands of Covey and sets up the conflict between master and slave that Douglass sees as their essential relationship.

When Washington comes to describe the relationship between the races in his first chapter, we find something very different from Douglass's account of brutality. Washington asserts that there was no bitterness among the blacks on his plantation toward their white masters, nor did the majority of slaves in the South who were treated decently feel bitter toward whites. He goes on to tell tales of slaves mourning the deaths of their white masters lost in the war, of slaves protecting the white women on the plantations when the men were absent, even of former slaves helping with the education of the children of former masters. Washington is at pains to assert the trustworthiness of slaves, their faithful keeping of trusts, and the reluctance of some to accept emancipation when it arrived. He crowns
his musing on the relationship of blacks and whites in pre-war days with these words: "Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have entertained the idea that, notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did." Granted that Washington's experience of slavery was much more limited than Douglass's, and granted that one could find authentic instances of every case of tender feelings between master and slave related by Washington, one still reacts with surprise at reading Washington's first chapter. The form recalls Douglass, but imagine Douglass ever asserting that blacks got nearly as much from slavery as whites did! Only when we understand what Washington is setting out to do in Up From Slavery do some of the absurdities (there are worse ones to come) make sense.

Up From Slavery can be read as a rewrite of Frederick Douglass's Narrative. Washington, aware that he had assumed the mantle of black leadership in the same year that Douglass died, wanted to be recognized as standing in the line of black authority that had been first held by Douglass. He saw many similarities between himself and the older man—both were born in slavery to a black woman and white man, both strove for education, and both reached positions of prominence. But it must have seemed to Washington that Douglass was fixed in an older time when the battles to be fought and won were different from those of his own adult years. If Douglass stressed the conflict between the races and white brutality as weapons in the abolitionist cause, that was an appropriate strategy for his time. Douglass wrote for a white audience who found a grim satisfaction in reading tales of southern cruelty.
But time and conditions had changed between 1845 and 1901, as Washington viewed them. Now blacks battled not for emancipation, but for jobs and economic stability. Now the audience for the autobiography of a black American was not only a northern readership of abolitionist sympathizers—it was an audience of Americans north and south, many, if not most, of whom were averse to full social equality for blacks, and some of whom, the white southerners, still had the power to help or hurt the black man. At the least, they could make life difficult for blacks by refusing to hire them; at worst, they could, with impunity, lynch black men and rape black women. Washington must have seen no reason to antagonize his white readers but much cause to mollify them, to gloss over the brutality of the past by sentimentally recounting mutually affectionate relationships between the beloved white master and mistress and their trusted servants. In the interest of advancing his view of the present as a time when whites and blacks needed to cooperate for the advancement of the South, Washington was willing to recreate the past or at least to give his version of it as a replacement of the older view as written by Frederick Douglass. Each writer, then, shapes his vision of slavery to serve his ends; each writer speaks of a "true" version of slavery. But each view is intentionally selective, and both have been criticized as prejudicial. Most readers today would probably find Washington's version less authentic, certainly less in keeping with the pictures of slave life shown in recent novels, films, and television programs (Roots, for example); many readers will still find his view offensive, even when they understand his tactics. In one way, Washington is no
more calculating than Douglass, but his motives appear less noble; he emerges as the accommodator, whereas Douglass appears as the fighter. Washington advocates racial peace at any price (even the truth); Douglass demands freedom and dignity for blacks at any cost, even war.

If some of Washington's assertions about the feelings between blacks and their white owners as described in the first chapter of *Up From Slavery* strike the reader as selective at best and downright misleading at worst, they are at least reasonable. But in his effort to put the best construction on race relations in the post-war South, Washington blunders badly: in his account of the Ku Klux Klan, he verges on the absurd. In Chapter IV of *Up From Slavery*, Washington describes the activity of the Klan in West Virginia in the late 1870's, the time when he was teaching school before going to Washington, D.C., for seminary training. In an unintentionally comic description of Klan purpose and activity, he writes, "The 'Ku Klux' were bands of men who had joined themselves together for the purpose of regulating the conduct of the coloured people, especially with the object of preventing the members of the race from exercising any influence in politics." "Regulating the conduct of the coloured people" is Washington's euphemism for the terrorizing of blacks by whites, the threats, the burnings, the beatings, and the lynchings. He does admit that some churches were burned, that "many innocent people were made to suffer," and even that "during the period not a few coloured people lost their lives," but again we find the technique by which Washington is able both to register a wrong and to understate it to a remarkable degree. Here again, as with his description of blacks' conditions
under slavery, Washington carefully reminds the reader that Klan violence is a thing of the past:

I have referred to this unpleasant part of the history of the South simply for the purpose of calling attention to the great change that has taken place since the days of the "Ku Klux." Today there are no such organizations in the South, and the fact that such ever existed is almost forgotten by both races. There are few places in the South now where public sentiment would permit such organizations to exist.62

Washington's statement about the end of Klan activity is correct: by the 1870's the organization had largely disappeared. But the Klan didn't go out of business because race relations had dramatically improved. It stopped its reign of terror because its goal—the subjection of the southern black—had been realized. A younger generation may have had no first-hand knowledge of Klan tactics, but hundreds of older blacks would never and could never forget it had existed—it still existed in their minds, for the memories of terror and death do not quickly fade. Washington here shows his strong determination to recreate the South to fit his vision of what it should ideally be: a paradise of racial harmony where black and white would work together but live separately. Did he know that astute readers would see the fallacies in his writing even while thousands hailed his vision? Washington was apparently willing to take the risk of criticism just as he had moved steadily and confidently forward to make a reality of his dream of black success in the South.

Incidentally, his explanation for the end of the Klan—public sentiment
had killed it—proved wrong. The Klan was reactivated in 1915, the year of Washington's death.

Washington's relationship to Douglass is implicit in the first chapter of *Up From Slavery*: the homage shows in his imitation of the autobiographical form Douglass employs; the corrective stance is revealed in the ways Washington softens Douglass's images of slavery. This implicit relationship is made explicit in a later chapter when Washington mentions Douglass and draws a comparison between the two of them. In 1899, Washington and his wife were given a trip to Europe as a gift from some admirers. He mentions meeting in England some of the men and women who had, years earlier, "known and honoured the late William Lloyd Garrison, the Hon. Frederick Douglass, and other abolitionists." Thus Washington deftly reminds the reader that Douglass, too, had traveled to Europe and had met prominent people. On his return trip, Washington had an experience that further connected him with Douglass and which he uses in *Up From Slavery* to make a point about his relationship with the other man and between the two different times in which they lived:

After three months in Europe we sailed from Southampton in the steamship *St. Louis*. On this steamer there was a fine library that had been presented to the ship by the citizens of St. Louis, Mo. In this library I found a life of Frederick Douglass, which I began reading. I became especially interested in Mr. Douglass's description of the way he was treated on shipboard during his first or second visit to England. In this description he told how he was not permitted to enter the cabin, but had to confine
himself to the deck of the ship. A few minutes after I had finished reading this description I was waited on by a committee of ladies and gentlemen with the request that I deliver an address at a concert which was to be given the following evening. And yet there are people who are bold enough to say that race feeling in America is not growing less intense!  

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass does indeed relate an incident such as Washington describes. On his first journey to England, in 1845, he was prevented from sailing as a cabin passenger because of the objections of some Americans on board. Consigned to the second cabin, Douglass soon was visited by many of the white passengers, his case a minor *cause célèbre* during the voyage. The intended insult became an opportunity for a moral triumph and is narrated as such by Douglass.

Forty-four years later, this incident from the life of Douglass is nothing more than an old tale in a book on a shelf in a ship's library, where it is found by another black man whose circumstances are somewhat similar. One is struck by the too-good-to-be-true coincidental perfection of the scene as Washington relates it: he "happens" upon a life of Douglass, he "happens" to be reading of Douglass's shipboard experience (some 250 pages into the account), and he just happens, at that very moment, to be invited to address the entire ship—an invitation which throws into sharp contrast the situations of the two men. Douglass was allowed on ship, but not offered firstclass accommodations; Washington is free to have whatever rooms he wishes and is given the honor of speaking to the assembled passengers. "How far
we have come!" is the message, the message Washington wishes to convey when he evokes Douglass. The moral victory of Douglass is glossed over; improved race relations are more important for Washington's purposes. Douglass is relegated to his book, an historic curiosity, manageable, something that can be taken up and put down at will. In this case, Douglass is put back on the shelf so that his successor may receive another honor. The past gives way to the present, where everything is improving every day in every way.

In "Autobiography and Washington," James Cox draws a distinction between the true literary author who struggles against the conventions of autobiography as he writes his own life story and the "nonwriter" or naive autobiographer who sees autobiography as a mold "into which he can empty the experience he confidently believes that he has had." Cox sees Booker T. Washington as a nonwriter or naive autobiographer who picks up autobiographical forms readily at hand (Cox believes Up From Slavery is modelled after Franklin's Autobiography) and adapts them for his own purpose. Up From Slavery breaks no new ground formally and is not as great a work as either Franklin's or Douglass's and in that regard is perhaps something of a literary failure. But Washington's primary purpose was hardly literary: Up From Slavery is autobiography as propaganda, a work seeking to demonstrate that the black American, as well as his white counterpart, can compete in the economic and social realms and be as successful as any man. Washington seeks to show himself as a black Benjamin Franklin, and the resemblances of Up From Slavery to the Autobiography help him achieve this purpose. But he does not, despite his efforts, succeed in his
highest goal—reincarnating himself as another Frederick Douglass, and his attempts to make *Up From Slavery* sound like the *Narrative*, perhaps even to rewrite the *Narrative*, correcting its outdated and "limited" social vision, do not work. Why?

Washington structures *Up From Slavery* according to the three part pattern of the slave narrative: bondage, flight, and freedom. For Washington, bondage is actual slavery, the state in which he lived for the first nine years of his life, but it is also enslavement to ignorance and poverty, conditions which did not magically disappear after emancipation. He did not have to escape slavery by fleeing North, as did Douglass and hundreds of others born earlier; Washington received freedom when emancipation was decreed. He did have to achieve mental and material freedom by working to educate himself: this process comprises the large central section of his work, including his description of his early years at Tuskegee, during which he had to teach himself how to create and sustain the school of which he found himself head. The "freedom" section of *Up From Slavery* could be said to commence with Chapter XIV, "The Atlanta Exposition Address," Washington's recounting of the speech that brought him fame and that convinced him that he had finally arrived. No man could now deny Washington's success or take from him what he had attained for himself through long, arduous labor. He had worked for, and received, the freedom to interact with white America as an equal and to express his opinions without fear. (But did fear prevent his speaking out against lynching and other flagrant abuses of blacks?) He had followed Franklin's advice and had been duly rewarded.
The tripartite structure is present, but the central metaphor of *Up From Slavery* sits uneasily upon it. In the slave narratives, flight links bondage and freedom as a rite of passage from one state to its opposite. In some cases, in the narrative of William and Ellen Craft, for instance, flight is shown to require cunning, determination, and nerves of steel. In others, Douglass's primarily, flight is a mental and emotional process as much as a physical one and involves fight, if necessary: Douglass's passage from slave mentality to thinking of himself as a free man comes after he has fought Covey. In these cases, flight forces the slave to take a stand against the desires of his master. If their masters want William and Ellen Craft to remain slaves, the Crafts refuse and break for freedom. If Covey wishes Douglass to submit passively to a brutal beating, Douglass will fight back. The slave must assert himself and take a stand opposing the wishes of others. But Washington's central metaphor is not one of resistance; it is one of at least seeming compliance, acquiescence.

When Booker T. Washington arrived at the Hampton Institute, he had no money to pay tuition. Upon applying to the head teacher for admission, he was at first put off—the woman would neither accept nor refuse him. As Washington puts it, he "continued to linger about her, and to impress her in all the ways I could with my worthiness." After some time, the teacher requested Washington take a broom and sweep a recitation room. This he did—three times, then proceeded to dust the room four times, cleaning every place where dust could possibly hide. The teacher, a Miss Hackle, gave the room a thorough inspection and, in Washington's words, "When she was unable to find one
bit of dirt on the floor, or a particle of dust on any of the furniture, she quietly remarked, 'I guess you will do to enter this institution.' Washington relates the meaning of the event for him:

I was one of the happiest souls on earth. The sweeping of that room was my college entrance examination, and never did any youth pass an examination for entrance into Harvard or Yale that gave him more genuine satisfaction. I have passed several examinations since then, but I have always felt that this was the best one I ever passed.

Albert E. Stone notes this event, the cleaning of a room to meet the stringent standards of a white "Yankee" woman, as announcing Washington's essential mythic identity. He sees himself not as the hero, the warrior, but as the servant who wins a place of trust and honor through faithful and superior service. If Douglass's credo can be said to be "I will fight," Washington's is "ego serviam"--"I will serve." And the act of service, in this case, sweeping a room, replaces the heroic flight/fight as the central event in Washington's personal drama. Douglass wins his manhood, his sense of self, by resisting the will of another; Washington discovers his by obeying the wishes of another--that other, be it noted, a white person.

Washington's central metaphor, then, is domestic, and it therefore fits poorly on the heroic bondage-flight/fight-freedom pattern that Douglass uses and perfects. Washington believes that faithful service is the way of his present moment, that the struggles of the past are no longer necessary nor desirable. Yet he desires to identify himself with those struggles, and this explains the use of Douglass's Narrative as a
model. If he had simply needed a mold into which he could pour his experience, Franklin's Autobiography was available (and more in line with Washington's self-image)—he need not have evoked Douglass at all. The evocation is made, however, with the resulting uneasy mixture of heroic form and domestic content. Washington may wish to be seen primarily as a latter-day Frederick Douglass, but his true identity remains that of a black Benjamin Franklin.

Washington tries, then, to fit his vision of himself and his world into the heroic mold of Frederick Douglass's autobiography, and the result is often unsatisfactory. Up From Slavery does not embody the myth of the hero, but it does embody myths: not only the domestic myth of the self-made man but also the myth of progress—racial, social, and economic. Up From Slavery strongly asserts that the past is gone, and with it, hatred, oppression, and violence. A new day has dawned, one in which white men and black men can live and work together in peace. But for this day to come fully to light, men white and black must forgive and forget. Washington carefully shows that he, for one, has done both. From the beginning of his autobiography, he emphasizes the absence of bitterness in himself and in other blacks: most slaves were neither hostile to their white masters nor bitter about slavery as an institution. Of himself, Washington writes:

I believe that I have completely rid myself of any ill feeling toward the Southern white man for any wrong that he may have inflicted upon my race. I am made to feel just as happy now when I am rendering service to Southern white men as when the service is rendered to a member of my own race. I pity from the bottom of
my heart any individual who is so unfortunate as to get into the
habit of holding race prejudice.69

Washington adds humility and a love of labor to the ability to
forgive as necessary components for man—black or white—to succeed.
These three traits Washington actively pursued as facets of his public
persona; any resentment, anger, or frustration he may have felt toward
the reality of race relations in the South he kept carefully to
himself.

The myth of progress must have been difficult for Washington to
sustain during the latter years of the 19th century, for these years
marked a low point in race relations in the United States and saw the
Negro stripped of many of the legal rights granted him after the Civil
War. The Supreme Court's 1883 ruling that the Civil Rights Law of 1875
was unconstitutional, for example, opened the door for the
disenfranchisement of blacks in the South. The states began systematic
oppression of their black citizens, compelling blacks to live without
the vote for many years, then having to fight to regain it in the
1960's and '70's. But these harsher realities are glossed over in Up
From Slavery. Instead, the book closes with a glowing description of
the visit of President William McKinley to Tuskegee on December 16,
1898. Many of the citizens of Tuskegee, white and black alike, worked
together to make the town and the school presentable for the
President's visit. A parade and exhibitions were organized to show the
chief of state and his entourage the work being done at the school.
Washington quotes part of the President's speech that day, and then
quotes an excerpt from an address by John D. Long, Secretary of the Navy:

I cannot make a speech today. My heart is too full—full of hope, admiration, and pride for my countrymen of both sections and both colours. I am filled with gratitude and admiration for your work, and from this time forward I shall have absolute confidence in your progress and in the solution of the problem in which you are engaged.

The problem, I say, has been solved. A picture has been presented today which should be put upon canvas with the pictures of Washington and Lincoln, and transmitted to future time and generations—a picture which the press of the country should spread broadcast over the land, a most dramatic picture, and that picture is this: The President of the United States standing on this platform; on one side the Governor of Alabama, on the other, completing the trinity, a representative of a race only a few years ago in bondage, the coloured President of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute.76

Long's heart obviously was not too full that day to make a pretty speech, and one, certainly, that vindicated the world-view Washington had worked long and diligently to bring into being. Washington himself could not have better expressed what the day meant to him, and he preserves Long's words so that his readers can know that meaning, too. The description of the three men standing on the platform—McKinley, the governor of Alabama, and Washington himself, tricked out in patriotic and religious language (Washington, Lincoln, and the
Trinity!) presents the myth of American racial progress in one remarkable image. Sadly, time has erased that glowing picture and replaced it with other images—a later governor of Alabama standing on the steps of the administration building of the University of Alabama, vowing that blacks would never enter; white Alabamans turning on black Alabamans with water hoses, attack dogs, and clubs. Washington's myth of progress proved only a myth, one that has had to be renewed in recent years and given expression by those who saw it not as accomplished fact, but as a dream yet to be fulfilled. Frederick Douglass's myth of the hero who has to fight for his freedom, to be able to say, "I am a man," has proven to be the true one for the black American.
NOTES


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11 Quarles, in his introduction to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, p. xviii.

12 Smith, p. ix.


17 This list was compiled by John F. Baylis for his introduction to *Black Slave Narratives* (New York, 1970), and is mentioned by Olney in "I Was Born."


In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass says that he wrote his *Narrative* to prove that he had been a slave. Some who heard him speak couldn't believe that so eloquent an orator could have been a slave.


Foner, p. 60.

Baker, *Long Black Son*, p. 77

Couder, p. 51.


Weissman, p. 726.


Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 25.


Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 149.

Campbell, p. 337.


Campbell, p. 40.

Benjamin Quarles, "The Breech Between Douglass and Garrison," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIII (April, 1938), 144-54.

Foner, pp. 177-78.


42Smith, pp. 33-35.


44Smith, p. 33.


47Factor, p. 103.


49Factor, p. 154.

50Factor, p. 155.

51Washington, *Up From Slavery*, p. 333. The speech in full is given in Chapter XIV of the work.

52Foner, p. 370.

53Foner, p. 370.


55A detailed account of the genesis of both works appears in Harlan's introduction to Volume I of the *Booker T. Washington Papers.*
56Baker, Long Black Song, p. 87.
58Douglass, Narrative, p. 28.
59Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 220.
60Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 223.
61Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 254.
62Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 255.
63Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 368.
69Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 303.
Chapter Two

The years 1895-1912 were the "glory years" of Booker T. Washington's reign as the most powerful black man in America. *Up From Slavery*, Washington's best-known expression of his social and economic credo, quickly established itself as a work of near-Biblical inspiration and authority," almost universally hailed. ¹ William Dean Howells's fulsome review typifies the praise heaped upon the autobiography; he extolls Washington's "simple" and "charming" style, his "winning yet manly personality," and his "ideal of self-devotion [which] must endear him to every reader of his book."² Neither Howells nor other readers of *Up From Slavery* realized that the book had been ghost-written and that its "simple prose . . . of sterling worth" and "sweet brave humor" were the products, at least in part, of the efforts of two white men, Max Bennett Thrasher and Lyman Abbott, the first a paid writer of Tuskegee, the second a trusted friend and advisor of Washington.

Amid the laudatory review of *Up From Slavery*, one dissenting voice made itself heard. W.E.B. Du Bois's short essay, "The Evolution of Negro Leadership," appearing in *The Dial* on July 16, 1901, was the opening shot in a protracted battle for leadership among black Americans that would last until Washington's death fifteen years later. Du Bois himself would go on to occupy a place of power and influence in the nation and would in time write two full-length autobiographies, as Washington had done. The first of these, *Dusk of Dawn* (1941), will be treated in this chapter. First, however, I shall deal briefly with Du Bois's *Dial* review of *Up From Slavery* and his essay, "Of Mr. Booker T.
Washington and Others" (1903), as a way of outlining the points at issue in the controversy that developed between the two men.

"The Evolution of Negro Leadership" seeks first to place Booker T. Washington into historical perspective by reviewing the various ways American Negroes—"the imprisoned group"—have sought to deal with their situation. Revolution, adjustment and accommodation, and self-development in the face of discouraging circumstances had all been attempted. The fortunes of the black man, so low during the long years of slavery, were suddenly and dramatically raised with Emancipation, ascended to the heights during Reconstruction, but met with reversal in the last years of the 19th century. As Du Bois puts it:

War memories and ideals rapidly passed, and a period of astonishing commercial development and expansion ensued. A time of doubt and hesitation, of storm and stress, overtook the freedmen's sons; and then it was that Booker T. Washington's leadership began. Mr. Washington came with a clear simple programme, at the psychological moment, at a time when the nation was a little ashamed of having bestowed so much sentiment on Negroes and was concentrating its energies on Dollars. The industrial training of Negro youth was not an idea originating with Mr. Washington, nor was the policy of conciliating the white South wholly his. But he first put life, unlimited energy, and perfect faith into this programme; he changed it from a by-path into a veritable Way of Life.³
Du Bois's review acknowledges Washington's considerable achievements, particularly his "conquest of the South" and his "gaining consideration in the North." But his success has been won at the expense of values that while admittedly not commercially profitable, are nevertheless vital to man's spiritual health:

He [Washington] learned so thoroughly the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism and the ideals of material prosperity that he pictures as the height of absurdity a black boy studying a French grammar in the midst of weeds and dirt. One wonders how Socrates or St. Francis of Assisi would receive this!

Having subjected Washington's view to implied criticism (the reader is meant to know very well how Socrates or Francis would have viewed Washington's "gospel of Work and Money"), Du Bois goes on to note that "singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age is a mark of the successful man." Yet not all blacks agree with Washington's program: those who founded the black academic schools of the South chafe under criticism from the Hampton-Tuskegee coalition; others distrust Washington for being so friendly with southern whites. Still others, a group including eminent blacks such as Dunbar, Tanner, Chesnutt, Miller, and the Grimkes, can agree with Washington and the policies of industrial education to a degree but believe that the program by itself is too limiting and that blacks should be able to advance themselves in whatever areas of self-development they choose. Further, these critics of Washington insist that blacks must have suffrage on the same terms as whites.
Du Bois stresses two things in his short review: first, not all Negroes give wholehearted support to Washington although most can honor and support him to some extent. Second, he identifies the concerns that unite this group of which he himself was part and was soon to lead. Those blacks who opposed Washington tended to be well-educated men who had received academic, not industrial, education at schools like Fisk in Nashville, Atlanta University, or (in Du Bois’s case) northern schools like Harvard. They recognized the value of traditional college training for qualified blacks—the “Talented Tenth” who would be the race’s future leaders. They resented the fact that black schools like Fisk and Atlanta University were receiving less and less funding from northern philanthropists who were succumbing to Tuskegee propaganda which claimed that blacks needed training in industrial skills, not the arts and sciences. This group also deplored Washington’s accommodationist policies and watched with concern, then horror, as civil rights for blacks in the South continued to decay even as Washington preached patience, hard work, and segregation.

Washington’s reaction to Du Bois’s review, if he read it, is not known. In 1901, the two men were on cordial terms; they camped with some other black leaders in West Virginia in September of that year. Surely Washington knew he had critics, yet neither he nor Du Bois could have guessed in 1901 that a rift would soon open between them that would resulting in a political struggle to determine the future direction of black Americans’ fight for equal rights. At stake, too, was the mantle of Frederick Douglass which Booker Washington had worn by default since 1895 and which a younger generation now sought to take.
upon itself. Du Bois and his associates saw themselves as the true
descendants of the militant Douglass and determined to continue his
efforts for full freedom for their people.

II.

Du Bois's essay "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," which
first appeared in a collection of his short works, *The Souls of Black
Folk*, marked the beginning of the formal breach between him and
Washington. Du Bois had already in 1901 expressed his reservations
about Washington's program, and even earlier, in 1900, had chastised
those blacks who forget that "life is more than meat and the body more
than raiment." But now, the reservations had become open, pointed
criticism. Why Du Bois became bolder in his attack is somewhat
uncertain. Francis Broderick suggests some possibilities: maybe Du
Bois had gained confidence in his own viewpoint from the favorable
reception his earlier critiques had elicited; he may have been inspired
by Monroe Trotter's attacks on Washington in his paper, the *Guardian*;
he may have been angered by the decrease in funds received by Atlanta
University in the face of the devaluation of academic education by the
Tuskegee "machine"; or he may have realized that his strategy of quiet
scholarship designed to elicit change through a rational presentation
of the truth was not going to be enough--open agitation would be
necessary to win rights for blacks.

Du Bois himself gives some indication of his motives for
publishing "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" in *Dusk of Dawn,*
his first full-length autobiography. Just before he describes how The Souls of Black Folk came to be assembled, he mentions how Washington had invited him to participate in a conference to discuss the problems of American Negroes. Du Bois notes his enthusiasm for the conference as well as his frustration that it took so long for the meeting to be organized:

... it seemed to me that I ought to make my own position clearer than I had hitherto. I was increasingly uncomfortable under the statements of Mr. Washington’s position: his depreciation of the value of the vote; his evident dislike of Negro colleges; and his general attitude which seemed to place the onus of blame for the status of Negroes upon the Negroes themselves rather than upon the whites. And above all, I resented the Tuskegee Machine.7

Du Bois further notes that The Souls of Black Folk was a collection of pieces he had already written; when asked by the A.C. McClurg Company for a book of his essays, he took what he already had, added the chapter on Washington which he wrote for the occasion, and submitted the lot for publication.

Much of Du Bois’s 1901 Dial review of Up From Slavery is incorporated into “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others.” The earlier essay’s overview of black Americans’ reaction to their history of oppression is repeated and expanded, but this time, Washington is said to be outside the line of self-assertive Negro leadership, a line centering in Frederick Douglass, “the greatest of American Negro leaders.” Du Bois recalls that Douglass, throughout his long career, never changed the terms of his confrontation with white America:
"Douglass, in his old age, still bravely stood for the ideals of his early manhood—ultimate assimilation through self-assertion, and on no other terms." Washington, in contrast, is a compromiser who arouses the resentment of Negroes whose civil rights are thrown away by this man without authority to do so. He is criticized particularly for his "attitude of adjustment and submission," for almost accepting the alleged inferiority of the Negro race, and for asking Negroes to give up, at least for the moment, political power, civil rights, and higher education for the young. During his tenure as leader of America's black community, that community has been disenfranchised, reduced by unfair laws to a status of legal civil inferiority, and has had its institutions of higher learning stripped of funding. Du Bois then asks:

Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men?

The answer is no. Further, Washington’s policies involve him in a triple paradox: 1. He seeks to make black men into business men and property owners, but such men cannot hold and defend their place in society without suffrage; 2. He insists on self-respect, but no man can hold his self-esteem when systematically relegated to a socially inferior position; 3. He favors industrial education and depreciates higher learning, but the trade schools he favors need college-trained instructors to staff them.
These points, so telling because of the calm, analytical manner of their presentation, must have roused the ire of Washington and his circle. Du Bois's insistence that Washington's critics admire him for his positive achievements and his assertion of their responsibility to voice their own opinion probably did little to prevent an angry reaction. When Du Bois states that he and his circle stand unequivocally for the right to vote, civil equality, and education for black youth according to ability, the Tuskegee people must have known that the gauntlet had been formally thrown down. Du Bois was challenging an entire system of thought and action and was criticizing that system for giving white America the mistaken impression that it was justified in its oppression of the Negro. The South, particularly, needed to be told the truth of its role in causing the Negroes' problems and of its moral responsibility to help mend a situation it had caused. Washington had, according to Du Bois, aided the national detour from its proper path—a path paved in earlier days by Frederick Douglass and others. A return must now be made, and Du Bois and his associates would attempt to take upon themselves the role of Douglass in renewing the fight for full civil rights for black Americans.

III.

From 1903 on, W.E.B. Du Bois and other like-minded black Americans struggled against the entrenched power of Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute. To fight against Washington's accommodationist policies, Du Bois and others organized the Niagara Movement in 1905 and then formed the NAACP in 1910. Washington's power began to wane with
the election of Woodrow Wilson in 1912, and Washington’s death in 1915 ended both his rule and Tuskegee’s. Tuskegee reverted to being a center of learning instead of a clearing house for nearly all decisions affecting black Americans. That same year the Ku Klux Klan was revived and one hundred Negroes were lynched—both signs that America’s race problems had in no way been solved by Washington’s policies. Du Bois worked tirelessly through these years and on into World War I and the Depression, remaining with the NAACP until 1933, then returning to Atlanta University to teach and write. In 1940, looking back on more than seventy years of life, Du Bois published Dusk of Dawn, the first of two autobiographies.

A reading of the full title of Dusk of Dawn immediately alerts the reader that the work is not in the "normal" autobiographical form, an unbroken chronology of the author’s life from the time of his birth up until the moment he writes his account. The subtitle reads, An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept. By this, Du Bois means two things: first, that in his own history can be seen a kind of compressed history of the black race in America; second, that his life story is the chronicle of his maturing understanding of the meaning of that complex and elusive term, race. Du Bois’s first meaning is stated in the Apology of the autobiography:

But in my experience, autobiographies have had little lure; repeatedly they assume too much or too little: too much in dreaming that one’s own life has greatly influenced the world; too little in the reticences, repressions and distortions which come because men do not dare to be absolutely frank. My life had its
significance and its only deep significance because it was part of a Problem; but that problem, was, a I continue to think, the central problem of the greatest of the world's democracies and so the Problem of the future world.12

The problem of which Du Bois writes is race, a problem he locates in the subconscious and which he calls, of all the issues facing the world, "one of the most unyielding and threatening." Commenting on the same subject later in Dusk of Dawn, Du Bois restates his thesis:

My discussions of the concept of race, and of the white and colored worlds, are not to be regarded as digressions from the history of my life; rather my autobiography is a digressive illustration of exemplification of what race has meant in the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is for this reason that I have named and tried to make this book an autobiography of race rather than merely a personal reminiscence, with the idea that peculiar racial situations and problems could best be explained in the life history of one who has lived them. My living gains its importance from the problems and not the problems from me.13

Dusk of Dawn, then, is not intended to be a standard autobiography, for Du Bois prefers to tell the story of his race during the years of his life rather than telling his individual story. Accordingly, sections of the work relating facts of his own life are interspersed with sections treating in general terms the idea of race, the situation of the black man in America, and the attitudes of white Americans toward blacks. Du Bois omits most details of his personal life—his marriage,
children, friendships, and so forth, in favor of aspects of his life that do somehow comment on the broader racial situation of his time. Thus, when Du Bois decides to tell of his ancestry, he does not assume his readers' interest in the subject itself. Instead, as he declares, he desires to show how strenuously white America has suppressed the study of racial intermixture although America is one of the countries of the world that has experienced the greatest blending of the races. He writes:

We have not only not studied race and race mixture in America, but we have tried almost by legal process to stop such study. It is for this reason that it has occurred to me just here to illustrate the way in which Africa and Europe have been united in my family.¹⁴

There follows an intriguing account of Du Bois's family, the line traced on the paternal side back to French Huguenots and on the maternal side to an African named Tom, born about 1730 and who served in the Revolutionary War. Du Bois seems to mistrust the intrinsic interest of what he writes, although he elsewhere tells his family history without apology. In Dusk of Dawn, however, he doggedly adheres to the stated theme of the work and so makes his personal history serve a larger purpose. His ancestry has brought him blood from several nations and from two races; his ancestors, like those of all but native Americans, have come to this country from other places yet have "made it" and have won the right to be called Americans. But because black blood runs in his veins, Du Bois is an outcast; despite his light skin, excellent mind, and superlative education, he remains part of America's
“problem.” Because of his black blood, he has inherited slavery, discrimination, and insult, and he feels himself bound not only to other black Americans but to the colored and enslaved peoples of Africa and Asia. Du Bois’s family history thus leads him to tell of his spiritual affinity with Africa and of his visit to his ancestral continent. This narrative, in turn, extols the beauty of the land and of its people and praises the harmonious and unhurried quality of life which is missing in Western culture. Where the white world has denigrated the dark races, Du Bois lauds them and shows that the whole white, Western concept of race is built upon lies that even many black men and women have been made to believe.

IV.

As Du Bois notes in the Apology of his autobiography, he sees his life as significant because it was part of the race problem of his day. The injustice in white America’s treatment of its black citizens is always his central theme. He uses his own example as an individual case illustrating a general truth: he possesses a superior education, an extraordinarily perceptive mind, and a highly cultured sensibility; his scholarly works are published and praised; but because he is a black man, America has declared him “nigger” and relegated him, literally and figuratively, to the Jim Crow car. With Frederick Douglass, Du Bois sees his own life as an expression of the victimization of millions of men and women because of one elusive
"fact"—race. Du Bois takes pains in *Dusk of Dawn* to demolish traditional prejudices against the black race, especially its supposed mental and cultural inferiority. With Douglass, he declares "I am a man" and denounces the wrongs done him. In this respect, *Dusk of Dawn* offers specific criticisms of Booker Washington and his policies, but the entire book and Du Bois's self-perception also refute Washington's program in a general way.

Booker T. Washington's self-portrait in *Up From Slavery* paints his life as a solution to the American racial problem, and his book stands as an "annotated guide" to racial issues and their proper resolution. His message runs, "Learn a trade, get a job, make money, and you will receive your rights in due time. Look at my example—I have won my respected place through hard work and determination." Du Bois's autobiography refutes that philosophy; he declares:

I was not an American; I was not a man; I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world; and that white world often existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds. . . . How I traveled and where, what work I did, what income I received, where I ate, where I slept, with whom I talked, where I sought recreation, where I studied, what I wrote and what I could get published—all this depended and depended primarily upon an overwhelming mass of my fellow citizens in the United States from whose society I was excluded."
Those words, written twenty-five years after the death of Booker T.
Washington, are more an indictment of his philosophy than any direct
criticism of his life and work in Dusk of Dawn. If Washington worked
at times to show that the Frederick Douglass approach to race relations
was outdated, destined to give way to a more "enlightened" approach
suited to an era of capitalist expansion, then Du Bois spent his life
countering the abuses that Washington's policies invited. The Niagara
Movement which Du Bois began and the NAACP of which he was a leader for
nearly twenty-five years were created as direct responses to the
Tuskegee Machine.

In his treatment of Booker T. Washington in Dusk of Dawn, Du Bois
here specifically faults Washington for decrying political activities
among blacks while playing power politics himself, and he deprecates his
policy of accommodation to the increasingly oppressive laws
disenfranchising blacks and relegating them to second-class treatment
in public services. But even more serious, in Du Bois's opinion, is
Washington's power over others; the Tuskegee leader could make or break
a career simply by giving or withholding approval of an appointment or
of a plan of individual enterprise. Du Bois notes the case of Will
Benson, who tried to organize a black town as an independent economic
unit in the South. Benson appealed to northern philanthropists for
financial assistance; when, according to custom, Washington was
consulted for his opinion about the project, he simply remained silent.
Benson did not receive the needed help; Du Bois writes that he died
young, "Of overwork, worry, and a broken heart."
Above all, however, Du Bois resents Booker Washington's determination to squelch opposition to his policies:

Contrary to most opinion, the controversy as it developed was not entirely against Mr. Washington's ideas, but became the insistence upon the right of other Negroes to have and express their ideas. Things came to such a pass than when any Negro complained or advocated a course of action, he was silenced with the remark that Mr. Washington did not agree with this. Naturally, the bumptious, irritated, young black intelligentsia of the day declared, "I don't care a damn what Booker Washington thinks! This is what I think, and I have a right to think."16

Du Bois furthers his criticism of the Tuskegee Machine by noting that it was not the creation of black men alone. Whites had an interest in Tuskegee and its accommodationist policies. The so-called philanthropists who funded Tuskegee had some self-interest in the success of the institution; being businessmen, they saw southern black men as a vast potential pool of semi-skilled labor unlikely to agitate for the rights the white labor unions of the North were seeking for their members. To keep the southern black man acquiescent to this scheme, he must have his ambition curtailed. Washington's policies fit with the plan of northern capitalists who "proposed by building up his prestige and power to control the Negro group." Du Bois concludes, "This was the real force back of the Tuskegee Machine. It had money and it had opportunity, and it found in Tuskegee tools to do its bidding."17
The implication that Washington was involved, even unwittingly, in a subtle but pervasive plot against the black man makes him appear as more than misguided; Washington is a traitor to his race, willing to sell its birthright for a mess of personal power. This suggestion also ties in with Du Bois’s theory of history which he espouses throughout Dusk of Dawn and which he states succinctly at the end of the chapter treating his controversy with Washington:

That history [of the West in the 19th and 20th centuries] may be epitomized in one word—Empire; the domination of white Europe over black Africa and yellow Asia, through political power built on the economic control of labor, income and ideas. The echo of this industrial imperialism in America was the expulsion of black men from American democracy, their subjection to caste control and wage slavery. This ideology was triumphant in 1910.18

Du Bois insists upon the reality of racial conflicts behind the great historical movements of his time, and he repeats this theme throughout Dusk of Dawn. For him, the colonization of Africa and Asia by the European powers results from the white race’s contempt for the darker races combined with the white race’s determination to exploit the raw materials and labor forces in lands inhabited by dark-skinned peoples. His determination to find a racial root for every one of the world’s problems comes to sound strained, and it forces Du Bois into some simplistic reasoning. He must ignore other forces active in history in order to highlight racial injustice; but if it seems exaggerated to claim that World War I was actually fought for reasons having to do more with race than with entangling political alliances, one realizes
how Du Bois, speaking on behalf of one of the world's largest oppressed minorities, can see racial prejudice as the supreme evil of his time. Du Bois actually takes up here a theme sounded by Frederick Douglass, who saw slavery as the great cancer eating away at antebellum America. For Douglass, slavery was an evil that adversely affected white slave owners as much as it harmed their black chattel—recall how he details the deterioration of the spirit and character of Mrs. Sophia Auld once she became the owner of a slave—Douglass himself. A woman once kind and compassionate became petty and cruel because of her power over another human being. But if Douglass deals with the deleterious effects of bondage upon both races on the national scale, Du Bois expands the issue to the global. He elevates to the nth degree the bondage theme already observed in Douglass and Washington; Du Bois looks at the history of the 19th and 20th centuries and sees the enslavement of two of the world's three races by its third race as the dominant historical fact of the era. This enslavement results from economic forces, to be sure, and has been carried out with premeditated malice in many instances. But Du Bois detects other, harder to explain motives behind racial persecution; his changing understanding of the causes of racism and of the means necessary to combat them forms the second great theme of the autobiography. Early in his life, he assumed that prejudice was the result of ignorance:

The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation.19
Well-equipped by his sociological training at a time when sociology was a fledgling discipline, Du Bois devoted years to producing the studies that would tell the "truth" about the Negro which would in turn change the attitudes of the white race once it knew that truth. But as he grew older, Du Bois came to realize how naive his earlier view had been. Racial prejudice is not simply a matter of ignorance, but rather...

...is rooted in the irrational nature of man, buried in his unconscious, perpetuated by the folkways and mores of a whole culture. It is "the result of inherited customs and of those irrational and partly subconscious actions of men which control so large a proportion of their needs."20

A realization of the irrational bases of race prejudice altered the course of W.E.B. Du Bois's career. Suited by training and temperament for an academic career, he became uncomfortable in his ivory tower "while negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved." He realized how few people were actually interested in the sociological truths he was uncovering, least of all the white racists who were most in need, as he thought, of being told truths which would change their attitudes. Furthermore, the realization that prejudice and oppression are rooted in unconscious forces showed Du Bois the futility, even the ridiculousness, of the programs of Booker T. Washington. Even a generous reading of Washington's motives would show them misguided, for his policies were designed not to change the white race's basic opinion of the black man but to equip the black man to step into cultural and economic roles acceptable to the prejudicial world view of whites. In training blacks to be skilled workers, Washington was only fitting them
for exploitation on a slightly higher level than the one they had known. His advice to the black man to temporarily accommodate himself to the status quo was doomed to fail, for the white world would never accept fundamental social change as long as unconscious attitudes remained intact. Through his controversy with Washington and the Tuskegee Machine, Du Bois realized that just as whites were not going to be persuaded by the facts, neither was Washington going to be moved by appeals to reason; another kind of tactic was in order. So Du Bois reluctantly left his work at Atlanta University (where his continued presence was making life uncomfortable for an administration under attack by Tuskegee for harboring him) and went to war full time against "physical, biological and psychological forces; habits, conventions and enactments."21 As he says, "My career as a scientist was to be swallowed up in my role as master of propaganda."22 And although he continued his scholarly work, Du Bois's life after 1910 did move from the narrow confines of academic study into the broader arena of activism on behalf of his race, creating an inner tension in a man who was not naturally gregarious. His job with the NAACP, his role as editor of the Crisis, and his constant writing were all facets of his new sense of purpose in life, begun after his fortieth birthday and continued into his nineties.

V.

W.E.B. Du Bois's decision to devote his life to direct combat against racism marks his way of trying to solve the problems associated
with bondage. Frederick Douglass used both fight and flight as weapons against his oppressors; Washington's program of industrial education and temporary accommodation to the cultural milieu of his day was his way of fighting the economic and social plight of black Americans; now Du Bois, in his turn, would use propaganda against the unconscious racism he detected as the major force in the history of his time. Each of these men lived in the flight/fight dimension of the three-part pattern, and each wrote of his dynamic in his autobiographies. But whereas Douglass and Washington both relied on narration of actual events in their lives, Du Bois employs not only a description of his career as worker on behalf of the black race, but he also creates an encounter with a fictional personification of white racist ideology as a means of describing his fight against the racial bondage of which he himself was a representative victim.

"The White World," which includes Du Bois's imaginary conversation with a "friendly" white antagonist whom he dubs Roger Van Dieman, occupies the central place in Dusk of Dawn. It consists of two sections, the first a discussion between Du Bois and his "friend," the second, a description of the difficulties another fictional but representative white man faces as he tries to reconcile in himself the conflicting roles of Christian, gentleman, and white American. I have already noted that Dusk of Dawn is no typical autobiography, containing, as it does, chapters that are essays on subjects related to Du Bois's themes; "The White World," however, is different from these other chapters in its use of fictional characters and situations to make thematic points. We shall see in the next chapter that Richard
Wright is the master of the fictionalized autobiography, creating scenes that never occurred but which are nevertheless emotionally true. Du Bois does not go as far as Wright does, for Du Bois tells us plainly that he is fabricating his conversation with Roger Van Dieman, perhaps to illustrate his conviction about the fictive nature of the concept of race through an imagined discussion. In this fanciful tête-à-tête, the two men take as their subject the relative inferiority or superiority of the white and black races. Van Dieman, the white man, naturally assumes the superiority of whites, claiming them to be physically more beautiful than blacks, mentally superior, and more advanced culturally. Du Bois, for his part, accepts none of these assumptions and argues for the superiority of blacks in every particular. As the two men banter, the reader senses the futility of the black man’s arguments—sometimes teasing, sometimes serious—in moving the white man away from his deeply ingrained (and unexamined) assumptions about blacks.

Furthermore, the ways in which blacks are superior to whites—their appreciation of beauty, their ability to laugh, their love of land and family—are not assets in the industrialized, capitalist societies white men have created. The two men are as far apart in their beliefs at the end of the conversation as they were at the beginning; Du Bois thus shows the great difficulty, if not futility, in his chosen life’s work. If he cannot persuade Van Dieman, a basically sympathetic if obtuse white man, of the value of the black races, what chance does Du Bois have against the masses of whites who stand to gain wealth and power from the continued oppression of blacks? Toward the end of their conversation, after Du Bois has hammered away at Van Dieman’s
simplistic notion of race by pointing out how much race mixture has occurred over the years (so much so that clear demarcations among the races, even if they can be made, often seem arbitrary at best), Van Dieman, exasperated, remarks, "you are not black; you are no Negro." Thinking of the mixture of yellow and black blood that has infused Europe over the years, Du Bois silently answers Van Dieman, "You are no white." But if the generally accepted concepts of race are invalid as Du Bois has sought to demonstrate, then Van Dieman wants to know what all the arguments of relative racial superiority or inferiority are about. He asks Du Bois to identify the black race, if he can:

"But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it and how can you call it 'black' when you admit it is not black?" [Du Bois replies]

I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride "Jim Crow" in Georgia.23

The absurdity and arbitrariness of racial distinctions and the cultural practices based upon them are shown in this fanciful conversation Du Bois constructs. The last part of the dialogue also expresses succinctly a paradox in Du Bois's thinking about himself and about the issue of race: on the one hand, he claims that race and racial identity do not exist; on the other hand, he and everyone he meets seem acutely aware of their individual racial identity: the Roger van Diemans of the world are every bit as aware of their "whiteness" and its implications as Du Bois is of his "blackness" and what that means. Whereas Du Bois would prefer to look at himself as a man, an individual with his individual physical and mental endowments,
with his particular intellectual gifts, the environing world in which he lives insists that he is first and foremost a member of a particular "race," a fact he must reluctantly accept despite the impossibility of discovering precisely what "race" means. Consequently, he suffers an inner division, about which he writes years before Dusk of Dawn but which he still feels when he comes to pen his autobiography. In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," the first essay in The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois notes:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.24

The black man, already suffering psychic division, is up against more than the Van Diemans of the white world; he stands also under the power of the white man described in the second part of the chapter, the white American who sees himself as a Christian and who tries to live by New Testament precepts. He views himself as a gentleman, too, but this
only complicates an already muddled set of values that conflict within him. Du Bois charts the codes of conduct that war within such a man:

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<tr>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Gentleman</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>White Man</th>
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<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Defense</td>
<td>War</td>
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<td>Good Will</td>
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<td>Golden Rule</td>
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<td>Poverty</td>
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Try as he will to nurture in himself the Christian virtues preached to him, combined with some of the positive qualities of the gentleman, the white American will when threatened revert to those codes found in the categories American and White Man. Since the white man naturally feels threatened by the rise of the dark races which, he believes, will want to take over his wealth and power and intermarry with his white women, even the well-meaning white man's attitudes toward blacks are at bottom hostile, for he knows deep down that blacks hate their lot and do wish their share of the life that whites enjoy.

Du Bois, then, has chosen to fight against subtle but formidable forces. Rooted in the unconscious, they rise as a kind of reflex action in the white world whenever it feels its privileged position at risk. Frederick Douglass could engage in hand-to-hand combat with Edward Covey and win exemption from further beatings; later, he could board a north-bound train and escape bondage. Booker T. Washington could secure an education and rise to a position of prominence so that he could train other black men and manipulate both white and black men. These accomplishments, impressive in themselves, pale in comparison to
the task Du Bois sees facing the black race, the task to which he devotes his life. The scope of bondage has become infinitely greater and the hope of success proportionately diminished. No wonder, then, that Du Bois is less optimistic than Washington about the chances for success. Yet he believes freedom, the third element in the pervasive three-part theme of black life and writing, is worth striving for.

Dusk of Dawn discusses some of the varied ways blacks have fought for their freedom and the difficulties attendant on each of those ways. The program of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP which features "ceaseless agitation and insistent demand for equality" and "the use of force of every sort: moral suasion, propaganda and where possible even physical resistance," is flawed because it fails to enlist the majority of Negroes themselves in the fight for equality. The nation is to enact the programs and the Negroes merely to receive them. Additionally, such a program would call for more unanimity among blacks than exists. To criticize the programs to which he has devoted his life shows an unusual degree of objectivity and unusual commitment even in the face of perceived flaws in the approach. But Du Bois thinks his activities have at least been more realistic than a second solution sometimes proposed for black liberation. Du Bois scorns the "back to Africa" movements for their impracticality; there are no uninhabited regions of the earth suitable for mass migrations. Other migration schemes, whether they be from the American South to the North, the West, or just to the cities, do in fact bring physical relocation but also new segregation and oppression in different locales. Du Bois has a third proposal for black freedom, one to which he has obviously
devoted a good deal of thought. He envisions a huge network of black businesses working together in a kind of cooperative. Blacks would buy from one another and sell to one another to create an inner and partially independent economy in America. Ironically, Du Bois ends up espousing a plan of self-help for the Negro that does not sound very different from Booker T. Washington's. Admittedly, Du Bois does allow for the use of propaganda and agitation along with his economic program, but his description of the goals of his proposal sounds like something Washington could have supported:

The object of that plan would be two-fold: first to make it possible for the Negro group to await its ultimate emancipation with reasoned patience, with equitable temper and with every possible effort to raise the social status and increase the efficiency of the group. And secondly and just as important, the ultimate object of the plan is to obtain admission of the colored group to cooperation and incorporation into the white group on the best possible terms.27

We should not be surprised that Du Bois seeks the solutions to the racial injustices of his times in economic programs; he had become interested in the Russian Revolution and socialism in the 1920's. A visit to the Soviet Union in 1926 increased his curiosity about the ways socialism could aid the Negro in America. Increasingly, Du Bois came to believe that socialism was the way of the future. He joined the American communist party at the end of his life.
Dusk of Dawn ends with a chapter describing Du Bois's work with the NAACP during and after the First World War up until his resignation from the organization in 1934 and his return to teaching. The goals for which he had given his life had yet to be realized; freedom had yet to be obtained. Yet Du Bois's energetic activity on behalf of freedom at the age of seventy is an indication of his lasting belief that despite the bondage that still existed, the fight was valid because freedom could be obtained. In this respect, Du Bois's viewpoint is similar to Booker T. Washington's, if somewhat more cautious. Twenty years later, at the age of ninety, Du Bois closes his last autobiography in a vein rather more pessimistic than anything found in Dusk of Dawn. During the two decades separating the two works, Du Bois had experienced difficult times. In 1950 and 1951 he had been indicted, tried, and acquitted of the charge of being an "unregistered foreign agent" because of his connection with the Peace Information Center. His well-known sympathy for socialism and the Soviet Union undoubtedly made him a target of the rampant paranoia of the McCarthy era. That experience—persecution at the hands of the federal government—certainly helped sour Du Bois on the United States. But whatever the reasons, he closes The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois with a "postlude" that mourns for an America that has squandered much of her glorious possibility. She has reduced life to buying and selling; everything falls to the desire for profit. Democracy has been shown to be unworkable; cheating exists in all facets of economic and political life; wealth and power are the ultimate gods. On the international scene, America is the great arms dealer, and she prepares
herself for more wars. The nation can yet be saved, "but it is selling its birthright. It is betraying its mighty destiny." Du Bois asserts that he has served his homeland all his life even though much of his calling has been that of the prophet destined to preach an unpopular message of the nation's failings. At the end of his life, Du Bois sums up his faith this way:

I believe in socialism. I seek a world where the ideals of communism will triumph—to each according to his need, from each according to his ability. For this I will work as long as I live. And I still live.28

Du Bois was not the only black man to turn to communism as a possible solution to the race problems of the United States. Claude McKay writes at length of his association with Soviet Russia in his autobiography, A Long Way From Home, and Richard Wright tells of his involvement with the Communist Party in the second part of his autobiography, American Hunger. Both McKay and Wright became disenchanted with communism, for both found racism even among the communists they met. Du Bois kept his hopes in communism alive for many years and died with those hopes intact. But Communism and socialism have not yet freed American blacks. Freedom continues to be elusive, but no one can say that W.E.B. Du Bois's efforts have been in vain.

VI.

Dusk of Dawn is an unusual work and in some ways an unsatisfying one. It lacks the narrative drive of Douglass's best work, the
audacity of Washington's suspicious (and often entertaining) rhetoric, and Richard Wright's descriptive power which makes *Black Boy* riveting. Nevertheless, *Dusk of Dawn* accomplishes something no other black autobiography attempts so consistently and on such a sweeping scale: the demonstrable connection between the history of a distinct group of people (Du Bois's argument against the validity of the concept of race notwithstanding) and one representative member of the group whose individual life characterizes and mirrors the communal experience. In this matter, Du Bois's autobiographical strategy contrasts, for example, with Richard Wright's. Wright strives in *Black Boy* to demonstrate how different he is from other blacks living under similar circumstances: his unique identity as artist sets him apart from both the black and white communities and propels him on his quest for freedom. Du Bois, on the other hand, although equally exceptional a man as Wright, insists on linking his life with the lives of other blacks, discovering his identity not solely in his uniqueness but in his oneness with others.

For this reason, *Dusk of Dawn* consistently recounts national and world events, especially as they affect blacks, as background to the events in Du Bois's own life. Digressions in the narrative serve a similar purpose, to help explain the forces in the world of Du Bois's time that influenced him. Through this expansive approach to his life story, Du Bois manages to reveal himself in much the same way that Montaigne leaves us a lively self-portrait through the far-reaching subject matter of the *Essays*. (One wonders if Du Bois had Montaigne in
mind when he subtitled his autobiography "An Essay Toward Autobiography of a Race Concept" [emphasis mine].)

Most black autobiographers show, to some extent, how external events shape their lives; Douglass's birth into slavery is the determinative fact of his young life just as his escape is the incident that sets the course for his adulthood. In Coming of Age in Mississippi, Anne Moody shows how the civil rights movement caught up her life and involved her in events she never imagined as a poor black girl growing up in rural Mississippi. Du Bois, then, is not alone in forging links between world events and his own life. No other black autobiographer is as insistent, though, on seeing himself as epitomizing the experience of a group. On first thought, such a vision seems antithetical to the very concept of autobiography, which is to reveal the development of a single life, not of a group of people. Du Bois knew himself to be far from average or typical in intellectual endowment and accomplishment; his insistence on his solidarity with all black people therefore serves to underline all the more the absurdity of treating a group of people as if they were all alike, which is precisely how many whites seem to have regarded all blacks during Du Bois's lifetime. Du Bois's individualism--any man or woman's individualism--is denied and eroded when all members of a group are regarded as one. Du Bois thus identifies a commonly recognized problem of modern life, one treated at length by other artists: the loss of individuality. He does not, however, lose his own individualism by insisting that his life is simply another example of the communal life of black Americans. To the contrary, he emerges from Dusk of Dawn as a

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man of singular compassion, dedicated to helping free others, when he could have, by virtue of his gifts and achievements, lived on in splendid isolation, far removed from the problems facing the great majority of blacks. He manages to identify himself with the masses without falling prey to the condescension so often present in the idea of *noblesse oblige*. This lack of pretension does much to make sympathetic a personality that otherwise might be easily dismissed as cool and aloof.

If *Dusk of Dawn* carries to an unusual extreme this practice of viewing one's life as somehow typical of a group under the influence of external forces, it stands alone, as far as I can tell, in tracing its protagonist's growing consciousness in terms of his maturing understanding of the concept of race. Other black autobiographers probe into the mystery of their blackness--one thinks of James Baldwin's and Eldridge Cleaver's work--but no one else makes the idea of racial identity the key to his own development. Du Bois also links this changing awareness to his assertion of racial solidarity with other black Americans. What he came to realize, many others did too: the concept of race is not a problem solvable by educating the ignorant; it is a force rooted deeply in the unconscious and therefore combattable only by subtle and determined propaganda. That others came to share Du Bois's new insights is demonstrated by the formation first of the Niagara Movement and then by the creation of the NAACP. Du Bois's views undoubtedly influenced other black leaders, but their receptivity to his realizations shows that blacks as a group were moving in the same direction as Du Bois was.
Du Bois's gradual change from seeing the racial problems of his day as merely the product of ignorance that could be remedied once the oppressing white majority had its ignorance corrected by a presentation of the "truth" to an understanding of the unconscious forces at work in both whites and blacks helps account for his relationship both with Frederick Douglass and with Booker T. Washington, his two forebears in black American politics and autobiography.

Du Bois identified himself and his life's work with Douglass, the man he never met; conversely, he disagreed strongly (and eloquently) with Washington, a man he evidently disliked personally and whose policies and power he spent years combatting. To Du Bois, Washington was the interloper in the "true" line of black leaders; accordingly, he and his works had to be expunged from the record. Because Du Bois lived to such a great age, he had the satisfaction of seeing most black Americans turn away from the Washington-Tuskegee philosophy of race relations and embrace a much more assertive program, one which he himself helped bring into being.

In 1903, however, when the publication of "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" inaugurated the Washington-Du Bois controversy, the task of redirecting American race relations must have seemed daunting. Not only was the Washington-Tuskegee coalition in full control, but Du Bois's still immature understanding of the true nature of racial attitudes prevented his forming the most effective plan for combatting Washington as well as white racism. Du Bois's instincts about the problem facing American blacks were basically sound even as
early as 1901, and the evidence of the black man's deteriorating economic and social position was available for anyone who cared to look at it honestly. Inspired and instructed by the example of Frederick Douglass's life and work, Du Bois began the task that would occupy him the rest of his life when he issued his challenge to Washington in the essay, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others."

VII.

True to his style, Booker T. Washington did not respond publicly to Du Bois's essay in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He often silenced his critics by ignoring them, thus depriving them of publicity which would keep their causes before the public. Additionally, he may not have wished to antagonize Du Bois, who was teaching summer school at Tuskegee in 1903; moreover, the two men were involved in negotiations for a conference of black leaders to be held in the early part of 1904. (The meeting, held at Carnegie Hall in New York City in January, 1904, had as its announced purpose the unification of black leadership and publication of a statement of common goals for the race; Washington viewed it as his opportunity to win his critics to his side.)

Furthermore, Washington did not have to defend himself against criticism: many journals friendly to him both vigorously supported his programme and viciously attacked Du Bois. An editorial in *Outlook* contrasted *The Souls of Black Folk* and Washington's *The Future of the American Negro*. Taking the two books as texts for reflections on "two parties or tendencies or influences in the negro race," it claimed:
One of these parties [Du Bois's] is ashamed of the race, the other [Washington's] is proud of it; one makes the white man the standard, the other seeks the standard in its own race ideals; one demands social equality, or at least resents social inequality; the other is too self-respecting to do either; one seeks to push the negro into a higher place, the other to make him a larger man; one demands for him the right to ride in the white man's car, the other seeks to make the black man's car clean and respectable; one demands the ballot for ignorant black men because ignorant white men have the ballot; the other asks opportunity to make the black man competent for the duties of citizenship, and wishes no man to vote, white or colored, who is not competent; . . . one wishes to teach the negro to read the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, the other wishes first to teach him to obey them in English; to one labor is barely more honorable than idleness and the education which makes "laborers and nothing more" is regarded with ill-concealed contempt; to the other industry is the basic virtue, and the education which makes industry intelligent is the foundation of civilization.30

This characterization of Du Bois's position is grossly unfair; his policies are made to sound ridiculous through deliberate over-simplification and by a refusal to treat them in full context. But as one-sided as it is, the article reveals the depth of feeling evoked by the publication of The Souls of Black Folk.

Another publication favorable to Washington and Tuskegee, the Washington, D.C. Colored American, urged Horace Bumstead, president of
Atlanta University where Du Bois taught, to silence the professor. It said:

If Atlanta University intends to stand for Du Bois' outgivings, if it means to seek to destroy Tuskegee Institute, so that its own work can have success, it is engaged in poor business to start with; and in the next place, the assurance can safely be given that it will avail them nothing. Tuskegee will go on. It will succeed. Booker Washington will still loom large on the horizon, notwithstanding the petty annoyances of Du Bois and his ilk. . . Let him [Bumstead] prove himself by curbing the outgivings and ill-advised criticisms of the learned Doctor who is now in his employ; that is, if Du Bois does not really represent him and the sentiment of Atlanta University. . . .31

In July of 1903 emotions on both sides of the rising controversy were heightened by events in Boston. Washington was scheduled to address the National Negro Business League in that city, which was the stronghold of the anti-Tuskegee movement, for it was the home of William Monroe Trotter's Guardian, the most outspokenly anti-Washington black newspaper in the nation. When Washington tried to address a packed auditorium, Trotter and an associate rose and directed prepared questions at him, which Washington tried to ignore. The audience erupted in hisses, someone threw pepper toward the platform, and police were summoned. Some in the crowd attempted to leave, and in the ensuing crush, one policeman had his uniform torn, another was stuck with a hatpin, and several women fainted. One young man, a supporter of Trotter, was stabbed.32 Trotter himself was arrested and spent time
in jail. This event, which came to be known as the Boston "riot,"
convinced some of Washington’s critics that his Tuskegee Machine would
go to great lengths to silence the opposition. Trotter’s case for
inciting to riot was vigorously prosecuted by a Tuskegee-picked lawyer
who won an unusually harsh sentence on what appeared to many to be
trumped up charges. Du Bois was not involved in the "riot," for he
was en route to Boston from Tuskegee at the time. Initially irritated
with Trotter for his supposed extreme actions in provoking the
Washington contingent, Du Bois later became sympathetic to Trotter when
he learned the riot was probably triggered by Assistant United States
Attorney W.H. Lewis (a personal friend of Washington’s), who presided
at the meeting, and by the Boston police who mishandled the arrest.33
One historian believes that this event finally brought Du Bois--who had
up to this point tried to stay away from active involvement in the
fight against Washington--to a position of "active leadership of the
Radicals."34 From then on, Du Bois became more vocal and pointed in
his criticisms; Washington, for his part, came to distrust Du Bois.
In a letter to Robert Curtis Ogden, dated October 20, 1903, he wrote:
In connection with our conversation when I last saw you, I think I
ought to say to you that I have evidence which is indisputable
showing that Dr. Du Bois is very largely behind the mean and
underhand attacks that have been made upon me during the last six
months.35
Washington apparently refers here to the Boston Riot, although as the
editors of his letters point out, he probably had no such evidence of
Du Bois's involvement, nor, as nearly as can be determined, was there
any. Yet because Du Bois publicly sympathized with Trotter's victimization at the hands of Washington's forces. Washington may have felt justified in claiming that Du Bois was somehow involved.36 At any rate, after the publication of "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," relations between Washington and his opponents worsened. His forces rallied behind him to attack DuBois in print and Trotter in person, and Washington, although having to deal with Du Bois publicly to organize the Carnegie Hall Conference, privately blamed him for the attacks of 1903.

The Carnegie Hall Conference took place January 6-8, 1904. The attendees drafted an eight-point document addressing issues such as suffrage, segregation laws, lynching and due process, and race relations. An unusual spirit of cooperation characterized the conference and the document it produced. The conference appointed Washington, Du Bois, and Hugh Browne, president of Cheney Institute in Pennsylvania, to select nine other men to serve with them on a committee of twelve to gather information and handle race relations on a national scale. But when illness kept Du Bois from attending the first meeting of the committee, Washington held it anyway; Du Bois then resigned. The Carnegie Hall Compromise had lasted only a few months.37 Du Bois now felt that Washington was completely untrustworthy, and his personal dislike of the man increased. Alain Locke later wrote, "The third time I saw him [Du Bois], he suddenly launched into a phillipic against Washington. I made no comment, but really, he ranted like a sibyl and prophesied the direct consequences."38
VIII.

The break between Washington and Du Bois was complete by 1904. The two waged a paper war over the next few years, highlighted by Du Bois's charges in 1905 that the Tuskegee Machine used extensive bribery to influence the Negro press in its favor. His charges were probably true, but because Du Bois had only circumstantial evidence, nothing came of them. Washington's office at Tuskegee produced an editorial denouncing Du Bois ("A Base Slander of the Afro-American Press") and distributed it for publication in Negro papers. By 1905, Tuskegee was also monitoring the activities of Du Bois and his friends: on February 20, 1905, Emmett Jay Scott, Washington's private secretary, wrote to Charles William Anderson, a longtime friend and political ally of Washington, asking him to be in Washington for Theodore Roosevelt's second inauguration in order to spy on Du Bois:

You were sent a wire today advising you to be in Washington during the inauguration so as to keep your eyes on the enemy. . . . Hershaw is arranging to resuscitate the Pen and Pencil Club for a banquet during inaugural week, and of course will be very anxious to feature your little Atlanta friend [Du Bois, whose small stature Scott here ridicules] as a big attraction. The Wizard [Washington] believes that it would be well for you to be on hand and if possible, as you easily can, secure an invitation . . . so as to meet the enemy on any ground that may be offered.

Similar spying activities were undertaken at Washington's direct order later in 1905 when Du Bois and a group of like-minded black men
met at Niagara Falls to formally organize a movement against Tuskegee. Anderson was again involved, as were other Washington spies. Anderson was still involved in covert surveillance of Du Bois in February of 1907.

Coupled with his efforts to spy on Du Bois, Washington continued to use his tactic of attempting to silence his opponents by denying them publicity. Emmett Scott wrote to an associate in July, 1905:

I have just wired you today to the effect that a conference of our friends thinks it wisest to in every way ignore absolutely the Niagara Movement. . . . The best of the white newspapers in the North have absolutely ignored it and have taken no account of its meetings or its protestations. I think, then, as I have intimated, if we shall consistently refuse to take the slightest notice of them that the whole thing will die a-borning.

But try as he would, Washington was unable to stem the growing tide of opposition to his policies. Du Bois represented a view whose moment had arrived after a decade of dominance by the Tuskegee Machine. Once again, the leadership of American Negroes was at issue. Washington had seized that role in 1895 just after the death of Douglass; now Du Bois and his associates were attempting to assume leadership themselves, but their position was much more difficult than Washington's had been. He had had no living leader from whom to take control; Du Bois was up against not only a living man, but an extremely popular, powerful, and shrewd leader who to all appearances occupied an unassailable position in American life. Du Bois's courage and depth of
commitment are the more remarkable given the apparently limitless influence and resources of the Tuskegee Machine.

Hovering over the Booker T. Washington-W.E.B. Du Bois debate were the spirit and authority of Frederick Douglass. Both contestants in the struggle realized they were fighting to see which truly stood in Douglass's line. In a 1904 essay, "The Parting of the Ways," Du Bois again pointedly contrasted Washington's leadership with that of former leaders such as Payne, Crummell, Forten, and Douglass. They had believed in the broadest scope of education possible, in the ballot, in civil rights, and in the assertion of manhood even at the cost of civic strife. Washington, by contrast, preaches the gospel of money, the uselessness of Negro universities, and the expendability of the vote and civil rights. Du Bois ends with ringing words directly at odds with the Tuskegee policy of accommodation:

The rights of humanity are worth fighting for. Those that deserve them in the long run get them. The way for black men to-day to make these rights the heritage of their children is to struggle for them unceasingly, and if they fail, die trying.

Realizing that his position in the line of the great black leaders was being undermined, Washington fought to re-identify himself with the person and ideals of Frederick Douglass. A new building at Tuskegee was named Frederick Douglass Hall; Lewis Douglass, son of the great man, delivered the dedication address. Washington began a campaign in 1906 to clear the mortgage and to do restoration work at Cedar Hill, Douglass's home in Anacostia Heights, Washington, D.C. Most importantly, Washington fought, beginning in 1904, to receive rights to
write a biography of Douglass for the American Crisis series of biographies of well-known Americans. The publisher had originally asked Du Bois to write the book, but when Washington protested, he was granted the privilege. This must have seemed a double victory to him: he both deprived his enemy of writing Douglass's life and of putting his own "radical" interpretative emphases into the biography; he also obtained the chance to identify himself with Douglass in print and to narrate the life of the famous leader in a way that would emphasize the similarities between Douglass's ideals and his own. Here was a perfect opportunity to "control" his predecessor while identifying himself with him as well as to defeat his would-be successor by wresting away a choice literary prize. The story of how Washington came to write Frederick Douglass is an intriguing, if minor episode in the history of black letters and bears further investigation. The finished product, largely ghost-written by Robert Park, a white man and Washington's much-employed assistant, is an undistinguished piece of work, adding little to the two biographies of Douglass then in print. Producing it under his name, however, must have given Washington the satisfaction of a man whose power gets him his way.

IX.

Although deprived of the authorship of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois continued to work actively in other areas to implement his own social programs. In 1905, he helped organize the Niagara Movement, an organization designed to attack the problems of American Negroes
through a program of "organized determination and aggressive action on the part of men who believe in Negro freedom and growth." In 1909, the Niagara Movement gave up its independent existence, and many of its members joined the newly created NAACP, of which Du Bois served as Director of Publicity and Research from 1910 until 1934. 1910 also saw the first volume of the organization's official magazine, The Crisis, which Du Bois edited. In 1934, he left the NAACP because his ideology had moved to the left while the organization's had remained more conservative; he returned to Atlanta University, where he was working when his first full-length autobiography, Dusk of Dawn, appeared in 1940.

By 1940, Booker T. Washington had been dead twenty-five years. He spent his last years vigorously promoting the same policies that had brought him fame and success, but he also was involved in three incidents that may well have caused him to question privately the actual validity of his public utterances. In 1911, Washington purchased a small estate near Huntington, Long Island; his new white neighbors took a collection among themselves and offered him a thousand dollars' profit if he would sell the home and leave the area. That same year, some southern whites sued the Pullman Company and the Cotton Belt Railroad for allowing Mrs. Washington to ride in a Pullman car to Memphis. Third, and most devastating, in 1911 Washington himself was attacked and beaten by a white man in a lower class neighborhood of New York City. The white attacker claimed he beat Washington for making an improper advance to a white woman. Although Washington won his court case against his assailant, he never fully
explained his presence in the neighborhood. Washington may have asked himself how far the Negro had really come under his leadership if he himself could be attacked just because he was a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Whatever Washington's personal feelings about the events of the inauspicious year of 1911, he never dramatically altered his public stance; he did, however, speak out more forcefully against lynching after his own beating. The following year brought another defeat to Tuskegee: the election of Woodrow Wilson, the presidential candidate supported by Du Bois and most of Washington's opponents, spelled the end of political patronage from Republican administrations toward Tuskegee. The school quickly ceased to be a political clearing-house for all affairs treating black Americans and returned to its original status as an institution of learning. Washington continued to travel, to raise funds, to speak publicly, and to write. His death in 1915 was attributed partially to sheer exhaustion.

Events after Washington's death and leading up to the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, '60s, and early '70s would prove the narrowness of Washington's programs, but during the height of his career, he was the most powerful and respected black man in the country, his policies received as gospel truth by millions. In historical perspective, however, Washington appears to be an obstacle in the road to freedom of all sorts—social, political, legal, and literary. The NAACP fought against Washington's legacy in court case after court case, and finally won in 1954. In the years that followed the Supreme Court's desegregation ruling, though, even the NAACP seemed too conservative.
and too cautious to many blacks, and the organization found itself criticized by a new generation of radicals in a way reminiscent of its own former criticism of the Tuskegee Machine's reactionary policies.

W.E.B. Du Bois lived through it all, reaching the age of ninety-five before dying August 27, 1963. Significantly, Du Bois died during the famous 1963 March on Washington which witnessed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech. When Du Bois's death was announced to the gathered crowd, a time of silence was observed for the long-time leader of the black race. Du Bois did live to see some of the goals toward which he had worked all his life finally become reality in the land of his birth.
CHAPTER TWO NOTES


4 Du Bois, p. 54.


6 Broderick, p. 44.


9 Du Bois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others, pp. 50-1.


22 Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 94.


33 Factor, p. 286.

34 Rudwick, p. 126.


36 See the editors’ note, Washington Papers, Vol. 7, p. 298.

37 See Factor, chapter 24, for an excellent summary of these events.

38 Factor, p. 306.


47 Factor, p. 316.


49 Factor, pp. 348-9.
Chapter Three

I.
Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E. B. Du Bois devoted their lives to the cause of freedom for black Americans. Their activities spanned more than one hundred twenty years of American life, from Douglass's first speech on behalf of abolition in August, 1841, to Du Bois's death in Ghana on August 27, 1963. These men had their own ideas of how freedom could be attained, and although their means were often dissimilar, they nevertheless shared (to different degrees, admittedly) a conviction that true progress could be made in the cause of equality. Even Du Bois, whose final autobiography ends with a strong, prophetic warning, believed that America could recover her almost-lost potential and fulfill her promise. These leaders' persistent optimism in the face of daunting odds stands as a testimony to the resilient spirit they shared.

But not all black Americans was as hopeful. Despite the encouraging words of the race's leaders, millions of blacks lived separated from the ideas of a Douglass or Du Bois because they could not read; they never hoped to obtain the industrial education Tuskegee offered (or any higher education, for that matter) because poverty and ignorance prevented their imagining such a thing. Eventually these dispossessed blacks would find a spokesman who would reveal even more graphically than had Douglass the brutality of white racism and the effects of that racism on its victims. This spokesman would explode the myth of the patient, long-suffering, and forgiving Negro so vital to Booker Washington's propaganda and reveal instead an underworld peopled
with characters so twisted by lifetimes of oppression that they often turned on one another in hatred and intolerance. This spokesman was Richard Wright.

In 1901, seven years before the birth of Richard Wright, William Dean Howells wrote his review of *Up From Slavery*. In it he praises Washinton's "conservative" temper of mind, his "unfailing sense of humor," and his "cool patience." Howells detects similar qualities in other black leaders like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, and even Frederick Douglass. Douglass's refusal to join John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry is cited as evidence of his ability to keep a "judicial mind" and "not lose his head" despite the appeals of a man whom he loved and respected. Commenting on this frame of mind which he wants to believe is present in the majority of Negroes, Howells continues:

This calm is apparently characteristic of the best of the race, and in certain aspects it is of the highest and most consoling promise. It enables them to use reason and the nimbler weapons of irony, and saves them from bitterness. By virtue of it Washington, and Dunbar and Chesnutt enjoy the negro's ludicrous side as the white observer enjoys it, and Douglass could see the fun of the zealots whose friend and fellow-fighter he was. The fact is of all sorts of interesting implications; but I will draw from it, for the present, the sole suggestion that the problem of the colored race may be more complex than we have thought it. What if upon some large scale they should be subtler than we have
supposed? What if their amiability should veil a sense of our absurdities, and there should be in our polite inferiors the potentiality of something like contempt for us? The notion is awful; but we may be sure they will be too kind, too wise, ever to do more than let us guess at the truth, if it is the truth.²

Today, Howells' words sound like willful ignorance combined with wishful thinking. He is much closer to the truth than he dares admit when he speaks of the Negro's ability to feel contempt for whites, if not something worse. But he is dead wrong in his certainty that the black American would forever be "too kind, too wise" to let white Americans guess at his true feelings. If Negroes long hesitated to voice their genuine emotions about their oppression, their motive was grounded more on fear than on innate kindness. It took time until one black man gathered his courage and wrote the truth that existed for many of his race—a truth too long concealed from the white world. Richard Wright might well have responded to Howells' naive words with bitter laughter; then he might have handed him copies of his two books—a novel and an autobiography—that forever changed the way America thought about its black citizens by exposing the tumultuous emotions concealed behind genial, smiling black faces.

II.

Native Son may not be the greatest novel yet written by a black American—many would reserve that honor for Invisible Man—but no novel by a black writer has caused such a stir at the time of its publication. Harper and Brothers, the book's publisher, announced in the newspapers that the public had "stampeded" the bookstores to buy
copies of the novel. *Native Son* sold out of Manhattan bookstores within three hours of its appearance; the Book-of-the-Month-Club selected it for its readers. The critics praised it, and Wright quickly earned more than $20,000 from sales. *Native Son* showed America facets of black life and of the black personality it had not previously acknowledged, and in Bigger Thomas, the world met a character who personified the alienation and pent-up rage in many black men and women, Richard Wright among them.

*Native Son* is divided into three books: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." In Book I, fear causes Bigger to commit the crime that costs him his life: so afraid is he of being found in Mary Dalton's bedroom and of having her mother believe he has raped the drunken girl that he inadvertently smothers Mary in his efforts to prevent her answering when the blind woman calls out to her. Bigger burns Mary's body in a furnace to cover his crime, having first beheaded her to fit her body into it. When the charred remains are found, he must flee; in his flight, he murders his girlfriend to keep her from betraying him. Bigger's futile attempt to evade the police occurs in Book Two, "Flight." Apprehended, Bigger is tried, found guilty, and condemned to death—this is Book Three, "Fate." Just as Wright makes it clear that Bigger kills out of fear, so does he emphasize the hopelessness of his flight and the inevitability of his punishment. In this three-part structure of *Native Son*, we observe a version of the bondage/flight/freedom motif of the slave narratives as perfected by Douglass and reshaped by Washington and Du Bois. Wright links fear and bondage by showing that fear is a kind of slavery which drastically
restricts his protagonist's choices (he makes the same connection in Black Boy); he also gives the old pattern a terrible twist when he changes the third part, "freedom," to "fate" and has Bigger's quest end in the electric chair where he finally finds freedom—and death. Before Bigger dies, he tells his lawyer that he has figured out a meaning for his life and for his actions, but such an assertion is at least questionable. Faced with death, Bigger must discover something to salvage from his wasted life, but his anguished cry, "What I killed for must've been good!" convinces neither Max nor the reader. The ending of Native Son is perhaps the grimmest in any novel by a black American, and although the book now shows its age, especially in the over-long final section, the novel's power remains largely intact.

Just at the time Native Son was receiving its enormous critical and popular acclaim, Paul R. Reynolds, Jr., Wright's agent, proposed that Wright consider writing his autobiography. Wright was put off by the idea—he felt he was still too young to be able to articulate the meaning of his life—but he was attracted, too. He took no immediate action on Reynolds' suggestion; not until 1942 did he begin writing his autobiography. In that interval, Wright's personal life was eventful. During an extended vacation in Mexico in the summer of 1940, he became disenchanted with his wife, Dhima Meadman, and left her behind when he returned to the United States. Taking a train from Mexico, Wright traveled in the South for the first time in twelve years. He visited Jackson and Memphis before going on to Chicago and New York, which he reached by August. There he made the final break
with his wife; in March of the following year, he married Ellen Poplar, whom he had met through his association with the Communist Party. Their daughter, Julia, was born in April, 1942; shortly after her birth, Wright began the autobiography. A year later, he was half-finished with it; he sent the completed work to Paul Reynolds on December 17, 1943. Published in 1945 as Black Boy, the book was an abridgement by about one-third of Wright’s original manuscript, which traced his life through his Chicago years and his involvement with the communists. Black Boy omits all the Chicago material, ending with Wright on his way to that city. (The second part of the work, published in 1977 as American Hunger, will be treated later in this chapter.) By March of 1945, Black Boy had sold 400,000 copies and was at the top of all the New York papers’ best-seller lists.

Constance Webb notes that Wright’s decision about the tone of his autobiography was determined during his train trip from Mexico to Chicago in the summer of 1940. As soon as the train crossed the Texas border, the passengers, who had so far traveled together regardless of race, were separated; Wright then had to use the Jim Crow car. At the border, his bags were inspected. The customs inspector was suspicious of Wright’s typewriter and of the books he was carrying. He had difficulty grasping that Wright was a writer; he apparently could not imagine any black man except a preacher or teacher having any use for books or a typing machine. That incident was Wright’s reintroduction to a South where he was again called "boy" and where he had to use segregated public facilities. Once more, Wright was at the mercy of whites who saw him only as a "nigger," not a famous author. His old
fears associated with his childhood came flooding back during the train trip and his stops in Mississippi and Tennessee. Once again he saw the degraded lives his family and other blacks led. Wright's feelings of repulsion, yoked with his own fear of being attacked for being a black man, found their way into the autobiography, although its writing was still two years away.

With pervasive fear the key to its tone, Black Boy bears remarkable similarity to Native Son, for it also uses the novel's variation of the now-familiar three-part structure of the slave narratives and other, earlier black autobiographies. As he did in Native Son, Wright here connects bondage and fear; he also changes freedom to punishment. Wright's bleak vision of the entrapment of blacks within American culture thus shapes both his fiction and his view of his own life.

III.

The fear/flight/punishment pattern in Black Boy is brilliantly set forth in the work's opening episode, as are some of its major themes. When Richard is four years old, he is kept inside all of one long, cold day because his grandmother is very ill. Wright's mother commands him and his younger brother to keep quiet lest they disturb the sick woman. Bored and frustrated, the young Richard seeks some way to amuse himself. He begins plucking straws from a broom and throwing them into the fire in the fireplace, watching them smoke, blaze up, and finally burn completely. Tired of this game, Richard wonders how the fluffy white curtains at the window would look if they were set ablaze. Despite his brother's protests, Richard ignites the curtains;
they burn, setting the wall and ceiling afire. Soon half the room is burning. Richard runs outside and hides himself under the house, driven by fear of punishment. Overhead, he can hear the panicky movements of the adults as they remove his grandmother from the blazing house; then he hears his parents outside frantically calling for him. Finally, Wright's father looks under the house, sights his son, and despite the boy's attempt to evade him, succeeds in pulling him out from under the house. Richard tries to run, but he is caught before he can escape. His mother then whips him so severely that he loses consciousness, becomes delirious, and has to be forcibly kept in bed. During the illness that results from his beating, he has persistent hallucinations which recede only with time.

A bare retelling of the events of the house-burning episode reveals the same pattern Wright uses in Native Son: young Richard experiences intense fear which prompts him to try to run away, but there is no escape; the wrong-doer is hunted down and brutally punished. In the same way, Bigger's fear leads him to accidentally kill Mary Dalton, hide her body, and feign innocence; when the crime is detected, fear makes him flee, but he is quickly caught and turned over for execution. Wright often uses this pattern in Black Boy: he repeats it, for instance, in the account of how Richard tells his Granny to kiss his backside after she has washed him there. Outraged, Granny descends upon Richard like an avenging angel. He runs from her, ending outside, naked; then he dodges his mother and returns to the house, cowering first in a corner and then hiding under a bed, refusing to come out. He remains there far into the night, but when hunger and
thirst drive him from cover, his mother is waiting, and the promisedeating is administered. Ultimately, fear drives Richard Wright out of
the South. In the sentence that originally ended the first part of his
autobiography, Wright summarizes his life to that point: "This was the
terror from which I fled."9

Throughout Black Boy, Wright connects his theme of fear with the
bondage motif of the slave narratives. In the opening scene, after
Richard sets the curtains on fire, he stands looking at the blaze. He
recalls, "I was terrified; I wanted to scream but was afraid."10 A
short while later, as he hides under the house, his mother peers down,
looking for him. Again Richard says nothing; fear prevents him from
speaking. Wright often thus expresses his characters' bondage through
their inability to speak: in many situations, Richard is presented as
being literally too frightened to say a word. After killing the
kitten, Richard is forced by his mother to say a prayer of contrition.
He repeats her phrases until she intones, "And while I sleep tonight,
do not snatch the breath of life from me." Wright recalls, "I opened
my mouth but no words came. My mind was frozen with horror."11 Later,
when Richard is taken to an orphanage to leave his mother free to work,
he becomes the director's pet. She tries to make him into an office
helper, but he is so intimidated by her that he cannot follow her
simplest instructions. She asks him to blot some envelopes; Richard
stands and stares, unmoving. Not even her repeated commands can spur
the boy to action. As he grows older, Richard has similar experiences
each time he enters a new school. Although a bright boy, he is so
painfully shy, by his own account, that in a new school he can hardly

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recall his own name or answer the most rudimentary questions. Even as a young adult, when placed in an uncomfortable situation, particularly when confronted by white people, Richard retreats into silence. About his dealings with whites, Wright notes, "in the past I had always said too much, now I found that it was difficult to say anything at all."12 Uncertain about how to respond to the white world and fearful of saying the wrong thing, Richard again and again loses his voice in Black Boy. In the same way, millions of blacks for years said nothing, masking their true feelings in silence or by the smiling faces whites liked to see.

Fear renders Richard psychologically paralyzed, first trapped under the burning house then frightened into silence when put into threatening situations. But Richard is not the only paralyzed character in Black Boy; his mother suffers a series of physically paralyzing strokes during the course of his youth. The first one leaves her temporarily unable to speak. She recovers her voice after a time, but gradually becomes more and more a prisoner in her own body, a victim of a debilitating, uncontrollable sickness. In a similar way, Richard is a prisoner in the South, a prisoner in his own black skin. Wright draws the connection between his mother's illness and his own experience this way:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the
emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face.13

Growing up, Wright was closer to his mother than to any other person; she alone seems to have felt genuine sympathy for him. No wonder that her protracted illness affected him deeply and that he saw in her paralysis a fit symbol for his own suffering and for the suffering of black men and women in general. Although his mother's illness caused Richard's family much distress and accounted in part for their poverty, their rootless wandering from one place to another, and their uncertainty about their future, in a more basic way, her paralysis was the result of such things; Ella Wright became sick because of the intolerable physical and emotional burdens inflicted on her. Up against the impossible odds the white, racist world offers, the black person understandably retreats into silent paralysis. So afraid is he of retribution for saying or doing the wrong thing that he often chooses to say and do nothing. This, I believe, lies behind Richard's agonized inability to act or to speak in front of those who have power over him. Fear causes his paralysis; fear creates—or is—his bondage.

Wright quickly demonstrates that he blames the white world for the bondage in which he and his family lived. This motif is explicitly worked out and expanded through virtually every contact with white people described in Black Boy. But Wright hints at this theme already in the autobiography's opening episode. Richard sets fire to the
curtains because he is bored with having to be quiet all day since his grandmother is sick. He wants to go out of doors, but his grandmother’s image fills his mind and makes him afraid. As Wright describes her, his grandmother has an "old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair." [emphasis mine] Margaret Bolden Wilson was virtually a white woman, but the trace of black blood in her veins consigned her first to the slavery into which she was born and then, after Emancipation, to the black world. She looked white, a fact which troubled young Richard when he tried to sort out the differences between the races; more importantly, Granny, as she is called in Black Boy, behaves like a white person. Her attitude toward Richard is as scornful as any white person's he encounters: her brutal physical treatment of the young boy seems to symbolize Richard's emotional brutalization at the hands of whites. He is not often physically assaulted by white people, but the "white" member of his own family supplies the tangible form of the psychological abuse the white world deals out.

Having to be quiet and stay indoors because of the sickness of his white-skinned grandmother leads Richard to experiment with the broom straws and then with the curtains. And what color are they? White, of course. The moment Richard comes into contact with anything white and makes one wrong move, things go up in flames—figuratively, usually, but this time literally.

These details about whiteness might easily be overlooked in Wright's retelling of how he burned down the house were it not for his...
description of the hallucinations he suffered after his mother had beaten him for his deed. Wright remembers:

Whenever I tried to sleep I would see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I could see the bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid.16

The shapes that torment the child in his delirium are two gigantic white breasts, filled not with wholesome mother’s milk but with “some horrible liquid.” The black child finds no consolation, no nourishment at the breast of his white motherland, but rightly recoils in terror from its impending threat; the breasts of his dura mater have no milk for him, only some horrible liquid to scald or drown him. Neither can his real mother or grandmother nourish him, nor can his “mother race” sustain him. Wright ends his recollection of this episode by specifically linking the terrifying white breasts, his mother, and death: “Time finally bore me away from the dangerous bags and I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me.”17 The significance of this cluster of images becomes increasingly clear as the reader proceeds with Black Boy. The white bags/breasts are a maternal symbol; two women, one of them “white,” figure in the first scene. Granny is the indirect cause of the fire and of Richard’s punishment, which is delivered by the other female figure, Richard’s mother. As the bags Richard sees contain no milk, so the two prominent women in Richard’s young life, themselves symbols of the two races, are unable to nourish
him. White-skinned Granny is not only devoid of the milk of human kindness, but her religious fanaticism and material poverty keep decent, sustaining food from the table while Richard is growing up. Granny also impoverishes the boy's spirit, for her distorted faith tries to ban literature ("lies," to her) from her house, thereby starving Richard's mind.

Richard's mother, who wants to provide better for her son, is helpless to fill his belly or feed his mind because of her progressive physical deterioration. When the boy looks to the maternal breast for sustenance, he finds either the "horrible liquid" of his grandmother's cruelty or the shriveled vessel of his stricken mother. Whether the breast contains poison or is empty, the child cannot drink; the result is hunger, perhaps the major theme of the entire autobiography. Hunger—physical, emotional, and spiritual—is soon specifically introduced, but here again, in Black Boy's opening sequence, an essential theme makes an early, subtle appearance. The empty breasts of America produce the peculiar hunger which Richard Wright feels so keenly. No wonder that his original title for his two-part autobiography was American Hunger.

IV.

The opening scene of Black Boy, then, lays down the work's major themes and overall structure in a few brutal strokes. A literal-minded critic of autobiography might, however, feel uncomfortable with the house-burning episode, despite its genius. Is it not a little too perfect? Is the gathering together of so many images and themes not too convenient? Wright is free, of course, to begin his life story
with whatever event he chooses. A tragedy like the burning of the house can be externally verified; no one suggests that the fire did not occur or that young Richard did not start it and was not duly punished. With the huge, wobbly white bags in his hallucinations, however, we enter the subjective world of Richard Wright's mind. No one can say if he actually saw such things in his nightmares, nor can anyone know if Wright accurately remembers the substance of his visions. An adult can vividly recall events from his childhood, particularly traumatic events like the burning of a house, so Wright could accurately remember the details of his sickness. But the white bags seem too good to be true. What if they are fabrications, deliberate creations of Richard Wright, the adult writing his autobiography and seeking appropriate images for the opening scene of his life story? Such a suggestion may well disturb some readers who have a particular notion of autobiographical "truth."

Today we know that Richard Wright intentionally fictionalized parts of Black Boy. That he should have done so comes as no surprise, for every retelling is in some sense a fictionalization, and autobiographers have been consciously (and unconsciously) employing fictional techniques since St. Augustine. Recall Frederick Douglass's account of his fight with Covey: the retelling of that incident is clearly more polished, more "literary" in Douglass's second autobiography than it is in the first; it had settled into a tidier form through constant reiteration in Douglass's numerous public lectures during the years that separate My Bondage and My Freedom from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Remember also the episode
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. Remember also the episode in *Up From Slavery* in which Washington is on shipboard reading from Douglass’s autobiography how Douglass was mistreated aboard a transatlantic vessel years before. Washington puts down that book to be greeted by white passengers who invite him to address the whole ship that evening. Granted, the event may have happened as Washington narrates it, in which case it is a wondrous coincidence, but the scene has the marks of "improvement" on it, if not invention. Yet "true" or not, it serves Washington’s purpose by making a thematic point, the progress of the Negro race. If Wright does no more in *Black Boy* than Douglass does in the *Narrative* or Washington in *Up From Slavery*, few critical eyebrows would be raised. But we know that at least one episode in *Black Boy* never occurred at all—to Richard Wright, at least. The incident of Richard’s Uncle Hoskins’ driving his carriage into the Mississippi River, thus terrifying his young nephew, is fabricated by Wright from a similar incident told to him by Ralph Ellison. The tale suits Wright’s thematic purpose—to show young Richard’s pervasive fear and his distrust of adults—so he includes it without comment as true. In fact, not only does he not qualify in any way the literal truthfulness of the episode but he also realizes it as vividly as any scene in the book.

Other students of Richard Wright’s life have detected a second fictional technique employed throughout *Black Boy*: the “fiction of omission.” Charles T. Davis notes in details what Wright leaves out of his autobiography: missing are references to friendships with peers...
describes Richard's youthful friendships and tells how he was the leader of a closely-knit club of boys who named themselves the "Dick Wright Klan" after their acknowledged leader. Edward Margolies notes other significant omissions:

He [Wright] does not, for example, tell of his friendship with the sons of a college president in Jackson nor does he allude to the fact that his mother, like several of his aunts and uncles, occasionally taught school. Such information might imply middle-class elements in his background . . .

As Davis asserts, Wright consistently omits such elements in his life in order to highlight his isolation as a child and to intensify the brutality and degradation of his environment.

Faced with these manipulations of fact in Black Boy, Wright's critics have evinced a variety of responses. All understand the artistic motivation behind Wright's fictionalizing strategies, but some are more comfortable with them than others. Charles Davis and Edward Margolies both believe the trade-off of absolute adherence to fact for artistic effect to be worth it; Davis calls Black Boy Wright's "supreme artistic achievement," and Margolies also considers the book an "artistic triumph." George E. Kent, on the other hand, although hailing Black Boy as a "great social document," believes that the work could have been greater had Wright remained truer to the facts of his life. Kent is troubled by the unrelieved bleakness of Wright's description of his childhood, finding it unbelievable and apt to make the reflective reader ask how Wright could have survived such an upbringing. Kent further believes that if Wright had given greater
indication of the "cultural supports" present in his environment and the ways his mother (who taught school) did feed his imaginative and emotional life, the reader could better understand the genesis of his own creative gift which later flowered in his fiction and autobiography.28 But what Kent seems not to realize is that this is precisely what Wright wishes not to do. On the contrary, Wright employs fictionalizing techniques in Black Boy to make an undeniably grim childhood and youth even grimmer, for this makes the miracle of his survival and artistic achievements all the more wondrous. Wright is not as interested in making Black Boy an accurate social document as he is in forging it into the heroic myth of Richard Wright.

No critic seems to realize this as clearly as does David Littlejohn, who finds in Wright's work the creation of a heroic self set in a mythic landscape of race war.29 For those who accept the brutal clash of the races as an inevitable fact of life for blacks, as Wright does, life assumes a certain clarity. One always knows, for instance, who are one's enemies and who are one's friends. In Westerns, heroes wear white hats and villains black ones; in the world of the black race-war myth, the good have black skin and the evil, white. In this world, that the more powerful white race victimizes blacks is always a foregone conclusion: there will be, as Littlejohn expresses it, "lynching, murder, fire, beating, castration, psychotic sex combats, police brutality, race riots, pure hate against pure hate."30 Wright's black characters, although belonging to the "good" tribe, are by no means always attractive; no one could claim that Bigger Thomas is lovable or noble. But if Wright's black characters
commit crimes, even the most brutal (Bigger smothers Mary Dalton, cuts off her head, and places her body in a furnace; later he smashes Bessie's skull with a brick and throws her body down an airshaft), their motives are understandable because they have themselves been victimized and brutalized by white society. This is the essence of Max's defense of Bigger in *Native Son*: he tries to persuade the white jury that Bigger is their creation. If he has killed, they must bear the blame, for even Bigger's horrifying crimes pale compared to the sins the white world has perpetrated against him and millions of other black men.

Richard Wright lived in a nightmare world similar to that which he describes in his fiction, essays, and autobiography; furthermore, his vision—admittedly shaped in part by selection, exaggeration, and omission—nevertheless often bears a painfully accurate resemblance to the objective world the American Negro experience during the first decades of this century. This vision is limited and limiting, of course, but it is nevertheless powerful and, as Littlejohn reminds us, necessary.

V.

It is one thing to fashion a fictional oeuvre in which a consistent world view is carried from novel to short story and back again over the course of a creative lifetime; it is something else again when the writer of fiction casts his autobiography within the boundaries of his fictional vision. Yet Wright does just that in *Black*
Black Boy; partially fictionalized though it is, one comes away from it, having also read Wright's fiction, with the disturbing realization that the world of both his fiction and autobiography is the world as Wright saw and felt it. And in this world of race war and race hatred, he himself, Richard Wright, is his greatest hero.

We have seen how Frederick Douglass's Narrative, embodying, as it does, so many of the elements of the monomyth of the hero, gains greatly in suggestive power. It touches us at unconscious levels and gathers to itself meanings of which Douglass himself was unaware. We have also seen how Booker T. Washington's attempt to cast his life into mythic form falls flat because his essential view of himself is domestic, rising lower-class. Washington may have become something of a legend, but he is no mythic hero. Du Bois does not attempt to cast his autobiography or himself in mythic terms; he is more comfortable in his role of scientific observer who occasionally discards his detached point of view to speak passionately on behalf of his people. Not until Wright do we again come to a black autobiographer with a strong enough sense of his own heroism and sufficient literary skill to successfully write his life story as heroic myth. Black Boy derives its greatness precisely from Wright's narrow, concentrated vision of himself and of his world; were it more literally "true," it would not be nearly so powerful.

Littlejohn says this about the heroic aspect of Black Boy:

... Black Boy ... reveals its author-hero (never was author more heroic) as a man governed by the most absolute, unreflective,
and uncritical certitude of his own virtue. He has had, it would seem, no mean or ignoble motives, no mixed motives even. Any "faults" that appear in the boy Richard are the result of others' moral blindness. He possessed, from infancy nearly, a humorless ethical monumentality; the world is a moral arena for the young Prince Arthur-Wright. Every episode is seen as another fierce combat in the career of this militant young atheist martyr.\textsuperscript{32}

Littlejohn's characterization of Richard is somewhat exaggerated; his youthful motives and actions are sometimes portrayed as consciously wrong. Richard knows, for example, that he should not hang the kitten even though his father has told him to kill it or to do anything to keep it quiet. The child understands that his father has not intended his words literally but uses a literal interpretation as his excuse to get back at his father, whose restrictions about making noise during the day he resents. This young hero, smaller and weaker than the adult villain he cannot conquer in open physical combat, wages psychological war instead, turning the adult's words against him: "You told me to kill it," Richard can say to his father, knowing that the man cannot justifiably punish him for following his orders to the letter. The hapless kitten becomes the victim in this strife between the ogre-father and hero-son. As \textit{Black Boy} proceeds, we frequently see similar interactions. Richard wrongly threatens to slash his Uncle Tom with razors, but his aggressiveness results from Uncle Tom's unwarranted decision to whip him. Richard's ignoble acts, whatever they are, are always reactions to mistreatment. If others would leave him alone or
treat him decently, this young hero would be free to perform great deeds.

And great deeds performed in the face of overwhelming odds are the substance of Black Boy. The mythic hero descends into an underworld peopled with frightening monsters; from this underworld he wrest a priceless boon. He then escapes to the upper world, returns to his own people, bestows on them the benefits of the prize he has won, and often assumes among them an elevated role of king, warrior, or saint.

Frederick Douglass, although born into slavery, did not make his descent into the "underworld" until he was six years old. Before that time, his childhood had been relatively secure and carefree. Only after being separated from his grandmother did Douglass come to experience the horrors of slavery. Richard Wright, on the other hand, was born directly into an underworld of unrelieved brutality. His earliest recorded memory is of the house fire and how his mother nearly killed him when he was four years old. By the time he was six, Wright had lived through his father's desertion, hunger, physical and psychological abuse, gang violence, and drunkenness resulting from frequenting a bar where patrons bought him drinks. Physical survival alone would have been a victory, but Wright is more interested in chronicling a different battle fought and won: his youthful struggle to discover an imaginative world beyond the barren externals of his life: in short, the process of learning how to read and then getting his hands on books to feed his mind.

The uphill battle toward literacy is one of the primary motifs in black American literature, beginning with the slave narratives. As
such, it assumes mythic proportions in that literature. Knowledge of reading and writing was denied slaves, for their white masters understood perfectly, as Douglass makes clear, that literacy would quicken their discontent. Consequently, it was illegal in many places to teach a slave to read or write. Such prohibitions made the knowledge of letters a forbidden fruit all the more to be desired, for such knowledge opened the world of ideas to the slave and often helped aid his escape. Frederick Douglass, for instance, was able to forge passes in his first, abortive escape attempt. He could not have begun such a plan without his ability to read and write. But Douglass and many other slave narrators trace the history of how they came to read not simply for the utilitarian benefits of such knowledge. Literacy opens the realm of ideas; it enables a "thing" to become a man. Literacy marks intelligence and culture. The slave, by proving he can read and write, asserts his humanity. No wonder the acquisition of literacy figures so vitally in slave narratives.

Robert B. Stepto, then, correctly recognizes a strong connection between Wright's account of how he discovered the world of literature and Frederick Douglass's account in his Narrative. In both works, the authors tell how they gained rudimentary knowledge of words from children on the street. In both, there is a "primal" scene of interrupted instruction: in the Narrative, Douglass recalls how his mistress, Sophia Auld, begins to teach him to read and write. This process continues until Hugh Auld discovers it. He strictly forbids his wife to continue, but young Frederick resolves to learn despite his master's prohibition; he realizes that something so strongly forbidden
must be for his good. Wright recalls a similar scene. Ella, a young school teacher who boards with Richard's family, begins to tell him the story of Bluebeard. Wright recalls:

My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. Enchanted and enthralled, I stopped her constantly to ask for details. My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me.

Here the artist is born, but here, too, an enemy appears to stifle him at birth. Just as the story of Bluebeard reaches its climax, Granny breaks in on Ella and the boy. Upon discovering that the teacher is telling Richard "lies," Granny forbids further contact between the two, and soon afterward, Ella is forced to find other lodging. As in Douglass's Narrative, a white person (for that is how Granny is portrayed) tries to stop the hero's attempt to become literate, and as in the Narrative, the taboo is imposed too late: once knowledge is tasted, the desire for it is unstoppable. Richard defies all the odds against him to further his knowledge. Despite a record of spotty school attendance, he learns to read well. He even aspires to become a writer, and actually has a short story (the wonderfully titled "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre") published when he is in the eighth grade. Later, when Richard moves to Memphis, he obtains books from the white-only library through the ruse of a library card borrowed from a sympathetic northern white man and a cleverly forged note: "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H.L. Mencken?" Note by note and book by book, Wright acquaints himself with Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, Dreiser, and others, mostly of a realist-
school of writing. In the face of almost universal opposition, the hero-as-artist equips himself for his life's task. His fanatical grandmother who believes all fiction to be lies from the devil cannot stop him; the whites who want to keep him in ignorance by forcing him to attend inferior schools and excluding him from public libraries cannot stop him. As in the myth, where no powers of the underworld can prevent the hero from attaining his prize, so the entire world of the American South in the 1920's cannot prevent this one determined black boy from entering the secret world of ideas in books and from wanting all that those books promise him. Richard Wright's achievement is remarkable, given the unvarnished circumstances of his early years; his fictionalization of those circumstances to the point that they resemble a mythic hell serves to heighten his triumph. Despite its manipulation of literal truth, or perhaps because of it, Black Boy is the most powerful autobiography of a black man since Douglass's Narrative.

The growth of the artist through literacy is, then, another of the principal themes of Black Boy. As Robert Stepto reminds us, this quest for literacy has long been a basic motif in black autobiography: we have already seen the similarity between the "instruction scenes" in Black Boy and Douglass's Narrative. Up From Slavery also treats Washington's search for an education; recall how he tells his reader that he wanted to learn to read and write so that he could study Frederick Douglass's books for himself. Desire to learn also prompts him to walk from his home in West Virginia to Hampton; there his persistence wins him a place at the school. When his sweeping of the
classroom to Miss Mackie's exacting standards wins his acceptance, Washington recalls that he was "one of the happiest souls on earth"; of all the exams he ever passed, he considers that one to be the hardest. Education was the vital factor in Washington's rise from slavery, and he made education of a certain kind the cornerstone upon which his life's work was founded. W.E.B. Du Bois also underscores the importance of his education; he acquires his with less difficulty than did Douglass or Washington, but his achievement—European study and a Ph. D. from Harvard—was, in its way, as remarkable as his predecessors'.

VI.

All of the autobiographies we have examined stress education, and Black Boy seems to fit into the tradition. But is this simply coincidence, or does Wright consciously employ elements of the autobiographical tradition in his own life story? Some uncertainty arises here, and at least one critic is uneasy with too simple an answer.

In her biography of Wright, Constance Webb notes that Wright was asked by Hollywood in 1940 to write a screenplay of Up From Slavery, but that he had never read it.37 She remarks:

Wright was almost ashamed to admit that he had never read Up From Slavery. He had escaped being educated in Negro institutions and never got around to reading those books which everyone was supposed to read. He did know that the greatest split among
educated Negroes of a generation or so ago was over Washington's proposals. 38

Wright's ignorance in 1940 of the important texts in the black literary tradition may be true; if so, the similarity between the fear/flight/fate pattern in Native Son and the bondage/flight/freedom motif in black autobiographies is a difficult to explain. Wright may also have become familiar with Up From Slavery and other older autobiographies in the years between 1940 and the time he began his own autobiography. George E. Kent has difficulty believing in Wright's supposed unfamiliality with his predecessors. Of Webb's claim that Wright was ignorant of Up From Slavery and other texts, he writes:

Miss Webb is valiant, but the explanation is lame. That very boyhood which Wright was attempting to understand in Black Boy depends, for proper dimension, upon an intimate knowledge of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and of the issues with which they grappled. . . . It would hardly seem that a person as obsessed with black problems as Wright was would require an education in negro institutions to put him in touch with the major figures in his history. 39

Although Kent admits he would like to know more about Wright's reading, especially works by other black men, he obviously doubts the truthfulness of Wright's claims not to have read books such as Up From Slavery. Knowing, as we do, of Wright's insatiable desire for reading and, more importantly, of the striking similarity between the instruction scenes in Black Boy and Douglass's Narrative, Kent's doubts seem reasonable. Robert Stepto goes further: he asserts that in
the 1940's Wright had read "most of the corpus of Afro-American literature" and that that tradition did guide him; in fact, having read his forebears, Wright was compelled to write his own life story.40 It also seems consistent with Wright's independent character that he would claim a certain freedom from other writers, black writers in particular. If Wright had still not read Douglass or Washington by 1942, the year he began his autobiography, the similarities between his work and his predecessors' are the more startling. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable that Wright, for his own reasons, would deny having read the earlier works, particularly if he wished to further the mythic aspects of his life and of his literary achievement. To have sprung, like Athena, fully armed literarily from a hostile environment makes better drama than to acknowledge one's debt to earlier writers.41

From the information available, I suspect that Richard Wright, despite his protestations, did in fact know in 1942 the literary tradition in which Black Boy stands. The similarities between its structure, themes, and some of its scenes to those of the black autobiographical tradition are too numerous for them all to be sheer coincidence. Whether Wright chose to use certain elements from the tradition or was somehow compelled to employ them is not altogether clear; Robert Stepto goes so far as to suggest that Wright had to write his autobiography after reading the earlier texts because it was the only way he could "authenticate" the "extraordinarily articulate self" that lies behind two of his own earlier texts, Native Son and "How Bigger Was Born."42 Although I do not always follow Stepto's reasoning, I believe his claim about some kind of inner necessity
operating in Wright points in the right direction. The autobiographer's decision to tell his own life story, particularly after he has read his strong predecessors' stories, seems related to Harold Bloom's contention that the artist must clear his own imaginative space. To do so, he often uses forms he has inherited but must somehow alter those forms or pour new content into them to assert his individuality. Richard Wright does this to a remarkable degree, as the following passages from his work demonstrate.

When Richard Wright was in his early teens, his mother joined the Methodist Church. Accompanying her, Richard encountered what for him was a "new world":

... prim, brown puritanical girls who taught in the public school; black college students who tried to conceal their plantation origin, black boys and girls emerging self-consciously from adolescence; wobbly-bosomed black and yellow church matrons; black janitors and porters who sang proudly in the choir; subdued redcaps who served as deacons; meek, blank-eyed black and yellow washerwomen who shouted and moaned and danced when hymns were sung; jovial, potbellied black bishops; skinny old maids who were constantly giving rallies to raise money; snobbery, clannishness, gossip, intrigue, petty class rivalry, and conspicuous displays of cheap clothing . . . .

This unkind, satiric, and undoubtedly accurate description of black people and their inbred world sounds a new note in black autobiography. Admittedly, Booker Washington told jokes about ignorant Negroes as part of his talks on the lecture circuit; Du Bois writes less than
flatteringly of the foibles of blacks in "The Colored World Within" in Dusk of Dawn; even Douglass, whose distance from the black masses has sometimes been commented upon, notes the ignorance and superstitions of other slaves. But none of these earlier figures writes so caustically about the pettiness and pretentiousness of black society as does Wright. Nor had any earlier writer described so bluntly the black's ability to be cruel to his own people.

Regardless of the unattractiveness of the world of the black Methodist church, a world in some ways a step up from what he knew in his youngest years, Richard still finds it attractive: "I liked it and I did not like it; I longed to be among them, yet when with them I looked at them as if I were a million miles away."44 Thus Wright sums up his relationship with the black world of his youth: he wants to belong because he needs human contact, yet the petty concerns of a defeated people repel him. As he portrays himself, Wright is already, at a young age, too sensitive, too aware to fit docilely into this stultifying black society. Because of his particularly harsh childhood, he trusts scarcely anyone, black or white. In fact, every close relationship he describes in Black Boy is marked by conflict, even violence. Richard remains outside even his own family, which characterizes him as a troublemaker destined for the gallows, if not for hell. But although Richard tries to assert his independence from other people, he still longs to belong somewhere.

In another, more famous passage, Wright remarks on his race in general terms, not just upon the world of the Negro Protestant church he encountered when he was a teenager. He writes:
(After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionless an existence. I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.

(When I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native to man.45

Here again Wright speaks of the black man as an outsider. And since he himself lives outside of the mainstream of black culture in his day, he is doubly outcast, for he cannot fit into a society that is itself dis-inherited. Yet part of him, as he makes clear, wants to belong.

I believe that Richard Wright’s relationship with the black America of his youth—alienation partially tempered by a desire and need to belong—also figures in his attitude toward the black autobiographical tradition. His desire to be a part of that tradition
shows itself in the ways he uses the forms; he employs the bondage/flight/freedom motif, and he uses the time-honored (and time-worn) theme of the acquisition of literacy. But if the forms are familiar, the content is sometimes startlingly new, and nowhere is it more jarring than in the critical descriptions of black culture and character epitomized by the two passages already mentioned; similar ones appear throughout Black Boy to paint a bleaker picture of black life in America than appears anywhere beforehand. Wright asserts his individuality by denying he has even read the texts of the tradition. This hero-as-artist emerges from the underworld by his own powers, yet he has paid a great price for his self-acquired knowledge and freedom: when Richard Wright makes his break for the North, he is alienated not only from the white world that has always been his deadly enemy, but from the black world as well.

Wright's success in "clearing imaginative space" for himself in Afro-American letters is well illustrated by W.E.B. Du Bois's reaction to Black Boy. Writing in the New York Herald Tribune (March 4, 1945), Du Bois criticizes the autobiography precisely for the characterization of black life that is its new note. Du Bois takes exception to Wright's portrayal of himself as a youth, and as Dan McCall notes, seems to doubt that the work is altogether true. Du Bois writes: "the hero whom Wright draws, and maybe it is himself, is in his childhood a loathsome brat, foul-mouthed, and 'a drunkard.'" Du Bois also objects that Wright portrays no black person who is "ambitious, successful, or really intelligent." Du Bois, of course, believed that such black people existed in large numbers, and he surely saw himself
as one example. As McCall notes, Du Bois must have felt that Black Boy, by presenting Negroes in such bad light to a white audience, could only hurt the causes to which he himself had devoted his life.48

W.E.B. Du Bois was, in 1945, probably the recognized leader of American Negroes, the greatest scholarly authority on their sociology, their most ardent defender, and himself the author of a recent autobiography, one that linked him with the black autobiographical tradition going back to Frederick Douglass. If Du Bois was offended by Black Boy, and he was, then Wright had succeeded in making a space for himself, or at least in speaking with a voice that had to be reckoned with.

VII.

Most of Black Boy fits the "bondage" element of the three-part structure so prevalent in black autobiography. Wright characterizes his youth as marked by fear that sometimes renders him paralyzed, literally unable to speak or move; that sometimes makes him want to run away, to stop living; and that sometimes causes him to lash out hysterically at those he perceives as his enemies. The white world keeps him in psychological bondage but it has also so perverted black culture that it, too becomes hostile to the young Richard. Under relentless attack from two alien cultures, Richard feels that he must flee the South or stay and risk madness or death. He determines to run.
The "flight" element of *Black Boy* is first expressed in the opening episode as Richard seeks to escape his mother's punishment for setting fire to the house and is repeated in each of his later attempts to evade his tormenters. Flight as a structural device in the autobiography appears in Chapter 11 with Richard's arrival in Memphis. Here he hopes to make a new life for himself, but he encounters more blacks who do not comprehend him and more whites who persecute him. In Memphis, Richard works for an optical company; after a while, his white co-workers concoct a scheme to put him at odds with another black man who works in a nearby office. White men tell each of the two black youths that the other has threatened to hurt him. They hope to cause violence between the black men to satisfy their own lust for blood sport. Worn down by relentless pressure, Richard and Harrison, the other black man, finally agree to box, although they have no reason to hate one another. Once in the ring, they first try to feign a genuine match, but soon, egged on by their white audience, they fall prey to the violence inherent in the situation and try with all their might to beat one another. The money they are paid to thus entertain their white spectators in no way compensates for their shame. Richard realizes he has been goaded into violence by cynical whites who actually care nothing for him. He comes to Memphis to escape the racism of the Deep South, but finds the racism of Memphis just as ingrained.

Memphis does offer Richard one opportunity: with the borrowed library card and his forged notes, he greatly expands his reading. Mencken, Dresier, Masters, Anderson, and Lewis fire his imagination and
make him realize how greatly restricting is the world of southern Negroes. Write notes: "I could endure the hunger. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me. I had a new hunger." To satisfy that hunger, Richard finally determines to leave the South for good. Black Boy ends with Richard on a northbound train, heading for Chicago—and, he hopes, freedom.

As it stands today, Black Boy concludes with a brief section in which Wright sums up the experience of his youth and speaks with guarded optimism about his dreams for a better future in the North. Disappointed by human contacts black and white, Richard finds solace, strength, and inspiration from his books from which, more than from any other source, he "had gotten the idea that life could be different, could be lived in a fuller and richer manner." He admits that in going North he is more running away from something—the terror of the South—than to something, for the North is an unknown. But he must go; the South has branded him "nigger," has denied him his personhood, and has kept him from learning who he really is. Black Boy ends on a cautious, poetic note that holds out some hope for a freer future:

With ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth
they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars.51

With this ending to Black Boy, readers disturbed by the bleakness of almost all that has gone before may take some slight comfort. Wright seems to say, "Freedom is there, and I will attain it if I can." In one way, such an ending seems jarring at the end of a book as pessimistic as Black Boy, almost a "happy-ever-after" conclusion to a grand guignol. On the other hand, young Richard is above all a survivor. We believe that if anyone can, he will make it in the North. The daring-to-hope ending puts Black Boy into the black autobiographical tradition, for we can see Richard taking his place with Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois as a black man who overcomes great odds and succeeds. Black Boy would thus seem to allow Richard Wright to have it both ways, for not only does he clear his own imaginative space with his generally acknowledged exaggerations about the poverty of black culture, but he also gets his work into the line of black autobiographies stretching back to Douglass. Black Boy could almost be read as the standard success story with a slight variation at the end—it only hints at a successful future, but the reader is expected to know that Wright did, after all, make good. The very book that the reader is holding is tangible evidence of its author's success in the North.

This scenario threatens to collapse, however, as soon as one remembers that Black Boy, in its original form, comprises only part of the autobiography Wright submitted to his agent in 1943. The original manuscript also included what was published three decades later as
American Hunger, an account of Wright's experiences in the North, the land of "freedom." What we read today as the cautiously optimistic ending of Black Boy was written by Wright as an ending to the work when he realized in 1944 that Harper's had decided to publish only the first part of it.

Although Constance Webb mentions Wright's initial suspicion about Harper's reasons for wishing to publish only the first part of the autobiography, both Michel Fabre and John Reilly stress his willingness to have Black Boy published alone.52 Wright apparently felt sure that the American Hunger portion of the work would be published soon afterward. His supposed notion that someone was trying to censure his work because of its references to the Communist Party is countered by the fact that much of the material in American Hunger had already appeared in print in other places before 1945, and another portion appeared in Mademoiselle shortly after Black Boy was published. The suggestion of a conspiracy to keep American Hunger out of print does not stand up before these facts.53 As it turned out, American Hunger was not published in its entirety until 1977, but almost all of it existed in print for years before that date, and Constance Webb had the entire manuscript privately printed and circulated in 1946.54 Accordingly, although the general public did not become aware of the second portion of the autobiography until thirty years after the publication of the first section, American Hunger did not come as a revelation to those who followed Wright's work carefully. Read together with Black Boy as Wright's complete autobiography in the form the author originally intended, American Hunger, does, nevertheless,
somewhat change the reader's view of the first part of the work. If we read it as Wright originally wrote it, we must omit the last pages of *Black Boy*, those which offer a guarded, hopeful vision for the future. Instead, we end the first part of the work at the words, "This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled." Richard's bondage has been described and his flight noted. There is no "freedom" section; that will come in *American Hunger*. The second part of the work begins, "My glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies." From that first sentence, we know that what Richard finds in the North is not really freedom, but something as bad as what he fled, if not worse. When the tacked-on ending of *Black Boy* gives way to this rapid "this-is-what-I-fled-and-this-is-what-I-found" transition, the reader suspects that the relentless tensions of *Black Boy* will continue in *American Hunger*. 55  

VIII.  

*American Hunger* itself divides into two parts. Chapters 1-3 recount Richard Wright's efforts to make a new life for himself and his family in Chicago. His various jobs are noted—all of them subsistence level and all meaningless to a young man aspiring to be a writer. Chapter 4-6 recount his experiences with the Communist Party in Chicago and re-emphasize a prominent theme from *Black Boy*: Richard's ongoing alienation because of his determination to have an intellectual and emotional life of his own.
As a place of refuge and opportunity, the North first took on mythic dimensions in the slave narratives. Because of its association with freedom, it was sometimes identified with the Promised Land sung about in so many Negro spirituals. The realistic slave realized, however, that the North guaranteed no paradise for the successful escapee from the South. The black man or woman who could get out of the South before or after Emancipation was likely to find new, different hardships in a strange environment. Douglass did, and so did millions of others, Richard Wright among them.

Wright's description of Chicago in the first paragraph of American Hunger alerts us to how its reality mocked its promise. Instead of streets paved with gold, Chicago (which Wright explicitly calls "mythic") is more a hellscape: "An unreal city whose mythical houses were built on slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of grey smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie." missing is the overt racism of Mississippi and Memphis; an indifference worse than active hatred replaces it. Wright finds that he does not know how to behave. In the South, he at least knew the unwritten rules of Jim Crow, but in Chicago, he must deal with uncertainty. He is as unsettled by the way most whites ignore him as he is by the kindness of others like the Hoffmans for whom he works for a brief time. When a white waitress at the restaurant where he works as a dishwasher asks Richard to tie her apron, he hardly knows what to do; for a white woman in the South to invite such closeness from a black man would be unheard of. Wright characterizes himself in Chicago as a baby having to learn things from the beginning.
From the start of his stay in Chicago, Wright describes his life as one of continuous loneliness. Although he comes to Chicago with his Aunt Maggie, lives for a while with another aunt, and later brings his mother and brother North, his family ceases to have a meaningful place in his life. They linger in the background for a time, act disappointed in Richard’s efforts to find steady work, are baffled by his interest in communism, and finally just disappear from the scene. With few exceptions, the people with and for whom Wright works are strangers to him and he to them. The white waitresses at the restaurant are portrayed as living the shallowest of lives, with "their tawdry dreams, their simple hopes, their home lives, their fear of feeling anything deeply, their sex problems, their husbands." They cannot understand any person, particularly a Negro, who wants to have an interior life. Having never felt deeply, they cannot grasp what Wright has experienced, marked as he has been from childhood by emotional trauma. Even the young woman with whom Wright has sex as payment for premiums on her burial insurance policy is a cipher. She can neither read nor write, has no ideas, and can relate to a man only through sex; all she wants from life is to go to the circus.

With his customary skill, Richard Wright epitomizes these early experiences in one fine, strategically placed scene. At the end of Chapter 3, Wright describes a fight between two of his black coworkers in one of Chicago’s large hospitals. Wright has found work there as a janitor; among his jobs is the care and cleaning of laboratory animals and their cages in a basement lab deep inside the hospital. During their lunch hour, Wright and his fellow workers eat in the room housing
the animals; all around them are diseased rabbits, dogs, rats, mice, and guinea pigs, the subjects of assorted experiments perpetrated on them by the white doctors who treat the black janitors as if they too were mindless creatures. One day, Wright's coworkers, Brand and Cooke, get into a fight over some trivial matter. A knife is pulled, and soon the two enemies are engaged in serious combat. In their scuffle, they knock down some tiers of animals' cages. These fly open, animals escape, and some are injured or killed. The black men find themselves with a lab full of loose animal and little idea which go back into what cages. To protect their jobs, the janitors do their best to return the rabbits, mice, rats, and guinea pigs to what they hope are the right places. When the white doctors come in and begin asking for their specimens, the black men fear that their errors will be discovered, but no white doctor even notices that some animals are missing and others are in the wrong pens. They pay as little attention to the identity-less rodents on which they experiment as they do to the blacks who perform menial tasks for them. Wright detracts somewhat from the biting humor and horror of the situation with his rather too-literal explanation:

The hospital kept us four negroes, as though we were close kin to the animals we tended, huddle together down in the underworld corridors of the hospital, separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the rest of the hospital—just as America had kept us locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years—and we had made our own code of ethics, values, loyalty.
The sole compensation for the disappointment Wright found in Chicago was his continuing opportunity to educate himself. His incessant reading helped him wall out reality and feed his hungry spirit. While living in a tiny, dirty two-rom "apartment" with three other people, Richard reads Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. The incongruous image of an impoverished black dishwasher reading Proust seems the artist's defiant answer to Booker T. Washington who recalls, in Up From Slavery, what he considers the sad spectacle of a poor black boy sitting in the weeds by his shack struggling to learn a French grammar. Washington would probably have had as much trouble with a Chicago dishwasher reading Proust, but this is the point Wright wants to make: no one understands this artist—not his family, not those whose values center on material gain, and not the white world that sees him fit only to scrub floors and clean dung from the bottom of animals' cages. Although Chicago disappoints Richard, he survives in (and because of) his private world of thought and feeling fed by his books, not by human contact.

Richard's frustrating inability to form human relationships and to fit into a group is treated even more fully in the last three chapters of American Hunger than in the first three. The last half of the work details his association with the American Communist Party in Chicago and New York. Despite his work for the party over several years and his faithful adherence to Marxist doctrine (verified by his writing apart from American Hunger), Wright's picture of his association with the communists in many ways reiterates his earlier, failed efforts to
make friends. This time the problem is not race: Wright takes pains to show that his colleagues in the party are, for the most part, remarkably free from racial prejudices. The problem is ideology, and because Wright reserves the right to think for himself even after he has heard the official party line, he is always suspected of being an "intellectual," as enemy of the party he serves.

By the time he wrote *American Hunger*, Wright had severed his ties with the Communist Party and had written of it critically. His portrait of the organization in his autobiography depicts a paranoid, factionalized body embroiled in neverending internecine strife of Byzantine complexity. No member knows when he might be charged with outlandish crimes such as "anti-leadership tendencies," "class collaborationist attitudes," or "ideological factionalism." One party member, a certain Ross, is tried for alleged crimes against the people; at his trial the prosecution spends hours detailing the oppression of the world's workers, the wrongs of their oppressors being ever narrowed until Ross's own "crimes" are recounted. By this time, he has been made to feel personally responsible for all the injustices dealt to all the world's workers. Unable to stand up against such an onslaught, he confesses to every charge leveled against him.

This is the Kafkaesque organization to which Richard Wright attaches himself. He quickly rises in the ranks and finds himself elected to the position of executive secretary of the Chicago John Reed Club, a communist organization for writers and artists. Just as quickly, Richard is entangled in political infighting. In trying to appease two warring factions in the club, he alienates them both.
Furthermore, he is suspect from the beginning because of his education; he remains an outsider, an "intellectual."

Looking for a place to belong, Richard instead finds renewed fear and isolation in his dealings with the Communist Party. Party officials try to cow him into submitting to the party line, but he maintains his intellectual integrity even at the cost of being ousted from the ranks. Although he still sympathizes with communist ideology—in fact, he believes communism to be the hope and the inevitable way of the future—he cannot fit into the party as it exists in actuality. Once again, Richard Wright is an outsider, cast out from two outcast groups, the black race and the Communist Party, as well as from the white world which oppresses them both. And once again, Wright manages to express his isolation in a memorable scene. American Humor ends on May Day, 1936. Richard has dissociated himself from the party, but his union has decided to march in the May Day Workers' Parade. When Richard misses his union contingent, he is invited by a black communist to march with his old colleagues from the party's South Side section. Richard finally falls in only to be accosted by two white communists from the South Side section who physically remove him from the parade and throw him roughly to the pavement. His negro friends from the party stand by and watch, helpless. This final scene of human interaction repeats and summarizes a pattern that has run throughout the entire autobiography: the black man (Richard) is forcibly ejected from the flow of American life (the parade) by his enemies (white men) while other blacks are powerless to help. American Hunger ends with
Richard alone in his tiny room, meditating on the meaning of his life so far and its purpose in the future.

*American Hunger* traces Richard Wright's growing alienation from other people, indeed, from the mainstream of American life. As John Reilly remarks, this second part of Wright's autobiography shows that his existentialism predates by years that theme's overt appearance in *The Outsider* (1951-52), which another critic has called Wright's most autobiographical novel. But *American Hunger* also tells of the growth of Richard Wright, young writer, and critics have noted its thematic resemblances to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

I have noted that Wright emphasizes how he greatly expanded his reading during his years in Chicago and how books were his lifeline during that time. Those years also saw his first successful attempts at writing: Wright published some poems in communist periodicals and had his short story "Big Boy Leaves Home" accepted for an anthology. He was also beginning to consciously articulate his life's mission. When his mother accidentally got hold of some of his communist literature, she was horrified by the crude and brutal political cartoons in it. This made Wright examine more closely the written propaganda as well. Finding the writing to be out of touch with its intended audience's needs and capabilities, Wright realized that he could act as mediator between the communists and those they hoped to recruit:

In their efforts to recruit the masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in
too abstract a manner. I would make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words and try to put some of that meaning back. I would address my words to two groups: I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them.82

Something of the priest inheres in Wright's articulation of his vocation: he will bring the needs of the people before the higher power; at the same time, he will explain Truth to the masses. But Wright isn't prepared for the hostility his efforts awaken among the leaders of the Communist Party. When he decides to interview black communists and write their life stories, he immediately falls under suspicion. The party, it turns out, cares more for pure doctrine than it does for the humanity of the individual. Wright the artist wants to tell the truths of the heart, but the party wants only to hear "truths" that accord with the official line.

Three times toward the end of his autobiography, Wright employs the image of the human heart to describe his calling, underlining, I believe, the religious implications of the artist's role. He writes, "I wanted to share people's feelings, awaken their hearts." Later he declares,

Politics was not my game; the human heart was my game, but it was only in the realm of politics that I could see the depths of the human heart. I had wanted to make others see what was in the Communist heart, what the Communists were after; but I was on trial by proxy, condemned by them.63
On the last pages of the work, Wright mentions the heart twice, calling it the "least known factor of living" and, in the last sentence of the book stating, "I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, that keep alives in our heart a sense of the inexpressibly human." Now the artist-priest becomes the artist-prophet, his work to recall humanity to an awareness of its almost-lost purpose and potential. It is not too extreme to suggest that Richard Wright saw himself as a kind of Old Testament composite figure, both the "Man of Sorrows" despised and rejected by men as well as the "voice crying in the wilderness." If this self-awareness were not enough, Wright adds to it the image of Prometheus, the god who brings fire (here, read truth) to man but pays the penalty of isolated suffering. Having been thrown out of the May Day parade and having returned home "really alone now," Wright muses, "Perhaps, I thought, out of my tortured feelings I could fling a spark into this darkness."

The spark he flings is the written word, and the reader ends American Hunger sensing he is meant to feel he holds in his hand the priceless boon which its heroic priestly-prophetic-godlike author has wrested from the powers of darkness. The hero may languish in tortured isolation, but the world has, at the price of his suffering, been blessed.

When we read Black Boy by itself, we realize how it follows the slave narrative pattern in many ways. It presents bondage and flight, and hints at freedom in its final pages. But when American Hunger is read as the second part of the large work as Wright originally intended, we discover that the "freedom" section does not deliver the
standard success-story ending. Instead, Wright tells of further oppression, further struggles, and further flight—this time not to any geographic place, but an interior flight into the world of books, into the self as he gradually discovers his true vocation. As a whole, then, American Hunger, Wright's title for the entire two-part work, turns out to be his own "portrait of the artist-savior as a young man," utilizing elements of the slave narratives to help tell the tale. Wright employs the mythic aspects of the slave narrative to heighten the miraculous element in his survival and his emergence as an artist, for there is no reasonable explanation for how a young black man with such blighted origins could become a writer of stature. American Hunger owes a debt to Douglass's Narrative, for Wright effectively uses the mythic possibilities Douglass uncovered in the slave narrative. Additionally, Wright responds to and refutes Up From Slavery, which expresses pity for poor blacks who seek higher learning when what they really need, in Washington's opinion, is a way of putting food on the table. Richard Wright is part of Du Bois's "talented Tenth," those from the race who will rise from humble beginnings to serve as the spokesmen and leaders of their people. In American Hunger Wright not only traces his own rise, but he also presents his work itself as tangible proof of his accomplishment. We may quibble with some of the means by which he clears his imaginative space, but in this case, knowing how the organism works in no way detracts from the wonder of its life.
Notes, Chapter 3


2 Howells, pp. 195-6.


6 Webb, p. 197. The details of how Black Boy was conceived and written are all from Webb's account.

7 Webb, p. 208.

8 Webb, p. 203. The details of Wright's trip are covered on pp. 199-205.


10 Wright, Black Boy, p. 11.

11 Wright, Black Boy, p. 20.

12 Wright, Black Boy, p. 215.

13 Wright, Black Boy, p. 111.

14 Wright, Black Boy, p. 9.

15 Webb, p. 13. The first chapter of the biography gives details of Wright's family background.

16 Wright, Black Boy, p. 13.
17 Wright, Black Boy, p. 13.


19 See Webb, p. 409, notes 9.


21 Davis, p. 434.

22 Webb, p. 53 ff.


24 Davis, p. 429.

25 Davis, p. 438.

26 Margolies, p. 16.


28 Kent, p. 40.


30 Littlejohn, p. 104.
Some critics of *Native Son*, for example, were troubled by Wright's portrayal of the white press and the white mob in the final section of the novel. Yet Wright's fictional newspaper accounts of Bigger's crime, arrest, and trial are no more exaggerated than the racist, sensationalist newspaper coverage of the Robert Nixon murder trial in Chicago in 1938. See Kenneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 121-5.

Littlejohn, pp. 103-04.


Constance Webb notes the coincidence that this woman's name, Ella, is the same as Wright's mother's. It has also been suggested that this "Ella" was Wright's mother and that this scene is a tribute to her contribution in nurturing his imaginative life. Recall also the dedication to *Native Son*: "To My Mother who, when I was a child at her knee, taught me to revere the fanciful and the imaginative") which seems to acknowledge more of her contribution than Wright shows in *Black Boy*. Michel Fabre says that the teacher's name was Eloise. Perhaps Wright's memory failed him at this point.

Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 47.

Webb, p. 186.


Kent, p. 41.

Stepto, p. 129.
Wright’s work shows his indebtedness to Dreiser and other naturalists, but he may have been especially unwilling to acknowledge a debt to earlier black writers.

Stepto, p. 129.

Wright, Black Boy, p. 166.

Wright, Black Boy, p. 166.

Wright, Black Boy, p. 45.

I agree with Robert Stepto, who comments on Wright’s passage describing the bleakness of black culture this way: "Wright is consciously and aggressively attempting to clear a space for himself in Afro-American letters." See Stepto, p. 157.


McCall, p. 116.

Wright, Black Boy, p. 274.

Wright, Black Boy, p. 281.

Wright, Black Boy, p. 285.


Reilly, pp. 213-4.

Reilly, p. 214.
The questions remain: Why did Wright add the ending--to give a better sense of closure to the work? Why did he write it with a positive tone? With this ending, Black Boy read alone does not give a completely accurate idea of Wright's original tone and overall purpose.


Wright, American Hunger, p. 12.

Critics have noted the similarity in the theme between this episode and Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Ellison's Invisible Man.

Wright, American Hunger, p. 59.

Reilly, p. 213.


Wright, American Hunger, p. 66.

Wright, American Hunger, p. 123.

Wright, American Hunger, p. 135.

Wright, American Hunger, p. 134.
Chapter Four

I.

Richard Wright's father, Nathaniel Wright, deserted his wife and went to live with another woman when Richard was still a young child. In the first chapter of Black Boy, Wright recalls being taken by his mother to visit his father to ask for money. Nathaniel Wright flippantly tells his wife and son that he has only a nickel for them; Ella Wright proudly forbids her son to accept it. She and Richard leave Nathaniel Wright with his woman, and Richard does not see him again for twenty-five years.

Wright's understandable bitterness toward his father surfaces several times in the first chapter of Black Boy, particularly in the episode of the kitten. Richard takes literally his father's words to kill the kitten although he knows better. Dragged before his father, Richard has the pleasure of defiantly insisting to his father that hanging the kitten was a simple act of obedience. But deeper issues are involved, as Wright notes in his interpretation of the incident:

I had had my first triumph over my father. I had made him believe that I had taken his words literally. He could not punish me now without risking his authority. I was happy because I had at last found a way to throw my criticism of him into his face. I had made him feel that, if he whipped me for killing the kitten, I would never give serious weight to his words again. I had made
him know that I felt he was cruel and I had done it without his
punishing me.¹

Father and son are at odds before the incident of the kitten; the son
questions the father's authority and contrives to free himself from it.
Soon freedom appears, but in an unexpected way: Nathaniel Wright
deserts his wife and children and forever severs his relationship with
them. Resentment at his father's restricting presence is replaced by
resentment that his absence causes hunger, for with Nathaniel Wright
gone, there is not enough money for food. Wright recalls, "As the days
slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of
hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep
biological bitterness."²

When he was a child, Richard Wright is unable to punish his
father for leaving him—he can only refuse the nickel cynically offered
him. But the adult Richard Wright can settle the score, and he does so
in the same way he triumphs over his father in the matter of the
kitten: with words. In the first instance, Richard deliberately
misconstrues his father's command. In the later case, Wright deals
with his father for good through his portrait describing him at their
final meeting many years later.

During his trip through the South in 1940, Wright saw his father
in Natchez. The older man had returned from Memphis, where he had
failed. Once again he was sharecropping, having retreated to his
birthplace at the end of his life to resume the work he had done years
earlier. One can imagine the awkward meeting between this sad figure
and his famous son, the author of a best-selling novel: the two men
were strangers living in different worlds. Wright's description of his father at this reunion is a small masterpiece of characterization and categorization, for with a few strokes, Wright forever makes his father a type, a symbol of the black man of the earth whose life has been blighted by the racism of the South:

--he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed with dim recollection, his fearsome aspect of twenty-five years ago gone from him—

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body...

From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was unknown to him as was despair. As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope. From far beyond the horizons that bound this bleak plantation there had come to me through my living the knowledge that my father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city; a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city—that same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing.
A photograph of Nathaniel Wright taken at the time of Richard's visit shows a man dressed in overalls and denim jacket over an open-collared shirt; his large, veined hands suggest years of manual labor. The face is unremarkable except for the eyes fixed straight ahead— their blankness is disturbing. In their lifeless gaze one finds scant suggestion of intelligence or personality. The portrait supports Richard Wright's assessment of his father as a harmless wreck, but Wright's verbal picture supposes far more. As his son shows him, Nathaniel Wright is little more than a beast of burden, an old, sturdy mule who knows his daily routine and works without interest or expectation. He is a creature, an elemental force, dumb and lasting as the earth itself. In asserting that his father knew neither joy nor despair, was ignorant of loyalty, sentiment, or tradition, and had neither hopes nor regrets, Richard Wright revokes his humanity, labeling him "a black peasant." Although this description is delivered without overt rancor, it oozes malice: Wright can both elicit sympathy for this ruin of a human being and can state "I forgave him and pitied him" while simultaneously relegating him forever to the status of an animal in a blighted pastoral world. With this portrait, "Wright banishes his father from the remaining pages of both volumes of his autobiography." He does more than that: he take his revenge on his father for his desertion of his family years earlier and asserts his own superiority and authority over the older man. After all, Wright implies that he himself partakes of the human values (loyalty, sentiment, tradition) and emotions (joy, despair) that are unknown to his father. He asserts "I am fully a man" while suggesting
at the same time "my father was not." Nathaniel Wright, who once deserted his family, is now repaid: his son leaves him behind, literally and figuratively. Richard Wright, redeemed by the city, continues his life of intense feeling, his life of the mind, of books and ideas, his life in New York and Paris, while Nathaniel Wright stays in Natchez, "A sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands." 6

Every autobiographer treated thus far in this study has in some way struck out against the father figures in his life. Frederick Douglass did not know his biological father, but his Narrative is a blow against the white, paternalistic, slave-owning society under which he grew up and from which he escaped. Douglass makes his victory over Edward Covey emblematic of his clash with slave society: in defeating one white man, Douglass scores a victory over all his white masters and attains his own manhood. Booker T. Washington did not know his white father either, and so knew of no blood relation whom he had to symbolically defeat to assert his own identity. But Frederick Douglass loomed in Washington's consciousness as the father figure of all black Americans who had to be relegated to an unthreatening position so that Washington could assume leadership over his race. W.E. B. Du Bois knew who his father was, but had little contact with him. He writes little of his father, and that without animosity, but Du Bois, too, had a potent father figure with whom to struggle: Booker T. Washington. The contest between the two took several years to play itself out, years during which both spent untold hours and reams of paper in the fight for the leadership of the race.
Richard Wright is the first of the black autobiographers we have studied to have waged a battle against a father figure on two fronts: he had both to clear his own space in the black autobiographical tradition by imposing his vision over those of his predecessors, and he also had to defeat his biological father, whose desertion had caused him so much suffering during his childhood. Wright proves equal to the task: in Black Boy he does make his voice heard and asserts himself as a force with which others must reckon, and he ruthlessly deals with his own father, making him a beast forever bound to the soil from which he sprang.

Richard Wright surely realized, however, that any author who stakes his claim in literary territory is going to be challenged by others who want the space for themselves: Wright did it to Booker Washington and (to a lesser degree) to W.E.B. Du Bois; eventually James Baldwin would do it to him.

II.

James Baldwin did not write a full-length autobiography, but several of his essays are autobiographical, and he produced one fairly long piece, No Name in the Street, which is built of autobiographical fragments. In these essays, Baldwin writes about the two father figures who decisively influenced his life: his biological father, whom he confronts in the significantly titled essay, "Notes of a Native Son," and his literary father, Richard Wright, whose authority he challenges in "Everybody's Protest Novel." In a later essay, "Alas,
Poor Richard," Baldwin deals with Wright much as Wright deals with his father in Black Boy: he makes his peace with his "father" while simultaneously robbing that father of his power and consigning him forever to a lost past. Because of his own autobiographical works and because of his tangled relationship with Richard Wright, James Baldwin merits a place in this study. Furthermore, we shall see that Baldwin falls prey to the same patricide that he inflicts upon Wright: he is "slain" by Eldridge Cleaver in a particularly acrimonious essay, "Notes On A Native Son" (note again the title), part of Soul On Ice, Cleaver's own declaration of independent manhood.

James Baldwin first met Richard Wright in 1945. Wright was famous and respected, the author of two best-sellers; Baldwin was an unknown twenty-year-old with literary aspirations. Both had grown up in deprived households, but Baldwin was a child of the urban North, as much a product of Harlem as Wright was a child of Mississippi. Both had managed to educate themselves, and both knew from an early age that they wanted to be writers. Wright was Baldwin's ideal, as Baldwin acknowledges in "Alas, Poor Richard":

I had made my pilgrimage to meet him because he was the greatest black writer in the world for me. In Uncle Tom's Children, in Native Son, and above all, in Black Boy, I found expressed, for the first time in my life, the sorrow, the rage, and the murderous bitterness which was eating up my life and the lives of those
around me. His work was an immense liberation and revelation for me.\(^7\)

Wright spent an evening with Baldwin, questioned him about the novel he was writing, and agreed to read the sixty or seventy pages Baldwin had completed. Wright praised what he read and recommended Baldwin for the Eugene F. Saxton fellowship, which Baldwin won.\(^8\) The money from the fellowship permitted Baldwin continue work on the novel, which ended up an unpublished failure. Feeling ashamed and blaming himself for that failure, Baldwin faced Wright again in 1946, just before Wright left for France. Baldwin sensed that both he and Wright had come to an end point: he had abandoned his novel and had no literary projects promising success; Wright, although highly successful, had grown weary of the pressures of life in the United States and was fleeing to Europe. A note of envy sounds in Baldwin’s description of the meeting, as well as a hint of a feeling of abandonment—both of which may help account for what happened between the two men later. Baldwin writes:

... he had done what he could for me, and it had not worked out, and now he was going away. It seemed to me that he was sailing into the most splendid of futures, for he was going, of all places! to France, and he had been invited there by the French government.\(^9\)

The two men did not meet again until 1948, when Baldwin, following Wright’s lead, also went to France, intending never to return to the United States. On the very day of his arrival in Paris, he ran into Wright at the Deux Magots and was warmly received. He also met the
editors of Zero magazine, who would, the following year, publish
"Everybody's Protest Novel," the essay that challenged Wright's
authority as leading black writer of his day and that effectively ended
their friendship.

The substance of Baldwin's attack on Wright can be briefly
summarized. Most of "Everybody's Protest Novel" critiques Harriet
Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. Baldwin argues that the novel fails
because its stereotyped characters have no life of their own but serve
as pawns in Stowe's propagandistic scheme which is her primary purpose.
The value of Uncle Tom's Cabin as protest novel is offset by Stowe's
disservice to her characters in making them one-dimensional figures
whose destinies are completely determined by their assigned positions
in the social scheme of the novel. Baldwin seems to have a point:
Uncle Tom's Cabin is today remembered not as much for its protest as
for its characters whose very names have become bywords: Topsy, the
thoughtless black child who "just grew"; Simon Legree, the archetypal
slave driver; and most infamous of all (to black people, especially),
Uncle Tom himself, who has lent his name to any black man who, like
him, exhibits endless patience and accommodation to white oppression.

Baldwin faults the protest novel for replacing complex human
characters with symbols or types who derive their life solely from
their place within the novel's deterministic social plan. He mentions
Native Son as a novel guilty of the same faults as those in Uncle Tom's
Cabin. He sees in Bigger Thomas a character completely constrained by
his external circumstances, his life controlled by his hatred and fear.
Bigger is as much a stereotype as Uncle Tom; in fact, he is his exact
opposite, but just as much a type. Native Son, therefore, continues the harmful tradition of Uncle Tom's Cabin, for Bigger confirms in the minds of white readers the image of black men as brutal and subhuman just as Uncle Tom symbolized another favorite white stereotype, the black man completely cowed, endlessly patient, somehow less than a man. Both stereotypes—all stereotypes—render disservice. Baldwin ends his essay by claiming:

The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.¹⁰

Wright's response to "Everybody's Protest Novel" was swift, strong, and predictable. He accused Baldwin of betraying him and all American Negroes by attacking protest literature which had, after all, helped the cause of black rights over the years. Baldwin seemed to have ignored the enormous impact of Uncle Tom's Cabin and its part in bringing the slavery issue to a head. Wright accosted Baldwin shortly after the essay appeared in Zero; Baldwin writes, "I will never forget the interview, but I doubt that I will ever be able to recreate it."¹¹ Baldwin, ostensibly, was taken by surprise at the vehemence of Wright's reaction; he somehow imagined that he would be "patted on the head" for taking an original point of view. Admittedly, Baldwin's comments about Native Son seem almost an afterthought, grafted somehow into the end of an essay really about Uncle Tom's Cabin; granted, too, that Baldwin was just twenty-four when his essay appeared—perhaps he didn't realize its potential to hurt and anger Wright. At least one
critic, however, suspects Baldwin's ingenuousness: Maurice Charney, noting Baldwin's admiration for Wright as a writer and his affection for him as a man, sees his attack on *Native Son* as "deeply premeditated and deliberate; he [Baldwin] uses it to define his own position as a novelist and critic, which is opposed to the values of naturalism and naturalist view of reality."

Richard Wright and James Baldwin continued their personal and professional association for several years, but their relationship never overcame the effects of Baldwin's attack. They could not agree on the nature and value of protest literature, although they discussed it on several occasions. Baldwin wrote "Many Thousand Gone" in 1951; that essay, while praising Wright's powerful and honest expression of what it means to be a black man in America, expands the brief critique of *Native Son* first made in his earlier essay, reiterating that the character of Bigger Thomas serves primarily to reinforce the harmful stereotype of the black man as vicious killer. In "Alas, Poor Richard," Baldwin remembers how he long hoped that Wright would someday understand his point of view, that the two men could re-engage in "a great and valuable dialogue." It never happened. Unable to reach a meeting of the minds, the two men drifted apart, and their chance for reconciliation was ended by Wright's death in 1960. In 1961, Baldwin published "Alas, Poor Richard," a memoir of his relationship with Wright.

In "Alas, Poor Richard," Baldwin openly acknowledges that Richard Wright was a father figure for him. He writes, "He became my ally and my witness, and alas! my father." But Wright was more: he was
Baldwin's idol, and idols, as Baldwin notes, "are created in order to be destroyed." Baldwin is candid about his purposes in writing "Everybody's Protest Novel"; he can afford to be honest (and even penitent) because his father/idol is dead by the time he composes "Alas, Poor Richard," and grief often involves a confession of sins committed against the deceased and the cry, "If only I had done things differently while he was alive!" In 1961, Baldwin could look back and admit his motives of 1949; what is unclear, however, is whether or not Baldwin knew at the time he wrote "Everybody's Protest Novel" that he was out to slay his father. A decade of thought and the removal of the threatening father figure finally free Baldwin to own up to his true motives:

... Richard was right to be hurt, I was wrong to have hurt him. He saw clearly enough, far more clearly than I had dared to allow myself to see, what I had done: I had used his work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself.13

Any doubt about the Oedipal aspect of the relationship between Wright and Baldwin disappears when Baldwin himself calls Wright the sphinx whose riddles he, like Oedipus, had to answer before he could proceed on his road to authority. Those familiar with the myth will also recall the fate of the sphinx: deprived of its power over those who passed by its dwelling, it dashed itself on the rocks and died. Richard Wright did not, of course, commit literary suicide after the publication of Baldwin's essays; as far as Baldwin was concerned, he
didn’t have to because Baldwin was quite capable of disposing of Wright in his own way. This he does in the last section of “Alas, Poor Richard.” The portrait of Wright in the essay is indeed peculiar in a piece intended as a tribute, for Wright emerges as a kind of paranoid egomaniac, incapable of tolerating anyone who dared question his opinion on any subject about which he felt himself an authority.

Baldwin mentions several of the charges levelled at Wright by acquaintances—that he had been away from America too long, that he had “Cut himself off from his roots,” even that he thought he was a white man. Baldwin denies that he thought these assertions true, but still he repeats them. His final view of Wright shows the man surrounded by sycophants, “an indescribably cacophonous parade of mediocrities,” a man out of touch with his homeland, divided from the French existentialists, frequenting the Parisian cafes visited by writers and intellectuals but no longer one of them. We last see Wright playing the pinball machines, ignored “spitefully and deliberately” by the younger generation of black American writers. Baldwin summarizes:

The American Negroes had discovered that Richard did not really know much about the present dimensions and complexity of the Negro problem here, and profoundly, did not want to know. And one of the reasons that he did not want to know was that his real impulse toward American Negroes, individually, was to despise them. They, therefore, dismissed his rage and his public pronouncements as an unmanly reflex; as for the Africans, at least the younger ones, they knew he did not know them and did not want to know them, and they despised him. It must have been extremely hard to bear, and
was certainly very frightening to watch. I could not help feeling: Be careful. Time is passing for you, too, and this may be happening to you one day. 14

Baldwin does a thorough job on Wright, including in his closing shots nearly every charge designed to belittle a black writer: he hates his own race; his pronouncements against racial oppression are “reflexes” and “unmanly,” to boot; he is out of touch with his homeland and with the concerns of the rising generation. Baldwin even suggests that Richard Wright’s comfortable life in France is purchased at the cost of his deliberate turning away from the problems of the American Negro.

Many readers will recognize Baldwin’s description of Richard Wright’s last years in Paris as an exaggeration, a caricature. Wright was in some ways a lonely, frustrated man, but his last years were nevertheless filled with travel, writing projects, and future plans. Constance Webb’s picture of Wright’s last years differs in tone from Baldwin’s short study. She portrays him as a man plagued by recurrent illness who nevertheless kept a lively interest in the world and his work. Others have defended Wright against Baldwin’s charges, as well: Nick Aaron Ford notes that Baldwin fails to mention certain facts beyond Wright’s control that probably help account for his occasional testiness: his continual harassment by the American Secret Service (for his alleged ties with the communists), the unwillingness of publishers to bring out his new works, the “unexplained cooling of the ardor of white friends,” and ongoing financial problems. 15 Addison Gayle, who has documented at length the C.I.A. and F.B.I.’s surveillance of Wright, also defends him: he claims that Wright’s
estrangement from the black expatriate community was not simply the result of his inflated sense of self-importance; some did indeed openly attack him whenever opportunity presented itself, calling him "expatriate" as if it were a dirty word and even suggesting that Wright himself was an agent of the C.I.A. and F.B.I. Wright appears as much a victim of his isolation as he was an instigator of it.

Several critics have recognized Baldwin's strategy in his three essays on Richard Wright and his work--how could they not, since Baldwin himself offers so many hints about his motives and attitude in "Alas, Poor Richard." Maurice Charney summarizes the dynamic: "Baldwin's relation to Wright was complicated by Baldwin's own sense of the older writer as his mentor and spiritual father, from whom he needed to revolt in order to prove his own manhood and integrity and skill." Calvin Hernton, however, probes more deeply than other critics to discover why James Baldwin so wanted Richard Wright as a father. Hernton suggests that Baldwin went to Paris in search of a father (his own had died in 1943) and that his meeting with Wright in 1948 was the "crisis of this desire" to find someone to replace his own father. But Wright did not respond as he had hoped; he treated the young man with what seemed "closer to denial or indifference than to love." Baldwin hints at his feelings about Wright's reaction to him when he writes, "I don't think that Richard ever thought of me as one of his responsibilities--bien au contraire!--but he certainly seemed, often enough, to wonder just what he had done to deserve me." Hernton suggests that "Everybody's Protest Novel" is Baldwin's way of chastising Wright for not paying him more attention. When Wright
reacted so violently to Baldwin's remarks about *Native Son*, the younger man, who had hoped to "have his head patted," retaliated. Hernton notes:

Rebuffed and angered, Baldwin took up his pen and, with hydrochloric pathos, dealt an avenging blow to perhaps the only black man he ever really loved. "Many Thousand Gone" and "Alas, Poor Richard" resolved (or dissolved), for the time being, the mean affair with Richard Wright in Europe.21

III.

"Everybody's Protest Novel" destroyed Baldwin's vain hope that Richard Wright would somehow replace his own father. But to understand Baldwin's need for a surrogate father, we must examine how he characterizes his relationship with his own father. Once again, Baldwin himself supplies the information, for he writes about his relationship with his father in three of his autobiographical essays, "Notes of a Native Son," "The Fire Next Time," and "No Name in the Street." In all three, Baldwin sounds the same theme: his estrangement from a man he hated.

Baldwin begins "Notes of a Native Son" by noting four events that occurred on the same day, July 29, 1943: his father's death, his youngest sister's birth, his own nineteenth birthday, and a Harlem race riot. The riot, Baldwin admits, seems to him chastisement devised by God and his father to punish his pride, for he has refused to believe his father's apocalyptic vision of the future; now Harlem blacks had
provided something that will pass for an apocalypse until the real thing occurs. It may also feel like a reprimand for James's relief that his father is dead; the older man's tyrannic, paranoid reign over his family had been enough to drive James from home when he was eighteen. Baldwin is also sensitive enough to be relieved that his father's suffering is over. His father was indeed afflicted with clinically diagnosed paranoia and had also contracted tuberculosis. His life ends in a state hospital on Long Island where James visits him on the last day of his life. The young man is shocked to see how the once robust and handsome black man now lies in bed "all shriveled and still, like a little black monkey," tied by tubes to machines that seemed like instruments of torture.

Baldwin characterizes his father's life as a bitter one; raised in New Orleans, the older man fled the South for New York City partly, Baldwin claims, because he was habitually incapable of establishing genuine contact with other people. A man who could not easily touch others' lives or be touched by theirs, the older Baldwin chose a profession for which he was eminently unsuited—the ministry. His career was marked by demotions to ever smaller churches; finally, having driven away all his friends, he ends up alone.

Like many other blacks, James Baldwin's father sought refuge in his religion from the oppressions of the white world. In "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin traces his own conversion to "religion." He chooses—albeit unconsciously—to give his life to the church, for the alternatives are frighteningly clear. Other young men his age are already becoming corrupted by the street life of Harlem which offers
sex, drugs, and violence. During his fourteenth summer, James accompanies a friend to church (not his father's) and there meets its woman pastor. When this imposing, proud, and handsome woman asks him, "Whose little boy are you?" the lonely young man replies in his heart, "Why, yours." Later that summer, during a service in which the same woman is preaching, James falls into a religious ecstasy lasting some hours, at the end of which he knows himself "saved." Soon after, he becomes a junior preacher in that church and embarks on a career lasting three years.

By the time he is finishing high school, James has discovered doubt from his reading (Dostoevsky) and from his friends (agnostic Jews). The simplistic world-view of the church cannot stand up to the questions Baldwin is asking, and he gradually drifts away from it. Looking back, Baldwin realizes that the church as he knew it did not offer the haven or salvation he sought. In fact, he comes to believe that the black church is governed by the same principles that applied in the white churches: Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, "the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the other two." Baldwin also confesses that his motives in becoming saved and in becoming a boy preacher are not wholly pure: to punish his father, he does not preach for his father's denomination, but for another church; additionally, his role as preacher is a way of escaping his father's domination. He quickly becomes a more popular preacher than his father, and his demand for private time for prayer and sermon preparation helps keep his father from constantly interfering in his life. The standoff between the two men ends when
James is in high school: a Jewish friend comes to his house. After he has gone, James's father asks, "Is he a Christian?" When James coldly replies, "No. He's Jewish," his father strikes him across the face, and Baldwin recalls,

everything flooded back—all the hatred and all the fear, and the depth of a merciless resolve to kill my father rather than allow my father to kill me—and I knew that all those sermons and tears and all that repentance and rejoicing had changed nothing.26

His conversion, which has been both a plea for his father's love and an act of rebellion, has not changed the antagonism at the root of the relationship. About a year later, James leaves home, and a year after that, his father is dead.

These few details of Baldwin's relationship with his father help explain his relationship with Richard Wright. Clearly, Baldwin misses paternal affection growing up. In a bid for recognition and acceptance, he becomes a junior version of his father, a boy preacher. Yet this is also an act of assertion; after all, he gets saved in an alien church and ends up competing with the older man. Finally, seeing that no rapprochement is possible, Baldwin leaves home, and after his father's death writes "Notes of a Native Son," an essay in some measure a eulogy (in fact, it closes with a description of the funeral oration delivered over his father) but also an attack on "The most bitter man I have ever met." This man, who could and should have been something, is eaten away by his bitterness against the world until he retreats into paranoia. Baldwin writes,"In my mind's eye I could see him, sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors," and "by the time he died none of
his friends had come to see him for a long time."

The similarities between Baldwin's relationships with his father and with Wright are now startlingly clear. Having been denied acceptance from his biological father, Baldwin looks to Wright; he ventures into Wright's territory, receives early encouragement, but when further help is not forthcoming, turns his literary skill against the "father" who has let him down, just as he has turned his preaching skills against his biological father. After Wright is dead, Baldwin "makes peace" with him just as he has with his own father—both times in essays that express sorrow at the loss of the father while at the same time kicking the corpse. The portraits of Baldwin's father and of Wright in their last years are even alike—two men alone, deserted by friends, wrapped up in their private, unreal worlds. In his attempt to break away from a destructive father-son dynamic, Baldwin manages to involve himself in its recreation in his relationship with Richard Wright, with all the attendant disappointment, anger, and need for revenge.

IV.

In the first part of "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin recounts his conversion and its failure to reconcile him with his preacher father. He continues by tracing his gradual fall away from Christianity and ends with a meditation on the ways that Christianity has failed the black man, noting especially the arrogance of white European Christians in their approach to black Africa, where evangelism and colonization
occurred simultaneously—both to the white man's advantage. He concludes by asserting,

...whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being...must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.27

Baldwin the father-slayer who has taken on his biological and literary fathers here challenges the ultimate paternal power, the white Father-God of Christianity. He, too, has let James Baldwin down: he has failed to keep His part of a bargain that James struck with Him when he became a preacher. The Jesus who would never fail James is permitted to know all the secrets of his heart, but has pledged never to allow James himself to find out those secrets. But, as Baldwin admits, "He failed His bargain. He was a much better Man than I took Him for."28 James apparently wants to exchange his commitment to God for protection from painful self-knowledge, knowledge which he does not explicitly state, but which may have had something to do with his homosexuality, his ongoing hatred of his father, and his ambivalence about white people, black people, and himself—all interrelated issues in his life. Furthermore, James discovers that his Christianity is no answer to life's hard questions; to the contrary, the church seems to avoid such questions because it has no answers. So Baldwin turns away from Christianity and its Father-God, just as he has turned away from his own father, who represents all the worst aspects of the faith.
If Baldwin can dispose of these father figures human and divine, he nevertheless continues to seek them out. In the second part of "The Fire Next Time," Baldwin recounts his meeting with Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Black Muslims. He is invited to dinner at Muhammad's South Chicago mansion. When Muhammad enters the room, James notices that he teases the women "like a father." When Muhammad turns to him, James remembers his encounter with the pastor who asked him, years earlier, "Whose little boy are you?" Elijah Muhammad makes James feel like that young boy again, the young boy seeking a place to belong; but he cannot answer Muhammad as his heart had answered before "because there are some things (not many, alas!) that one cannot do twice." But Muhammad feels like a father to him, a father able to take the burdens from his shoulders. Baldwin notes, "He made me think of my father and me as we might have been if we had been friends." But Elijah Muhammad cannot be a spiritual father to James, however attractive his personality or however appealing his gospel of black racial superiority. The Black Muslims' teachings of racial pride and the rejection of the white man's religion, attractive in themselves, are based upon a doctrine of the origin of the races so bizarre that James cannot accept it. Muhammad offers a faith with a strong emotional appeal but which oversimplifies human relationships. If the white man is the devil, what is Baldwin to make of his own friendships with whites? He knows a few white people to whom he would entrust his life, and isn't love more important than race? James can feel the appeal of Elijah Muhammad and his religion, but he cannot give himself
to it. He rejects the white God of Christianity, as do the Muslims, but finds no father in Allah. His quest for the one who can be his father must continue.

Baldwin's life, finding frequent expression in his essays and (at least) in his first novel, the autobiographical *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, shows absorption in a cluster of related issues centering on unresolved feelings for his various fathers. Like Richard Wright, he tries to dispose of his biological father, and like several of his predecessors in the black autobiographical tradition, he battles against his literary forebears. But no other black autobiographer enters into the struggle with Baldwin's intensity. Furthermore, no earlier writer, not even Wright, has so many father figures of such power arrayed against him. Baldwin's father is a stronger figure than Nathaniel Wright is; therefore, Baldwin's father is more difficult to overcome. Wright's rage against the white world that dominates the black world in so many paternalistic ways is powerfully expressed in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, but Baldwin's work goes farther by expressing the frustration and fear of a black man who is also a homosexual as he faces the white world that hates him not only for his color but also for his sexual preference. Up against such odds, it is little wonder that Baldwin has not been altogether successful in freeing himself from these various paternal influences, a fact he himself recognizes.

In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin writes of his father's bitterness, a bitterness directed against the white world for its brutal oppression of blacks. On the way to his father's burial, passing through Harlem streets ruined by the race riot on the day of
his father's death, Baldwin feels frightened "to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness now was mine." (Emphasis mine) Baldwin fears inheriting his father's bitterness because he senses its destructive power—the smashed windows and looted stores of Lenox Avenue are just two of its manifestations. If bitterness has killed his father, it can also kill him. "Notes of a Native Son" ends with Baldwin's description of the tension which characterizes the lives of so many black people: they must struggle against the hatred which leads to spiritual death but must simultaneously fight with all their might against the injustices that foster hatred. Acceptance of life as it is and the vow to fight life's wrongs are the seemingly contradictory charges laid on the heart of every black man. James Baldwin's father shows him by negative example the consequences of bitterness; now James must strive to free himself from repeating his father's fatal errors.

Baldwin is aware of the legacy of bitterness he inherited from his father, a bitterness resulting in alienation from others and from oneself, and he strived during his life to overcome it. In many places in his essays he expresses his hope for integration—not only of the races, but of the warring parts of the individual personality. The endings of two of his essays written more than twenty years apart show his preoccupation with the theme of unity. At the end of "The Fire Next Time" (1962-63) he writes,

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others—do not falter in our duty
now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.32

In "Here Be Dragons" (1985), which treats the issue of androgyny of all individuals and which also discusses his own hetero- and homosexual involvements, Baldwin asserts that there is always "male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are part of each other."33 This truth, that we must accept the reality of things, has already been shown as one of Baldwin's themes; yet how we handle that reality makes all the difference. When reality leads to bitterness, spiritual disaster results, as it has in the case of Baldwin's father. When differences are accepted and when people work together despite those differences, a new world can be forged. A man may not like having to deal with the warring elements in his own personality or the racial differences in his own neighborhood, but those heterogeneous elements exist, like it or not. Baldwin asserts: "We are part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it."34 The implication is "make the best of it, and perhaps something better can be created." On the other hand, Baldwin does not hesitate to predict disaster if individual lives are not reintegrated and if American culture does not accept its racial diversity. His father's death from bitterness of spirit somehow relates to the Harlem race riot that also resulted from unresolved hatred and frustration. Richard Wright, in Baldwin's judgment, ends up alone and out of touch because he refuses to continue facing the racial
problems of America. The whole thing may well blow up in everyone’s
face if the nation as whole doesn’t act: Baldwin ends “The Fire Next
Time” with a quote from the Negro spiritual that gives him the title
for the piece: “God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the
fire next time!” Baldwin’s ongoing preoccupation with these issues
shows that they remain unresolved for him, or at least that he
realizes the ever-present possibility of giving in to bitterness and of
allowing his troubled personality to break into warring elements.
Being aware of the issues is a step toward solving them, and writing
about them is another act of asserting one’s control. The years have
seen progress in race relationships, but the years have also brought
setbacks and sorrows—the deaths of King, Malcolm X, and others, about
which Baldwin writes at length in “No Name in the Street.” The
apocalypse prefigured by the Harlem race riot on July 29, 1943, the day
of Baldwin’s father’s death, has not yet materialized; but it may still
appear, and James Baldwin’s writing is a cry of warning that unless
Americans reintegrate their lives and their culture, destruction may
yet follow. Far from escaping his fathers’ legacy, Baldwin shouldered
their burden and struggled with the same issues that tormented his own
father and Richard Wright, his literary father. He tried to lay both
ten to rest, but because the conditions that troubled their lives
always existed in Baldwin’s life, the dead again and again rose up to
compel him to wrestle against the bitterness and the anger that marred
their lives.
In writing of his literary relationship with Richard Wright, James Baldwin admits that he used Wright’s work as a springboard into his own. He adds, “this was the greatest tribute I could have paid him.” And then, prophetically, he states, “But it is not an easy tribute to bear and I do not know how I will take it when my time comes.”

Baldwin had occasion to find out how he would take it when, in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver published *Soul On Ice*. That book, a collection of essays and letters with many autobiographical elements, includes a piece on Baldwin—"Notes on a Native Son." In it, Cleaver does to Baldwin what Baldwin did to Wright: he acknowledges his importance and praises his achievement, but then takes away with the other hand twice as much as he gives with the first. In fact, Cleaver’s “notes on” James Baldwin are a sustained attack altogether nastier than anything Baldwin writes about Richard Wright. Yet if one reads Cleaver’s chapter on Baldwin within the context of the rest of *Soul on Ice*, the attack becomes understandable, even inevitable.

*Soul on Ice*, together with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published four years earlier, marks a new militancy in black autobiography. Earlier writers had written passionately of the wrongs inflicted on American blacks and of their smoldering resentments, but Cleaver and Malcolm X sound some new and troubling notes. Gone is an expressed desire that the black man be allowed to take his place in an integrated society; black exclusivism and black nationalism replace integration as a goal. Gone are the pleas for white America to abandon its oppressive policies; the promise of coming revolution and judgment
blots out appeals to the oppressor's conscience. Malcolm X's stridency mellows toward the end of his autobiography, after his pilgrimage to Mecca gives him a new vision of the possibility of the brotherhood of all men, but Soul on Ice, which appears to have been written in a black heat, stands as a direct challenge and threat to white America.

To describe the black man's predicament in America, Soul on Ice creates an elaborate myth of interrelated racial and sexual conflicts in three sections of Soul on Ice: "Lazarus, Come Forth," "The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs," and "The Primeval Mitosis." The villain in the tale is the white man, usually referred to as the "Omnipotent Administrator." This figure controls the nation's wealth and power. He has developed his mind at the expense of his body and is consequently physically weak and effeminate. His greatest crime has been perpetrated against his primary victim, the black male, or "Supermasculine Menial." This black male has been robbed of his mind by the Omnipotent Administrator and has been left with only his body, which he has developed to a high degree. The Supermasculine Menial is the raw muscle power which carries out the designs of the weak-bodied white male. But the white man has taken more than the black man's mind: he has stripped him of his masculine power by depriving him of his penis.

To keep him in his place, the Omnipotent Administrator has castrated the black man by laying claim to black women as his sexual prerogative along with white women. The black man is left to watch, helpless, as the white man rapes his black women. The black woman, or
"Amazon," in his turn loses respect for the black man who cannot protect her. Since her man has been deprived of his mind, she must do the thinking for them both. She must become hard and strong in order to survive, so she ends up losing her femininity and her appeal to the black man. Thus, the sexual relationship between the black man and the black woman is unsatisfying. The black male has access to black women but finds them a threat, so he turns his desire elsewhere. The black woman, for her part, often ends up desiring the white male because she admires his power and his brains. This desire may take on a religious form, manifesting itself in emotional Christianity. The black woman may betray her sexual passion for the white Christ by calling on Him at the moment of her orgasm: "Oh, Jesus, I'm coming!"

The white woman, or the "Ultrafeminine," is the final component in this tortured dynamic. Her white consort secretly despises her because of the ultrafemininity which she has developed to make his effeminacy less noticeable. To hide his aversion, he puts her on a pedestal and makes her an idol. The white woman, treated as an icon and so locked in femininity that she loses touch with her body, constantly runs the risk of frigidity. Her effeminate white partner cannot satisfy her, so she develops a secret yearning for the physical potency of the black male. The Supermasculine Menial desires her in return, for she is the forbidden fruit. Could he possess her, the black man could retain his lost phallus and his lost masculinity. But contact between the black man and the white woman is the ultimate taboo, punishable, for the black man at last, by death. Yet the black man cannot quench his desire for the white woman; desire for her is a sickness in his blood,
a cancer. She is the symbol of freedom, while the black Amazon represents slavery. To be free, to assert his manhood, the black man will risk the consequences of sex with the white woman, even at the cost of his life.

All of the players in this tangled nexus face the frustration of their natural desires. The solution, from the black man’s perspective, lies in his regaining his forfeited mind and penis; he will then be able to provide for his woman and to protect her from the white man. The black woman will then respect her man and desire him, and he will begin to desire her. United at last, the black couple can begin to rebuild the world, recreating it as a kind of African Eden, as described in the last section of Soul on Ice, "To All Black Women, From All Black Men." The fate of the Omnipotent Administrator and his Ultrafeminine consort is not commented on; perhaps they are left to try to reestablish their broken relationship in a world outside Black Paradise.

For Cleaver, then, the predicament of the black American male is intimately tied to his sexuality, or lack of it. Images of castration appear throughout his book; the black man is impotent, a eunuch, and, in his most horrible manifestation, a hanged body, its sexual organs ripped away from a bloody socket. To be desexed is Cleaver’s metaphor for the black man’s place in America; it is his equivalent of the "bondage" motif in the three-part pattern of bondage, flight, and freedom found so often in black autobiography. Actually, Soul on Ice contains the bondage motif explicitly: Cleaver writes from Folsom
prison where he is serving a sentence for rape. The inmates feel themselves castrated because their incarceration prevents their having access to women. Cleaver, like many of the other prisoners, puts up a pinup picture of a white woman in his cell; a guard removes it and destroys it, affronted that a black man should have a white woman’s picture. The guard informs Cleaver that he can have a black pinup, but not a white one. This incident reinforces Cleaver’s sense of impotence, but it also reveals to him the shocking truth that he actually prefers white women to black ones; he has been infected with the sickness of desire for the unattainable white woman.

Cleaver leaves no doubt in his reader’s mind that the imprisoned, castrated black man has but one option if he is to free himself: he must fight. Flight as a possible way to freedom is not even considered; there is nowhere to run, for the white man has invaded every dark-skinned nation. Cleaver himself has ended up in the white man’s prison for asserting his manhood. His rapes have a specific meaning:

Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women—and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge.  

Cleaver deliberately mentions these rapes as a way of shocking and threatening his white readers; he seems to want to confirm what white men supposedly harbor as their greatest racial fear: that black men
actually do desire nothing more than to have sexual intercourse with white women. To assert his manhood, Cleaver defiantly waves his black phallus in the face of the white man and warns, "Watch out, your worst fears can become reality."

The "fight" motif in black autobiography appears in *Soul On Ice* in the image of the boxing ring as well as in the threat of rape. In the section "Lazarus, Come Forth," Cleaver uses the Floyd Patterson-Muhammad Ali fight to illustrate the black man's necessity to fight and to show the white man's fear of his self-assertion. In keeping with his overall theme of the relationship between the races and between the sexes, Cleaver points out how white men, the Omnipotent Administrators, admire black athletes, allowing them to be champions in the arena as long as they are submissive outside it. The black man may use his brawn in sport, but may not assert his manhood in the world. Thus, Floyd Patterson can be a world champion as long as he submits to racism—a cross was burned on his doorstep when he tried to integrate a white neighborhood. He moved soon afterward.

In the Patterson-Ali fight, whites back Patterson because he is tractable; they hate and fear Ali because he is the first "free" black champion ever to confront America. Ali does not subscribe to the white man's values or to his religion. His victory means so much to blacks because they sense in him a man not chained to the white world. The white man likes to think of his black boxers as trained animals, apes who box:

But when the ape breaks away from the leash, beats deadly fists upon his massive chest and starts talking to boot, proclaiming
himself to be the greatest, spouting poetry, and annihilating every gunbearer the white hunter sics on him (the white hunter not being disposed to crawl into the ring himself), a very serious slippage takes place in the white man's self-image--because that by which he defined himself no longer has a recognizable identity. "If that black ape is a man," the white hunter asks himself, "then what am I?"37
The voice calling the black man in America, the Lazarus too long in his tomb, is that of Elijah Muhammad, exhorting the black man to reject the white God, to reject the white world, and to create his own black world in its place. The white world will find it hard to accept the black man who knows he is a man, especially when he is also a Black Muslim and the world heavy-weight champion. But accept him it must:
Swallow it--or throw the whole bit up, and hope in the convulsions of your guts, America, you can vomit out the poisons of hate which have led you to a dead end in this valley of the shadow of death.38
If the white world finds Muhammad Ali a bitter pill to swallow, how much more will it hate and fear Malcolm X, the spokesman for the Black Muslims, a man who combines in himself the assertive masculinity of Ali with a creative, rebellious intelligence? Cleaver includes a chapter describing his reactions to the death of Malcolm X. He expresses the outrage felt by millions of blacks at the death of such a strong figure and acknowledges the satisfaction that his removal will surely bring to whites and to many blacks ("the bootlickers, Uncle Toms, lackeys, and stooges") who play up to the white power structure.
Cleaver quotes from Ossie Davis’s eulogy for Malcolm, where Davis declares, “Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood!” Malcolm is held up as a symbol of the fight for black freedom, as is Muhammad Ali. Malcolm may be dead, but what he symbolizes lives, and others will take up the fight. Cleaver closes his meditation on Malcolm X with another threat: “We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it.” This warning is repeated in explicit detail further on in Soul on Ice, where a friend of Cleaver, presumably a man who shares his imprisonment, declares,

... the day is here when I will march into the Mississippi legislature with a blazing machine gun in my hands and a pocketful of grenades. Since I will be going to die, I definitely will be going to kill.

This hostility toward whites may not be completely new in black writers, but Cleaver’s way of relishing the prospect of violence (the same character who fantasizes about executing the Mississippi legislature also has a desire to drink deeply from the white man’s blood) is new, joined as it is to the black man’s avowed willingness to die even as he brings whites down with him. Soul On Ice asserts, “I will fight—and die” in a voice stronger than any we have yet heard among black autobiographers.

Although Soul On Ice spends most of its force decrying the plight of the bound and castrated black male and threatening the bloody havoc he will wreak when he finally claims his freedom and his manhood, Cleaver is able to imagine another world, which he describes in his
final chapter. He leaves it to us to puzzle out how the black man will fight his revolution, how he will reclaim his missing parts, and how he will reforge the ties that bind him to his black woman. But by a leap of imagination, his and ours, he sets us down in a new paradise where the restored black man greets his woman whom he hails as "Queen--Mother--My Eternal Love." He is the Lazarus returned from the dead, no longer impotent, very much repossessed of his Balls (as he puts it), ready at last to protect his woman, to look her in the eyes, to be her lover. His exhortation to her ends, "But put on your crown, my Queen, and we will build a New City on these ruins." Curiously, this last chapter seems overblown and trivial compared to the weight of what has preceded it; Cleaver does an excellent job at conveying the black man's torment and his hatred, and he can deliver his threats as powerfully as any writer, but his inability or disinclination to seriously confront how freedom can be obtained (will there be any world left after the bloodbath he envisions, or any black men left to love in it?) makes his dream of endless love with his black goddess sound too easily won.

VI.

When we realize that the potency of the black male is, for Cleaver, the lost commodity that must be reclaimed if the black man is to win his freedom, Cleaver's antipathy for James Baldwin becomes understandable. In "Notes on a Native Son" Cleaver berates Baldwin for criticizing Richard Wright, for hating blacks, and for loving whites,
but lying beneath these criticisms is Baldwin's "sin" that Cleaver cannot forgive--his homosexuality.

Because James Baldwin offers a less-than-flattering opinion of the Conference of Negro-African Writers and Artists (Paris, 1956) in his essay "Princes and Powers" and because he writes in another place, "I despised blacks because they didn't produce a Rembrandt," Eldridge Cleaver reaches the remarkable conclusion that Baldwin harbors a deep, intense hatred for his race and a concomitant adoration of whites:

There is in James Baldwin's work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in writing of any black American writer of note in our time.42

This opinion, which can be reached only by a vigorous misreading of Baldwin's work as a whole, and which one critic dismisses out of hand as so absurd as to warrant no serious discussion, is nevertheless congruent with Cleaver's world view.43 His militant, pro-black racism compels him to glorify all things black, to vilify those who dare to criticize anything and anyone black, and to suspect any expression of liking, let alone of loving, anyone white. James Baldwin, whose artistic vision is far more complex than Cleaver's, both feels and expresses the tensions he experiences as a black man in white America; he could not agree with the Black Muslims' opinion that all whites are devils because he has loved some white people who have loved him and have treated him in undevilish ways. Baldwin also can express his frustration at the ways blacks sometimes behave and at their racial
failings. Cleaver, however, to establish his own political and artistic space, makes a break with the "militant" tradition in black autobiography in which Baldwin stands, one "trained and rooted in a tradition of ideas and maintaining a reasonable tension between moral complexity and political imperative . . . ." But in so doing, he traps himself in a world view so constricting that it leads him to utter some of the absurdities we find in Soul On Ice. As Jervis Anderson notes,

 His vision is so narrow and racially determined that it is incapable of accommodating the tragic sense or of displaying any interest in what we are used to calling the sadness and ambiguity of the human condition.  

James Baldwin can express both the sadness and ambiguity at the heart of the American racial situation, and for that, Cleaver excoriates him; as we shall see, however, Cleaver himself is also involved in such ambiguities but seems blind to them.

According to Eldridge Cleaver, James Baldwin's crimes do not stop with hating blacks and loving whites. He is also guilty of betraying and killing Richard Wright. Although Baldwin believes his disagreement with Wright is over literary matters, Cleaver claims to have discovered the true cause of the quarrel: Baldwin, the homosexual, hates and fears Wright's masculinity, which Wright also pours into his characters. To escape the threat he feels from the strongly heterosexual Wright, Baldwin strikes at him in a weak moment, calling into question the older writer's artistic vision in order to disguise his true goal of revenging himself on Wright for being a real man.
Once again, Cleaver's simplistic world view, this time manifest in his insistence that sexuality is the single, underlying force behind all human activity and interaction, leads him into a critical position that, while it probably touches on one aspect of the Wright-Baldwin relationship, doggedly ignores other, more important dynamics.

A similar, equally willful interpretive approach appears when Cleaver discusses Baldwin's work. Although Cleaver never asserts it in so many words, he appears to claim that James Baldwin's characters express the personality and desires of their creator. In comparing Baldwin's *Another Country* and Wright's *Native Son*, Cleaver asks of Baldwin

... isn't it true that Rufus Scott, the weak, craven-hearted ghost of *Another Country*, bears the same relation to Bigger Thomas of *Native Son*, the black rebel of the ghetto and a man, as you yourself bore to the fallen giant, Richard Wright, a rebel and a man?46

By calling Bigger Thomas and Richard Wright "rebels" and "men," Cleaver connects the two; he thereby also suggests that Rufus Scott and James Baldwin stand in the same kind of relationship. Later, he quotes Baldwin's words to his nephew concerning white people in the introduction to "The Fire Next Time": "you must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope."

Immediately thereafter Cleaver turns to Rufus Scott, the hero of *Another Country*, describing his relationship with whites, as if Scott represents Baldwin's belief about how the black man's love for the white man should be expressed. Rufus Scott, in his sexual confusion

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and self-hatred, allows a white man to perform anal intercourse on him. Cleaver suggests that Baldwin loves white men by permitting them to use him as Scott’s white lover used Scott. Here we arrive at the center of Cleaver’s aversion for Baldwin: for Cleaver, the identity and power of the black man are rooted in his sexuality, in possessing a penis and using it on other people, ideally on the black woman. The black phallus means freedom, racial pride, and self-assertion. The antithesis of the heterosexual black male is the homosexual black male who instead of giving his penis to a woman, receives the penis of a white man, thereby humiliating himself both as a black and as a man. Because James Baldwin admits to being a homosexual, acknowledges that he loves whites, and peoples his novels with characters who supposedly reflect his own problems, he is, in Cleaver’s opinion, unfit to be a spokesman for the black race. To Cleaver, homosexuality is a sickness, “just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors.”47 Unless the black race can cast off this sickness and reestablish its true racial identity symbolized by the potent, heterosexual male, its oppression will continue and worsen. To prevent that, James Baldwin and what he represents must be cleared away.

Just as Baldwin tries to tame Richard Wright, the powerful father figure standing in the way of his self-assertion, so Eldridge Cleaver deals with Baldwin in “Notes on a Native Son.” But Baldwin is no father figure to Cleaver, for he is made to represent all that the dominant masculine figure is not. Yet he still threatens Cleaver’s world view, just as homosexuals threaten a particular class of super-masculine men. The homosexual male complicates a narrow view of
relationships that cannot tolerate or acknowledge the complexity of human needs and desires which find expression in many ways. To the homophobic Cleaver, Baldwin is doubly damned for revealing breaks in the walls of both male and black solidarity. For his crimes, he is punished just as homosexuals have long been punished: he is hunted down and beaten up by a gang of macho heterosexuals on the prowl. This time, the "gang" is Eldridge Cleaver, and his weapons are not fists but words; Cleaver's attack on Baldwin is even more unfair than Baldwin's attack on Wright, for the punches are almost all "below the belt."

Cleaver's interpretive techniques are flawed, his arguments ad hominem, and his assumptions erroneous, but "punk hunting," as he calls it, has never been fair. Cleaver lives up to the tradition.

_Soul On Ice_ expresses myths of race and human sexuality in which black writers like James Baldwin can only be seen as aberrations; consequently, they must be demeaned and silenced if racial and sexual justice are to be reestablished. Ironically, though, Eldridge Cleaver cannot see that his book itself exposes him as a more complex figure than his mythic identity as supermasculine black male would suggest.

We have seen that the final chapter of _Soul On Ice_, "To All Black Women, From All Black Men," describes a black paradise in which the black man and the black woman will come together in mutual love and respect. Yet human relationships are more complicated than this edenic vision suggests: Cleaver's own life illustrates this very point. The same book that ends with a panegyric on the love between the black man and the black woman also contains an exchange of love letters between Cleaver and his lawyer, Beverly Axelrod, who, according to my
research, is white, although Cleaver never says so. The book’s dedication, in fact, reads "To Beverly, with whom I share the ultimate of love." Were they to discover Beverly Axelrod’s race, the "All Black Women" whom Cleaver addresses in the final chapter of his book would have to wonder what he is doing pouring out his love to this woman who, although she is herself a radical, on the side of blacks, and dedicated to revolution and liberation, is, nevertheless, white. Baldwin is faulted for loving whites; how does Cleaver account for his devotion to Beverly Axelrod? He acknowledges that all prisoners feel a high regard for their lawyers who represent their cause and fight for their freedom. Not all prisoners, however, have women lawyers as Cleaver does, so most do not have to distinguish between regard and love. Cleaver claims, however, that what he feels is more than gratitude—he is in love. The ways of the heart remain mysterious, all the same; two years after his exchange of letters with Beverly Axelrod, in which he writes "Ours is one for the books, for the poets to draw new inspiration from, one to silence the cynics, and one to humble us by reminding us of how little we know about human beings,"48 Eldridge Cleaver married Kathleen Neal, a black woman. Perhaps he thereby fulfilled the ideal of "To All Black Women, from All Black Men," but readers of Soul On Ice will always be reminded that Eldridge Cleaver, for a while at least, was prone to more complications of the heart than even he could comprehend.
Notes, Chapter 4


2Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 22.


6Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 42.


8These details of Baldwin's early relationship with Wright are from "Alas, Poor Richard." Fred L. Standley has chronicled the personal and literary relationship between the two men in a succinct and useful article which also summarizes the secondary material on their literary feud. See "'... Farther and Farther Apart'": Richard Wright and James Baldwin," in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, Yoshinobu Hakutani, ed., (Boston, G.K. Hall and Co., 1982), pp. 91-103.

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Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," pp. 285-6. Baldwin's words proved prophetic: Eldridge Cleaver levels some of the same charges against Baldwin in his chapter "Notes of a Native Son" in Soul On Ice. Cleaver charges that Baldwin hates blacks and that he is unmanly.


Charney, p. 67.


Hernton, p. 112.

21Hernton, p. 112-3.
22Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 128.
24Baldwin uses this experience as the center of his first, obviously autobiographical novel, Go Tell It On The Mountain.
30Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," pp. 678 ff. In this essay Baldwin expresses his bafflement at whites who one minute were harassing him in a group and the next minute individually begging him to have sex with them.
31Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 129.
33Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," p. 690.
34Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," p. 690.
37Cleaver, Soul On Ice, p. 94.
38Cleaver, Soul On Ice, p. 96.
39Cleaver, Soul On Ice, p. 61.
40Cleaver, Soul On Ice, pp. 174-5.
42Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, p. 99. Baldwin accuses Wright of the same thing; see note 14, p. 194. Whether they believe the change to be true or not, these writers seem to use it as the worst they can think to say about another black man.


44Anderson, p. 68.

45Anderson, p. 69.

46Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, p. 106.

47Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, p. 110.

48Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, p. 149.
CHAPTER FIVE

Introduction

Like the works that precede it, The Autobiography of Malcolm X records a struggle for freedom. Originally conceived as a conventional conversion story, the Autobiography, even in its final form, can be viewed as the chronicle of a sinful soul’s flight from the bondage of sin to the freedom of true faith through spiritual rebirth. Additionally, Malcolm traces his struggle to free himself from the dominance of a powerful father figure, thereby repeating an Oedipal theme that by now appears pervasive in black autobiography. First intended as a paean to Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm’s “savior,” The Autobiography of Malcolm X turns out to record Malcolm’s fight for intellectual and emotional independence and to trace his quest to think for himself and to be himself. Bondage, flight, and freedom may be the most pervasive pattern in black autobiography, but the creation of a free self, a self unconstrained by the likes of a white master, a domineering father, a strong predecessor in the literary tradition, or a charismatic spiritual leader, is doubtless the most important theme in black autobiography. Black autobiography is a revolutionary act: the assertion of the ego against all “others” in the world; as such, it exemplifies in a striking way a central theme in all autobiography, the creation of a free, autobiographical “I” that is identified with, yet distinct from, the writer himself.

Black autobiography well illustrates the establishment of the free “I” as a dominant theme in autobiography through its use of images of its protagonists’ bondage, flight, and freedom to describe the journey
of individuation that every man and woman is challenged to undertake. The Autobiography of Malcolm X is unique in black autobiography, for it reveals how that autobiographical "I" is conceived and how it changes as the autobiographer writes his story. Alex Haley, Malcolm's collaborator, furnishes an illuminating account of the genesis of the work and of the changes both in Malcolm X and in his autobiographical "I" as the work was written. Haley's Epilogue to the work stands as an integral part of it; as such, it offers something missing in other autobiographies—a third-party perspective on the process through which an autobiographer constructs his autobiographical self. Of course, Haley is hardly a disinterested spectator, for he had a hand in the creation of the Malcolm of the Autobiography; nevertheless, his ultimately distinct viewpoint allows us to see a changing Malcolm X revise both the stated purpose of his life story as well as the character of its protagonist. Additionally, Haley's Epilogue, written after Malcolm's assassination, gives the Autobiography a sense of closure on a life—a feeling missing in other autobiographies which must, by their nature, end before their writers' deaths. For all these reasons, The Autobiography of Malcolm X fittingly concludes this study.

I.

A publisher who had read Alex Haley's interview with Malcolm X before it appeared in the May 1963 issue of Playboy first had the idea for an autobiography of the outspoken leader of the Nation of Islam, popularly known as the Black Muslims. Taken with the idea, Haley proposed it to Malcolm early in 1963, and after Elijah Muhammad gave
his approval, Malcolm and Haley began the series of conversations that eventually produced the autobiography. As Paul John Eakin notes, Malcolm originally conceived the work as a standard conversion story, relating how he, a sinner, was saved and given new life by Elijah Muhammad, the man who became his mentor and spiritual father. The Autobiography was thus to stand in the “exemplary life” genre, pointing the way for other lost souls to find salvation. As such, it was to take a two-part pattern: the first detailing Malcolm’s downward descent into ever-greater degradation, the second tracing his ascent through his acceptance of Muhammad’s doctrine. Both the original purpose and pattern of the autobiography are implied in its first dedication, which Malcolm X handed to Haley the day the contract for the work was signed. This dedication, later discarded, seems to have been Malcolm’s way of letting Haley know from the outset that the active agent in the autobiography would be Elijah Muhammad; Malcolm (and, by extension, all blacks who followed his example) would be the passive recipient of Muhammad’s bounty. That dedication reads:

This book I dedicate to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who found me here in America in the muck and mire of the filthiest civilization and society on this earth, and pulled me out, cleaned me up, and stood me on my feet, and made me the man that I am today.4

In crediting Elijah Muhammad with saving him and remaking his personality into what he at the time considered its preordained, final form, Malcolm was unconsciously thwarting the true purpose of every autobiographer—to create a self through the act of autobiography. A
popularly held notion supposes that the autobiographer must first
discover the shape of his life and then write his life on the basis of
that discovery; the living of the life precedes the writing of it. At
first, Malcolm held to this misconception that his life had already
reached its ultimate form, not through his own doing, but through the
ministrations of Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm thus sought both to abdicate
responsibility for having shaped his life through the living of it and
to relinquish the privilege of creating a life through the writing of
it. All the credit was to go to Elijah Muhammad who had somehow taken
both that burden and that power into himself.

It is little wonder, then, that the composing of the *Autobiography*
got off to a poor start. In his Epilogue, Haley mentions Malcolm's
distrust, grounded in the suspicion that Haley was working for the
F.B.I. More to the point, however, was Malcolm's determination to make
the work a piece of Black Muslim propaganda. Haley recalls, "He would
bristle when I tried to urge him that the proposed book was his life"; that, of course, was what Malcolm did not want the book to be: his
life. It was to be the story of how another man, Elijah Muhammad, had
fashioned a life for him to live.

By comparing the writing of the autobiography to the process of
psychoanalysis, Eugene V. Wolfenstein offers another explanation for
the difficulties Malcolm and Haley initially experienced. Wolfenstein
sees Haley in the role of analyst whose purpose it was to help Malcolm
break through an unquestioning devotion to Elijah Muhammad so that his
"true" self could surface. Eakin suggests something similar by calling
Haley the "lure" that brought the suppressed "counterrevolutionary"
Malcolm into the open. To extend the metaphor, we might say that the early difficulties of writing the autobiography were the result of the patient's distrust of and lack of rapport with his analyst. Wolfenstein compares Malcolm to the patient who consciously agrees to psychoanalysis but then resists free association of any ideas that he finds morally unacceptable. More will be said about the relationship between Haley and Malcolm and that relationship's importance in the shaping of the Autobiography; first we will discuss some of the circumstances that broke the two men's initial impasse.

II.

Malcolm's dedication of the Autobiography lauded Elijah Muhammad for virtually saving his life, and Malcolm's first sessions with Alex Haley were, as Haley notes, "Almost nothing but Black Muslim philosophy, praise of Mr. Muhammad, and the 'evils' of 'the white devil.'" Although Malcolm presented a front of unswerving loyalty to Muhammad in those early meetings with Haley, causing Haley to despair of ever getting any material that would make a readable book, events had already been working before 1963 to breach Malcolm's defenses and allow a different self to emerge.

The break between Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X was probably inevitable, for reasons that appear obvious today. Muhammad gave Malcolm the wings to fly from a life of crime and despair to a position of influence and power. In gratitude, Malcolm long afterward proclaimed and lived the gospel of the Nation of Islam, seeking to minimize his own growing fame while trying to magnify the man whom he adored. Yet no amount of abnegation could hide Malcolm's high
visibility in the press and public eye; his oratorical gifts and
electric personality made him much more sought after as a speaker than
was Elijah Muhammad. Envy arose within the Nation; like any popular,
powerful leader, Malcolm had enemies among those less highly favored.
Finally, Mr. Muhammad himself seems to have become prey to jealousy;
even the idea of Malcolm's autobiography may have pained the older man,
although he consented to it. After all, it was Malcolm, not Muhammad
himself, who had been asked to tell his life story. Ironically, the
work that was intended to praise Muhammad probably contributed to the
break between him and Malcolm and, consequently, to Malcolm's
reassessment of both Muhammad's character and his own.

Malcolm says in the autobiography that he first noted in 1961
criticism from other high-ranking members in the Nation of Islam. By
1962, he was being slighted in Muhammad Speaks, the Nation's official
newspaper, and criticism increased the following year. Whatever
tensions such treatment caused Malcolm X were exacerbated when he
heard—from Muhammad himself—that persistent rumors of "the Prophet's"
adulteries with various of his private secretaries were true. Malcolm
received this confirmation from Muhammad in April, 1963; the news
became public in July. Malcolm had lived according to Elijah
Muhammad's strict laws of sexual purity; it stunned him to learn that
the Prophet had not practiced his own teaching. Worse, Muhammad
expressed no remorse but told Malcolm that as the "reincarnation" of
various Old Testament figures, he was bound to repeat their sinful
deeds.
Peter Goldman, one of Malcolm's biographers, suggests that Malcolm's peers in the Nation of Islam generally underestimated the depth of his shock at hearing of Muhammad's sins. Malcolm had built his new life upon an unquestioning acceptance of Muhammad's message as divinely inspired; Malcolm himself said toward the end of his life that learning of Muhammad's sins was the beginning of the collapse of his own faith.13

As Malcolm's doubts grew, Muhammad and his inner circle in the Nation were at the same time actively looking for a way to oust him from power. Malcolm unwittingly gave his enemies the excuse they needed with one ill-considered remark. Speaking at a Muslim rally in New York City a week after Kennedy's assassination, Malcolm called the President's death a case of "the chickens coming home to roost." The press quickly picked up on the statement, and it made national headlines. Muhammad immediately silenced Malcolm for a period of ninety days as an act of discipline and as a means of distancing the Nation of Islam from an unpopular sentiment voiced amidst national grief over the death of a popular leader.

Malcolm's silencing was the beginning of the end of his relationship with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Although Malcolm put on a brave public front, submitting humbly to his humiliation and confessing his bad judgment in the remark about Kennedy, he was inwardly furious.14 Then, shortly afterward, he first heard that his death had been ordered, and as he expresses it in the Autobiography, "any death talk for me could have been approved of—if not actually initiated—by only one man."15 Elijah Muhammad, once
Malcolm's savior, was now an enemy who, as Malcolm believed, desired his death.

Against these events of 1963, The Autobiography of Malcolm X took shape. Although Malcolm's conscious loyalty to Muhammad was still intact when he began working with Haley, the seeds of doubt had been sown. After Malcolm's silencing, it was clear that the original tone and direction of the autobiography had to be changed, but the breakthrough Haley had hoped for had already occurred some time earlier.

One night (the date must be in early or mid-1963), Malcolm arrived at Haley's apartment exhausted and angry. After Malcolm had delivered a two-hour tirade against black leaders who criticized Elijah Muhammad, Haley calmly asked him to talk about his mother. The request broke through a wall that had stood between the two men, and all the rest of that evening, Malcolm poured out the story of his early life. His words formed the basis for the first two chapters of the autobiography.

What happened that night to shatter Malcolm's defenses? He had begun the autobiography determined to make it not his own story, but Elijah Muhammad's, yet when his faith in Muhammad was shaken, Malcolm was freed to face his own traumatic past. Haley speculates that Malcolm was so tired that night that "his defenses were vulnerable." He calls Malcolm's talking that night "stream-of-consciousness reminiscing." Wolfenstein offers a thoroughgoing psychoanalytic explanation of why a question about Malcolm's mother undammed the stream of personal recollection. Whatever the reason, the plan of the autobiography began to change that night; the events of the latter
part of 1963 changed the direction even more than Malcolm or Haley could have predicted. What began as a tribute to a virtually omnipotent father figure ended up as genuine autobiography: the delineation of the development of a free self.

After Malcolm and Haley had their "breakthrough" evening, the autobiography began to emerge as Malcolm's story. His adulation of Elijah Muhammad was secure enough at first, however, that the accounts of his early years with the Nation of Islam sounded very much as Malcolm had originally intended them to. Even though his faith in Muhammad was gradually being eroded by what he was learning about the Prophet's private life, Malcolm dictated the autobiography as if he were still a completely loyal devotee of the man who had saved him. But as the rift between Muhammad and Malcolm widened, Haley began to worry lest Malcolm go back through the chapters of the autobiography and drastically edit them in the light of his new disillusionment. His fear was realized after Malcolm's return from Mecca in the late spring of 1964. Malcolm returned chapters of the autobiography Haley had sent him for approval extensively blue-pencilled wherever he had discussed his close relationship with Muhammad. Malcolm had previously promised Haley that the chapters about his early relationship with Elijah Muhammad would stand as originally written, despite recent changes in his feelings. Reminding Malcolm of that promise, Haley recalls, "I stressed that if those chapters contained such telegraphing to readers of what would lie ahead, then the book would automatically be robbed of some of its building suspense and drama." Although Malcolm first resented Haley's caveat, he soon agreed that the early
chapters should stand pretty much as written. In final form, they do recount Malcolm's early devotion to Muhammad with only a few hints of his later disappointment.

Haley's journalistic savvy rescued *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* at two crucial points: first, Haley realized before Malcolm did that the autobiography had to be his story if it were to appeal to a mass audience. Haley's initial pushing to get Malcolm beyond the Nation of Islam rhetoric to personal reminiscence is explained by this understanding that most readers were uninterested in a whole book devoted to nothing but Black Muslim propaganda. A deeper insight into the nature of genuine autobiography seems to be revealed, however, in Haley's contention that it would ruin the autobiography if Malcolm were to rewrite the story of his earlier life in light of his later, changed feelings. Although he does not articulate it, Haley may have sensed that the autobiographer, in creating the autobiographical "I," must in a way pretend not to know all that he knows about the self he is creating. Even though the autobiographer has the advantage of standing at an end point looking back over the journey that has brought him to his present position, he must suppress his knowledge of the shape of his life as a whole in order to show how the self he is creating gradually develops and changes. If Malcolm had rewritten his life as a Black Muslim by including parenthetical comments indicating his later knowledge of the flaws in Elijah Muhammad's character or by claiming that he had been deceived and only later learned the truth, he would have robbed the narrative of its suspense, as Haley feared. Additionally, he would have bypassed a crucial stage in the development
of his autobiographical self. In order to tell the truth about the
growth of the autobiographical "I," the autobiographer must lie--
pretending he does not know at every point what will come next in the
narrative and how his subject will change. Fortunately, The
Autobiography of Malcolm X, which examines the formation and
abandonment of one self after another, is preserved by Haley's
contention--and Malcolm X's concurrence--that later realizations had to be withheld until the appropriate moment. If Haley had not alerted us to this decision that he and Malcolm made together, we might still detect how Malcolm, like all other true autobiographers, had to suppress the insights and emotions of his current self in order to reveal his earlier selves in proper order. Haley's Epilogue, however, gives us an unparalleled insight into the decisions autobiographers must make.

III.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X successfully portrays the growth of Malcolm, who is identified with and yet is distinct from the Malcolm X who narrated his life story to Alex Haley. The autobiographers' awareness that they are tracing Malcolm through a series of identities which are developed, lived in for a time, and then discarded as the self continues to metamorphose is shown in the titles for several of the autobiography's chapters. Malcolm, is, by turns, "Homeboy," "Detroit Red," "Satan," and "Minister Malcolm X." His genius lies in his ability to leave an identity behind when it no longer fits his changing personality. Early in his life, for example, after his family has disintegrated and he has been placed in a school for troubled boys,
Malcolm enjoys great success as the only black boy in an all-white junior high school. Talented in sports and academics, he soon becomes a leader and is elected class president. But Malcolm discards this "house nigger" identity when a teacher lets him know that despite his popularity in the white community, he can never aspire to anything more than carpentry—a trade "fit" for blacks. His desire to be a lawyer is unrealistic. Some young men would have been content with the degree of comfort Malcolm had attained, but Malcolm will not be constrained by the restrictions of the white world. Soon he leaves Michigan for Boston, and so undertakes his first act of self-assertion; the world has tried to keep him in an unthreatening position, but Malcolm will not be a kept man. He leaves Michigan and his identity as "Mascot," the token black in a white community, to find a new identity in a strange place.

The first part of the autobiography follows Malcolm as he assumes one identity after another. In Boston, he becomes known as "Homeboy" because of his unsophisticated clothing and hair style. Malcolm soon remakes himself, however, adopting first the straight hair considered attractive among young black men, then buying outlandish clothing to match his straightened hair, a "conk." He refashions his values, too, learning quickly how to get along through petty hustling—buying alcohol and condoms for his shoeshine customers at the Roseland Ballroom. When Malcolm moves to Harlem, "Homeboy" disappears and "Detroit Red" takes his place, a more serious hustler who makes money pimpling and running a numbers racket. Soon he adds burglary to his crimes. Malcolm is finally caught and tried for heading a robbery ring.
and is sentenced to ten years in prison, where he assumes yet another identity, "Satan," the hate-filled, blasphemous inmate. When Malcolm hits bottom, he is ready for another transformation—this time one to reverse the downward spiral that characterizes his previous lives. Hearing about Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam from his brothers brings about the conversion Malcolm has needed and gives him a new life as a follower of Muhammad.

Malcolm's various identities in the first part of his autobiography share some interesting similarities. In many of them, we see contempt for authority mixed with a fascination for it. Malcolm's early experiences with whites lead him to distrust and dislike them, yet by conking his hair, he tries to make himself look more like a white man. His various hustles are acts of rebellion against the white-controlled power structure, but "Detroit Red" ironically applies the work ethic of the white world as he toils day and night to make a dishonest living. Without realizing it, Malcolm adopts the values and practices of the dominant culture he professes to despise.

Malcolm's identities are also characterized by the extreme degree to which he carried them: he conks as faithfully as any black man he knows, and his zoot suits are the most outrageous money can buy. When Malcolm, in his "Detroit Red" phrase, devotes himself to crime, he works harder at his calling than any other hustler he knows; when he winds up in prison, as "Satan" he screams and curses more violently than any other prisoner.

Malcolm X looks back over his early identities and notes their emptiness. He seeks to be an individual, but he actually is not very
different from many other young black men of the times whose lives were just as aimless as his. The conked and zoot-suited hipster is a type, as is the petty hustler; although each character comes to life in the Autobiography, we are meant to see how inauthentic, how un-individual each figure is. When Malcolm X began working with Alex Haley, he wanted to show Haley, the world, and himself that his real life began when he was converted to the Nation of Islam. His pre-conversion selves were, to him, necessary steps on his road to the moment of salvation, but not embodiments of Malcolm's "genuine" self. That true self was called into being, Malcolm X once believed, when Elijah Muhammad's message reached Malcolm/Satan in prison.

As we have noted, Malcolm X first imagined his autobiography in two parts, pre- and post-conversion, with the real Malcolm emerging when he embraces the faith of the Nation of Islam. When he was first approached by Haley with the idea for the work, Malcolm X was still living comfortably enough in the latest of his identities, "Minister Malcolm X," that he could portray himself as a faithful adherent to Elijah Muhammad. Early in 1963 he did not imagine that by the year's end he would be cut adrift from the Nation and from the identity in which he had lived for twelve years.

Of all the roles Malcolm X ever abandoned, that of Minister of the Nation of Islam was the most painful to leave behind, for in it he had found what he had lacked since the death of his father: a relationship of love and trust with another man. Critics have discussed at length the various dynamics at work in Malcolm X which led to his surrendering of his life to Muhammad and his teachings; Malcolm X himself describes
the event in language common to many conversion narratives. Although the Nation of Islam proclaimed Allah as its God, Elijah Muhammad became, at the least, a physical embodiment of Allah for Malcolm, and this is how the Malcolm of the autobiography responds to him.

When Malcolm embraces the teachings of Muhammad, he assumes a new identity that he believes is the authentic self he has been seeking. Still, this new self repeats patterns of behavior we have already encountered. To become a Black Muslim is to undertake an act of rejection of the white world and its values; through that act, Malcolm reasserts his own earlier rejection of such a world. Additionally, Malcolm embraces his new identity with the same dedication he has given to earlier selves: just as he had been the best two-bit hustler in Boston and the hardest working con man in New York, now he becomes the most self-disciplined and loyal Black Muslim ever to follow Elijah Muhammad. Despite the radical quality of Black Muslim rhetoric and its demands for strict separation from the corrupt white world, many of the Nation's teachings about personal morality, economic success, and social organization mirror the values of the white world. By accepting the Muslims' social program, Malcolm repeats his earlier practice of mimicking the white culture he believes he is rejecting.

IV.

We cannot say for certain how The Autobiography of Malcolm X would have turned out had Malcolm not been ousted from the Nation of Islam. We can speculate, however, that the work would have followed the typical conversion form while expressing its author's naive assumptions about autobiography. Malcolm X would have seen his life as a series of
false identities predestined to give way one after another until his true self emerged through the process of conversion. He would have told his life story from the perspective of the autobiographer who assumes he can write about his life coherently because that life has been lived and has reached its final form by the time of his writing. If Malcolm X had still been safely positioned in his identity as Minister of the Nation of Islam, he could not have imagined that either he or his autobiographical self would undergo any further metamorphoses. Having attained his life's preordained goal, he could not--indeed, would have no need to--change further. This, I imagine, resembles the way Malcolm X thought when he and Haley first began working together. The dedication of the autobiography and his initial conversations with Haley substantiate this view of his life and autobiography. According to the plan of the standard conversion narrative, the saved sinner, having attained his life's goal, has nothing further to report. Malcolm X would therefore probably have ended his autobiography shortly after recounting his conversion and explaining fully the doctrines and demands of the Nation of Islam. Of Malcolm, there would be nothing more to tell, for that self would no longer exist independently but would be subsumed into the body of the Nation. If we cast this hypothetical autobiography into the three-part pattern, its narration of Malcolm's early years of degradation would correspond to the bondage section, his experience of conversion to flight, and his life as a Minister of the Nation to the blissful experience of freedom. But as we have noted, Malcolm's dismissal from the Nation ended the possibility that his autobiography could follow
such a standard format, just as Haley’s question about his mother had earlier broken down his determination that the work would not be his own story. Two visions for the autobiography had to be abandoned because of changes in Malcolm’s own life during the time of its writing. Now the third and final form of the work could emerge.

Malcolm X believed for years that in Elijah Muhammad he had found not only his savior but his freedom. He threw himself into his work as Minister Malcolm X with a zest and dedication that were characteristic of him. Muhammad’s word was truth, and like a true believer, Malcolm X preached that word tirelessly and selflessly. Yet, as Peter Goldman notes, Malcolm X came to chafe under aspects of Muslim doctrine even before he learned of Muhammad’s adulteries. The Nation’s bitter denunciations of the white world were not linked to any program of action to secure equality for blacks, but Malcolm longed to be involved in the struggle for civil rights, if not for integration. Additionally, Malcolm X became disillusioned with the changing mood within the Nation itself. Once the Nation had established itself economically, some of its leaders fell prey to the temptation to take advantage of the material comforts the Nation could provide them. In his dedication to an austere Islamic life style, Malcolm came to out-Muhammad Muhammad himself and deplored the lowering of the values upon which the Nation had been built.

Malcolm’s break with the Prophet was in some ways yet another repetition of a pattern he had lived through before. As a teenager, he had for a time accepted the values of the white world and had achieved a measure of success within it; only when he realized that the culture
of such a world would forever limit his opportunities did he break free from it. In the same way, Malcolm lived in the world of the Nation of Islam for years, but finally began to realize that both he and the Nation were changing in ways that might no longer permit him to live within its constraining boundaries. Although Malcolm was forced from the Nation, he might well have eventually left it of his own initiative and discovered another calling had not the necessity of such a change been thrust upon him.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X ends up recording not Malcolm's eternal union with the Black Muslims, but his separation from them—an event which took its authors and their work by surprise. What had been planned as a conversion story with a predictable outcome now had to be changed again because the autobiographer and the life he was shaping were both overtaken by unforeseen events during the act of writing. Consequently, when the reader reaches the chapter titled "Out," he realizes that Malcolm X's "conversion" autobiography is not really a typical example of that genre at all; the hints Malcolm X and Haley put into the text earlier prove to be accurate: the autobiography, which began as a conversion narrative, takes a turn and ends up as the story of Malcolm's struggle to be free from the dominance of his godlike father figure, Elijah Muhammad.

At first, Malcolm regards Muhammad as the replacement of his own father, Earl Little, who had been killed by white racists when Malcolm was six. For more than a decade, Malcolm accepts Muhammad as the purveyor of divine truth, a man he worships and for whom he would gladly give his life. But when Muhammad's other side is revealed to
Malcolm—the adulteries, the deceptions, the jealousy, and the determination to protect his self-interest—Malcolm's attitude must change if he is to save his own life. Acceptance of Muhammad's teachings gives way to questioning; trust turns to doubt, and adoration to disappointment. As Malcolm X expresses it:

... after twelve years of never thinking for as much as five minutes about myself, I became able finally to muster the nerve, and the strength, to start facing the facts, to think for myself.²²

The Malcolm who has served Elijah Muhammad so faithfully has not, it turns out, really found his freedom in the Nation of Islam. By accepting the tenets of the faith, he has given up his freedom of thought; what is more, he has given up the right to his own life. Now he reclaims it.

Malcolm's words, "I became able ... to think for myself," recall words W.E.B. Du Bois puts into the mouths of the "bumptious, irritated, young black intelligentsia" of his own day when their ideas collide with those of Booker T. Washington, the "official voice" of black America: "'I don't care a damn what Booker Washington thinks! This is what I think, and I have a right to think.' "²³ The realization that one can and must think for himself links the Malcolm of The Autobiography of Malcolm X not only with Du Bois and the blacks seeking freedom from the stifling influence of Booker T. Washington, but also with Frederick Douglass in his struggle to learn to read and write, skills which unlock the world of ideas. The ability to think for himself sets Richard, the protagonist of Black Boy, against both
the white and black cultures in which he grows up and makes the book the story of his growth as a young artist. When James Baldwin understands that he can have his own artistic opinions, he attacks the literary values of Richard Wright; the same dynamic causes Eldridge Cleaver to reject Baldwin. Malcolm also begins to think for himself, and so joins the other autobiographical selves we have studied.

Unlike Douglass and Wright, who are never at peace with their worlds until they find their freedom (and not altogether, even then), Malcolm lives comfortably for a time in his various worlds before his own growing awareness forces him to strike out for new territory. Malcolm enjoys a longer period of good relations with a father figure than does any other autobiographer in this tradition, but when the break with that father figure occurs, the trauma, as detailed in his autobiography, is as painful as any we have examined, even James Baldwin's break with Richard Wright.

About his break with Muhammad, Malcolm writes:

I was in a state of emotional shock. I was like someone who for twelve years had had an inseparable, beautiful marriage—and then suddenly one morning at breakfast the marriage partner had thrust across the table some divorce papers.

I felt as though something in nature had failed, like the sun, or the stars.24

The shock Malcolm feels at being cut off from the Nation of Islam sets the struggle with his father figure apart from the other father-son conflicts we have encountered. Other autobiographers write of themselves as instigators of the conflict: Douglass rebels against the
paternalistic slave society by standing up to Covey and then by running away; Du Bois fights Washington with his books and then by organizing the Niagara Movement and the NAACP; Wright fights both black and white Southern culture and then flees to the North. These autobiographers are not surprised by their separation from paternal power because they have long hated that power and desired to be free of it. Even Baldwin, whose love for Richard Wright resembles Malcolm's devotion to Muhammad, comes to realize that he initiated the break with Wright and should not have been surprised by Wright's furious reaction to "Everybody's Protest Novel." Malcolm alone appears not to have been looking for a fight; it is little wonder that he feels the world falling apart when he learns, in quick succession, that he is "divorced" from his surrogate father and that this same father has probably ordered his death. Malcolm, who planned to live out his life in his identity as Minister Malcolm X, secure in his relationship as adopted son and heir to Muhammad, instead finds himself once more in a position of spiritual chaos similar to that which he had experienced in prison before he was first found by the Nation.

So after twelve years as Minister Malcolm X, Malcolm finds himself a spiritual orphan. Realizing his old self no longer exists, he undertakes a quest for a new identity and for a new father. At this point in the Autobiography, the true pattern of Malcolm's life finally becomes clear. Malcolm's journey to Mecca and his discoveries there reveal, at last, that his life is not a chronicle of a self trying out various avatars and discarding them until the "true" one is finally discovered, after which the fulfilled self can live contentedly every
after. Instead, _The Autobiography of Malcolm X_ traces the open-ended journey of a changing self stopped only by death. Malcolm's life story cannot be cast into the standard conversion genre he originally believed to express the shape of his life, and so the autobiography finally reflects "The vision of a man whose swiftly unfolding career has outstripped the possibilities of the traditional autobiography he had meant to write." Malcolm's life, as he himself states, turns out to be above all one of changes.

Although Alex Haley notes in his Epilogue that anger filled Malcolm X in the days after his ouster from the Black Muslims, Malcolm himself expresses little overt rage against Elijah Muhammad in the autobiography. His reaction is more one of bewilderment, hurt, and betrayal than of fury. Malcolm in no way glosses over Muhammad's sins, presenting the Prophet as a man capable of adultery, deceit, and execution, but personal hatred is absent. Strangely enough, Malcolm seems never to have lost his love for Muhammad, even when betrayed. Charles Kenyatta, Malcolm's friend and associate, claimed, "Malcolm loved Elijah Muhammad better than his own sons loved him. . . He never wanted to move away. If Elijah had come up to him five minutes before he got shot, Malcolm would have gone back." But there was no going back. In fairly short order, Malcolm realizes this fact, accepts it, and with characteristic resilience, moves on.

V.

Malcolm X says little in his autobiography about his motives for wanting to make the pilgrimage to Mecca beyond stating that the hajj is a religious obligation for every Muslim at least once during his life.
The timing of his journey, however—about four months after his dismissal from the Black Muslims—explains a great deal. Just as Malcolm was ready for a new life and identity when he was converted to Islam in prison, so he is now prepared for another self to emerge. Indeed, having been so brutally wrenched away from one identity, Malcolm must find a new center for his life.

According to his description, Malcolm’s hajj strips away the remnants of an old identity and gives birth to a new one. Taken out of his normal surroundings, stripped of his customary clothing, garbed in the white diaper-like loincloth of the pilgrim, and deprived of his powers of communication because he does not speak Arabic, Malcolm resembles a newborn baby. He describes how he must learn the unfamiliar rituals of Muslim prayer and purification, much as a child must learn the appropriate practices of his culture. Malcolm also details the important relational breakthrough he experiences while in Saudi Arabia. Complications with his travel papers compel him to remain at the Jedda airport while authorities decide whether he will be allowed to proceed to Mecca. While awaiting such permission, Malcolm remembers the name of a prominent Saudi family given him by a friend in America. Once he contacts this family, they take him in hand, treat him like visiting royalty, and smooth the way for him to enjoy preferential treatment during the rest of his visit. Significantly, this family is white. For the first time in many years, Malcolm is put in a position in which he must trust whites. Impressed by their friendliness and unable to detect in them any trace of racism, Malcolm
gives them his trust. Through this act and through witnessing Muslims from every race and nation worshipping in harmony at Mecca, Malcolm takes a great step in thinking for himself. He comes to see that all whites are not the "devils" Black Muslim rhetoric declares them to be; he realizes that race war and race separation are not the only alternatives for black and white Americans. At Mecca, Malcolm's new self begins to emerge; the fatherhood of Elijah Muhammad is replaced by the fatherhood of Allah, and the brotherhood of the Nation of Islam by the "Oneness of Man under One God." Just as Malcolm Little had changed his name to Malcolm X when a new self was born, so now Malcolm X gives way to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the new name identifying the new self.

Critics disagree about the extent of the revision in Malcolm X's thinking about racial issues after his return from Mecca, but they agree that some changes did occur. The Malcolm of the autobiography expresses changes in his thought primarily through the imagery of expansion: he comes to see the solidarity of American blacks with African blacks, and he admits that there are some whites who want to help end racism. The New Malcolm is more inclined to look at each person individually and not to make blanket judgments as Minister Malcolm X had done. During the last months of his life, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz works to create the Organization of Afro-American Unity, as a way, one suspects, to give substance to his new vision and as a means to provide himself with meaningful work. A sense of urgency pervades the post-Mecca chapters of the autobiography, for this last Malcolm, like the earlier ones, holds on to the conviction that he will die
young. In the final chapter, he expresses in brief what might serve as a fitting summary of the lives which together form his life:

Anything I do today, I regard as urgent. No man is given but so much time to accomplish whatever is his life’s work. My life in particular never has stayed fixed in one position for very long. You have seen how throughout my life, I have often known unexpected drastic changes.²⁷

VI.

Malcolm X and Alex Haley completed the autobiography not long before Malcolm’s assassination on February 21, 1965. Malcolm had given his approval for the drafts of the latter chapters, so the book as it stands bears his imprimatur. The main text ends with its author still alive and so possesses the openendedness of all incomplete lives. Additionally, as we have seen, Malcolm’s autobiography demonstrates little of the naivete of certain other life writings that assume an autobiographer can achieve final perspective on his life; as such, his work is quite unlike standard conversion narratives. Paradoxically, though, The Autobiography of Malcolm X does possess a feeling of closure not present in any other work in the genre.

Alex Haley’s Epilogue today stands as an integral part of the Autobiography. When the work was begun, Malcolm gave Haley permission to write and afterword not subject to his approval. Haley did compose such a piece, although his freedom to include in it whatever he chose resulted more from Malcolm’s death than from the two men’s initial agreement. Had Malcolm not died, Haley would probably have written of his reactions to Malcolm’s life and to the message of the Nation of
Islam. Instead, Haley was given the opportunity to write about
Malcolm's last days, his assassination and funeral, and to summarize
his life.

As we have noted, the Epilogue furnishes information about how the
autobiography was actually composed. During many lengthy sessions,
Malcolm would talk about his life, and Haley would take notes. Haley
also got into the habit of leaving scraps of paper about the room so
that Malcolm could scribble on them. Some of those dashed-off notes
reveal feelings Malcolm could not articulate even to Haley. At the
time of Malcolm's silencing, for example, Haley discovered two notes
Malcolm had scrawled during one of their sessions: "You have not
converted a man because you have silenced him. John Viscount Morley,"
and "I was going downhill until he [Elijah Muhammad] picked me up, but
the more I think of it, we picked each other up." Using his own
notes and some of Malcolm's, Haley would compose chapters of the work,
then submit them to Malcolm.

The collaborative effort between Malcolm and Haley that produced
the Autobiography inevitably raises questions about Haley's role in the
production of the work. Since, as we have noted, all autobiography
unavoidably fictionalizes a life to a greater or lesser extent, we must
ask to what extent Malcolm's story is fictionalized and what part Haley
played in shaping the Malcolm who is the protagonist of the work.

I believe, first of all, that The Autobiography of Malcolm X is
indeed more Malcolm's book than it is Haley's. Haley scrupulously
allowed Malcolm to approve each chapter of the work. When it appeared
that Malcolm would reedit the sections dealing with his relationship to
Elijah Muhammad, Haley questioned the decision. Malcolm retorted, "Whose book is this?" and Haley conceded, "yours, of course."

Fortunately, Malcolm reversed his decision and allowed the chapters to stand as originally written, but one receives the impression that they would have been changed if Malcolm had so desired.

Granted that Malcolm had control over the autobiography, we must next ask to what extent the work is an accurate representation of his life. Since its publication, the autobiography has assumed a kind of canonical status, much like that afforded to Up From Slavery at the turn of the century. No biography of Malcolm X has appeared and been accorded general recognition as the standard account of his life; the Autobiography seems, by its overwhelming aura of authority, to have prevented anyone from challenging its preeminence by attempting a definitive biography. Here, a comparison with the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., proves instructive. King has been the subject of numerous biographies since his death; it might be argued that he merits so many because his fame and influence were so great—even greater than Malcolm's. The absence of a King autobiography, however, might also account for the large number of biographies. A strong autobiography, as we have seen, tends to cast its protagonist in the role of father figure to be overcome by later generations. It might be that Malcolm is still so intimidating a figure (actually, he has become something of a cult figure since his death) that his image to this day daunts the would-be biographer who would seek to retell his life.

Although the definitive biography of Malcolm remains to be written, critics have investigated Malcolm's past. Peter Goldman
looked into Malcolm's years as a Harlem hustler but was unable to establish contact with any of his former associates. He notes that the journalist Ted Poston had made a similar effort while Malcolm was still alive, with disappointing results. Only one man remembered Malcolm, and he deflated Malcolm's claims to have been a fairly important criminal. Goldman concludes that while Malcolm may exaggerate his past a bit, portraying himself as worse than he was, the degradation he describes is genuine enough. That Goldman believes the Malcolm of the Autobiography is an accurate representation of the man Malcolm X is also borne out by his frequent recourse to the work as source in his own book, which itself is meticulously researched. Eugene Wolfenstein also finds the autobiography to be a faithful portrayal of Malcolm X's life, for several reasons. He notes:

Was Malcolm representing himself accurately? Was Alex Haley, his biographical amanuensis, representing him accurately? From a purely empirical standpoint, I believe the answer to both questions is generally affirmative. Throughout the Autobiography, there is clear and self-consciously drawn distinction between fact and opinion. Furthermore, both men had a passion for accuracy and order, as is evident in Haley's epilogue as well as in the body of the text. Finally, and I think most convincingly, the relationship of Haley and the process of self-reflection this involved were integral parts of Malcolm's personal evolution. By permitting him to develop a knowledge of himself as a distinct individual, they were instrumental in helping to free him from his unquestioning devotion to Elijah Muhammad. It is extremely

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unlikely that such a process of individuation could have been premised upon major falsification of the life-historical record. I agree with Goldman and Wolfenstein that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is, by and large, both factually and emotionally true to Malcolm's life, and that, therefore, while the Malcolm of the work is to be distinguished from Malcolm X his creator, he nevertheless bears an extremely close resemblance to him. Haley's role in the writing of the autobiography was not, then, to help Malcolm misrepresent himself, nor did he act as an "agent of truth" that prevented Malcolm from extensively fictionalizing his life. Moreover, Haley did not consciously or unconsciously seek to impose his own voice over Malcolm's, but reproduces Malcolm's voice in the work so that the autobiographical self has his own authentic tone and personality.

How, then, did Haley figure into the production of the autobiography? He played a part more important than of assuring or hindering its factual accuracy—not the most important issue in autobiography, anyway. Through instinctive awareness that the work had to be Malcolm's life story, Haley made the first crucial contribution by prompting Malcolm X to talk about himself, not about Muhammad and the Nation of Islam exclusively. Second, and perhaps even more important, Haley, by his very involvement with Malcolm's life during its tumultuous last two years, helped Malcolm move from dependence and unquestioning trust in Muhammad to a trust of himself and of other people. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Malcolm told Haley, "I don't completely trust anyone...not even myself...Other people I trust from not at all to highly, like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad."
... You I trust about twenty-five percent." 32 But after Haley got Malcolm talking about his past, Malcolm never again, according to Haley's account, hesitated to tell him "even the most intimate details of his personal life." 33 Malcolm's trust in Haley obviously grew during the months that followed, for later Haley was awakened in the night by a call from Malcolm with the terse pronouncement, "I trust you seventy percent." The relationship between Malcolm and Haley may be described according to the patient-therapist model, as Eakin and Wolfenstein suggest, or as a growth of mutual respect and friendship, as Haley writes of it in his Epilogue. However that relationship is characterized, though, it helped Malcolm to change during the difficult time of his ouster from the Nation of Islam, and it figures as the clearest example I know of an autobiographer's changing because he writes his life story.

The dedication of the Autobiography that replaces the original tribute to Elijah Muhammad perhaps best summarizes the transformation in Malcolm X between the time the work was first conceived and its final realization. The new wording reads: "This book I dedicate to my beloved wife Betty and our children whose understanding and whose sacrifices made it possible for me to do my work." Such an expression of affection for a woman and an acknowledgement of dependence on her is a far cry from the adulatory yet rather distant praise of Muhammad first prepared for the text. Malcolm here acknowledges his own family and thereby signifies that his relationship to his wife and children has replaced his sonship to Muhammad as the most important in his life. The Malcolm who appears at the end of the autobiography and the Malcolm
X who rewrites its dedication are both warmer and more human than the guarded, dogmatic figure who was first approached by Haley. Haley helped create this more attractive man, not by applying his skill as a writer and editor to the manuscript of the book, but by being a friend. That Haley was touched by Malcolm is also apparent in the tone of the Epilogue and is summarized in its closing paragraph:

After signing the contract for this book, Malcolm X looked at me hard. "A writer is what I want, not an interpreter." I tried to be a dispassionate chronicler. But he was the most electric personality I have ever met, and I still can't quite conceive him dead. It still feels to me as if he has just gone into some next chapter, to be written by historians. Haley's Epilogue is the element which gives The Autobiography of Malcolm X, a radically open-ended work, its feeling of closure. Once the autobiographical voice of Malcolm is stilled at the end of the chapter titled "1965," Haley takes over as Malcolm's biographer, or rather as his thanatographer, for the Epilogue deals at length with Malcolm's assassination and funeral. Through it, we are shown the end of Malcolm's story—the increasingly tense final days and a Malcolm who seemed to have, at last, run out of ways to escape his doom. A friend of Malcolm's told Peter Goldman, "Malcolm wanted to die." Goldman reacts, "One could not easily imagine a man so alive embracing death. Yet the desperation of those days finally did seem to push him past caring, and if he did not want to die, he was too spent to run from death any longer."
The evidence does suggest that Malcolm was reaching the end of his resources, but he had been at such a place before; had he not been gunned down, one can imagine him rising phoenix-like into still another identity. Of all the lives treated in this book, Malcolm's seems the one which ended most prematurely. Douglass and Du Bois lived to ripe ages and enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing their work for freedom bear much fruit; Washington actually seems to have outlived his time—and the appreciation of his countrymen. Wright and Baldwin produced their best work early in their careers and were both in artistic decline at their deaths. Cleaver still lives, but has produced nothing remotely equal to *Soul on Ice* in the twenty years since its publication. Only Malcolm died with his promise unfulfilled, a fact which adds poignancy to the sense of finality that Haley's Epilogue stamps on the *Autobiography*. Yet the work as a whole does not end simply with Malcolm's death, for the Epilogue, which is a biographical summation of his life, is, at the same time, an autobiographical excerpt from the life of Alex Haley. As Haley pays tribute to Malcolm's influence on him, he shows how Malcolm, although dead, lives on. Ossie Davis's remarks about Malcolm, appended after the Epilogue, do the same thing. Death brings closure to the life of Malcolm X as lived by Malcolm X, but his autobiography, a work both open-ended and closed, ultimately concludes with life, for Malcolm and his ideas live in Haley and in thousands of others whose stories are not yet come to their end.

In the last twenty years, Afro-American autobiographies have proliferated. The Civil Rights Movement reawakened interest in black
life and culture among both black and white Americans, and this renaissance sparked an interest in all kinds of writing by and about blacks. Since the early 1960's, black autobiographies have fallen by and large into two categories: "success" stories written by sports and entertainment figures and intended for the mass market, and works by men and women involved in the equal rights struggle, designed to show that the fight for freedom is an unfinished one. None of these recent autobiographies, however, equals Black Boy, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, or even Soul On Ice. Some do possess exceptional interest: for example, Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi, the best of the civil rights autobiographies, captures the feeling of the divided South of the 1950's and '60's and powerfully expresses the relentless fear and pressure felt by civil rights workers. Bobby Seale's A Lonely Rage portrays his troubled youth so vividly that the reader easily understands how Seale and men like him came to create the Black Panther Party. James Farmer's Lay Bare the Heart tells the story of his deep involvement in the fight for equal rights from the earliest days of the struggle, furnishing first-hand recollection of the freedom rides and of the imprisonment of hundreds of the riders in southern prisons. Yet for all their merits, these works and many others like them somehow lack essential qualities that make great autobiography. Missing are Wright's intensity and narrative drive, Malcolm X's ability to record the growth of an autobiographical self, and Cleaver's originality of expression. This is not to say, though, that productive study might not be done on such texts, but the critic will realize that they are intrinsically less interesting than many earlier works in the black
autobiographical tradition. Feminist criticism, particularly of autobiographical works by black women like Moody and Maya Angelou, continues to locate important patterns and ideas, but such studies lie outside the scope of this paper. For these reasons, this study of individual work ends with The Autobiography of Malcolm X. I shall conclude with a general discussion of black autobiography and its relationship to Afro-American culture, to American autobiography, and to autobiography as a whole.

Autobiographers produce works that reflect the cultures in which they are born and grow to maturity. Although American culture might be viewed as so multifarious as to defy characterization, a distinctively "American" autobiography is nevertheless recognized and studied. Black American culture, although by no means homogeneous, is more unified than American culture as a whole, and its influence upon black autobiography is more readily apparent than "American" culture's impact upon American autobiography. Despite black autobiographers' inevitable fictionalizing, occasional exaggerations, and even rarer deliberate untruths, the genre, by and large, accurately reflects the black American life and culture that have helped shape it. In so doing, it exhibits one of the qualities of autobiography that makes it so fascinating: as one critic expresses it, "autobiography is always something other and more, something other and less than literature and it inevitably shows a tension between its straining on the one hand toward literature, on the other hand toward history." As it reflects black history and culture in America, black autobiography shows its
supraliterary side, for so read it resembles both history and sociology. The student of Afro-American culture will find in black autobiography an excellent source of insight into virtually every facet of black life.

As the critic of black autobiography reads the many texts in the genre, he discovers that similar events recur many times. Although the autobiographies produced among any people cannot be said to speak authoritatively of the entire group's experience, one suspects that incidents recurring repeatedly in those autobiographies probably represent a reality common to many within that group. This is true of black autobiography, which for all of its variety, creates a collective suprapersonal self that gathers the lives of numerous individuals into one life expressing truth even for those who have not themselves lived that truth in all its details. Among these key events in black autobiography, I note four which illustrate some of the bitter realities and personal imperatives of black American life over the course of many years.

The first of these events (or realizations, for each centers on a moment of awareness) concerns the discovery of racial identity. In Black Boy Richard Wright recalls a childhood train trip to Arkansas. As Richard notices the separate ticket windows and train cars for blacks and whites, there arises in him "A sense of the two races . . . that would never die until I died." The black child's realization that he is black occurs at a pivotal moment in many autobiographies, often accompanied by the second key event, one seen in Wright's reminiscence—the understanding that being black means relegation to
second-class status in a white-dominated world. In _Lay Bare the Heart_, James Farmer recalls that he first grasped his blackness during a trip to town with his mother. James, a young child, becomes thirsty and asks for a Coca Cola. Although she has the nickel to buy him one, his mother cannot, for no place in town will serve blacks. When James sees a white child drinking a soft drink in a store he cannot enter, he begins to realize the unfairness of his situation.

Related to the black child's awareness that his race automatically deprives him of respect as a person is his realization that whites, by and large, seem to have easier and better lives than blacks simply because they are white. Anne Moody recalls her mother's dragging her from the whites-only lobby of a movie theater and forcing her into the blacks-only balcony. Later, as she plays with her white friends, young Anne sees them in a new way:

Now all of a sudden they were white, and their whiteness made them better than me. I now realized that not only were they better than me because they were white, but everything they owned and everything connected with them was better than what was available to me. I hadn't realized before that downstairs in the movies was any better than upstairs. But now I saw that it was.39

Experiences similar to these reported by Wright, Farmer, and Moody occur in nearly every autobiography we have treated: in Douglass's as the youthful Frederick notes the discrepancy between the impoverished lives of blacks and the wealth of the slave-owning families; in Du Bois's when he recounts being socially rebuffed in school because of his color, in Malcolm X's as he tells how his junior high school
teacher offers "friendly advice" about his unrealistic hope of becoming a lawyer. This communal experience of prejudice, whether overt or covert, finds expression in most black autobiographies.

A third key realization repeatedly mentioned in black autobiographies concerns their protagonists' determination, at some point in their lives, to fight against the oppressive forces aligned against them. Douglass's battle with Covey stands, as we have noted, as perhaps the prototypical event of all black autobiography, serving as a rallying point for every person who must establish his identity through an act of resistance. Du Bois recalls the moment he decides to devote himself to the promotion of black rights through organized propaganda. As Wright tells his childhood, his life from its beginning is marked by violent conflict with whites, first by rock and bottle fights between his black gang and its white opponents. Anne Moody, who spends years working in the non-violent struggle for civil rights led by Martin Luther King, Jr., finally determines to change her stance. In an angry "prayer," she tells God, "As long as I live, I'll never be beaten by a white man again. Not like in Woolworth's. Not any more, That's out. You know something else God? Nonviolence is out." Even autobiographers who record no particular moment in which they determine to resist nevertheless detail lives spent battling oppression. Booker T. Washington, the least overtly aggressive of autobiographers, still devotes his life fighting for the black man in his own way. Baldwin fights with words, Cleaver sees his rapes as insurrectionary acts, Seale forms the Black Panther Party, and Malcolm X gives the most productive years of his life to the Nation of Islam. Without
exception, these autobiographers tell of selves devoted to waging the battle against the oppression of blacks.

The fourth event so often recorded in black autobiography is the writer's realization of the importance of education. Douglass recounts how he learned to read and write despite his master's strictures; Washington tells how he walked to Hampton Institute and cleaned the room to gain admittance. Wright recalls how Richard obtained books from the whites-only public library, and Malcolm X explains at length the process by which he educates himself in prison, even to the detailing of how he copies the entire dictionary longhand. Explicitly or implicitly, these writers and others stress education as the means by which one enters the world of ideas, the way one can know the truth about oneself and one's place in the world. Knowledge strengthens the individual in his fight against oppression and enables him to rise in the world. Learning thus helps counteract the disadvantages which often inhere in being born black in America.

Other important moments in black life could be culled from black autobiography, but these stand out because they form a cluster of experiences which decisively shape the personalities of autobiographers who have been leaders among black Americans. Given the determination to fight oppression by men and women who have achieved leadership in black America by virtue of their involvement in politics, education, or literature, the course of black history as one marked by the recurrent struggle for freedom has always been inevitable.

Although the critic can more easily argue the influence of history and culture upon autobiography, the impact of the genre upon the world
in which it is produced can also be demonstrated, particularly black autobiography's part in shaping American history and how America has regarded her black citizens. Douglass's *Narrative* and other slave autobiographies contributed to the tensions between North and South that resulted in the Civil War. Not only did these works shock the nation by their accounts of the horrors of slavery, but they also demonstrated that slaves were as fully human as any other men and were capable of education. A half century later, *Up From Slavery* helped lull a fearful America into believing that blacks would be content with unskilled labor and would press for full social equality with whites only slowly—if ever. Some historians would assert that this one book did more to slow black Americans' fight for civil rights than any other. More recently, *Black Boy* alerted the country to the resentments and alienation just below the surface of many black Americans' lives, and just a little more than twenty years ago, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* frightened many white Americans and galvanized blacks into deliberate action. Bobby Seale recounts, for example, that Malcolm's work helped inspire the Black Panthers and was customarily read as a kind of sacred text at Panther meetings.

Black autobiography, then, not only reflects the conditions under which its writers have lived for the last one hundred fifty years but also has helped shape their history. Moreover, the black autobiographer, frequently locked in struggle with the preceding texts of the tradition is, in at least some cases, combatting those texts because they have helped create conditions which the autobiographer finds intolerable. Du Bois's hostility to *Up From Slavery* lies not
only in his antipathy to the ideas it expresses but also in the constricting circumstances of his own life which he believes the earlier book's philosophy has helped perpetuate. For some of these writers, the battle is more than literary because the literature they dislike has power to mold their lives. By writing their own life stories, these autobiographers seek to establish their own identities, but they also intend to expose what they perceive as flaws in their predecessors' world views and to recreate the world for themselves and for those who follow them.

VIII.

Black autobiography reflects black American life and has helped shape America's perception of black culture. The relationship of black autobiography to American autobiography in general—that is, to a tradition created primarily by white males—is somewhat different. First, it displays what John Adams called the "instinct of emulation": some black writers pattern their lives on those of certain white Americans, imitating precepts for success and carrying them to a degree greater than that found in their models. Second, black autobiography expresses the underside of the American dream by voicing "that fundamental, continuing contradiction in America between the idea of freedom and human fulfillment and the reality of oppression, conformity, and mean narrowness of spirit." These contradictory impulses express the dilemma felt by so many black Americans--to live in America but never to share fully in the promise.
of America because the potentially fortunate accident of being born American is outweighed by the real problems of being born black.

We have seen that Booker T. Washington and Malcolm X are attracted to the prescriptions for success in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Washington deliberately sets out to portray his autobiographical self as a latter-day, black Franklin whose goals of personal improvement and civic service mirror the ideals of the Founding Father. On the other hand, Malcolm X's imitation of Franklin is probably unconscious: so determined are he and the Muslims to separate themselves from the prevailing white culture that they would hardly set out to conform themselves to the precepts of a man instrumental in shaping that culture. Nevertheless, the Muslims' preoccupation with rigorous standards of personal conduct and with success through diligent work demonstrates the attraction of the American dream even upon those determined to reject it.

Whereas some black autobiographers imitate, knowingly or not, the model of American life created by a white, colonial society, many others reject that model, particularly in its debased forms. The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* for example, despite its Franklinesque ideals, is famous for its attack on oppressive white society, not for any unconscious imitation of that society. *Black Boy* centers on Richard's rebellion against white oppression and his attempt to flee it; *Soul on Ice* not only savages racist America but also predicts its overthrow and the rise of a cleansed black society from its rubble. In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois tries to give shape to black values that, while
dismissed by the dominant white world, are nevertheless in many ways superior to its confused standards.

But whether black autobiographers accept in part the cultural standards and traditions of white America or reject them in toto, black autobiography nevertheless recognizes the pervasiveness of such traditions and must deal with their reality. Accordingly, black autobiography has long been and still is a literature of reaction. As such, it well expresses the lives of many, if not most, black Americans, who have had to accommodate themselves to living as a distinct minority in a nation which has been primarily white by virtue of numbers alone, if not by cultural domination.

The black autobiographers' sense of creating a literature of reaction may ultimately account for the Oedipal theme that recurs in so many of their works. Surely it is more than coincidence that black autobiographers as a group have suffered from hostile relationships with their fathers or father figures; instead, their experience exemplifies a phenomenon in black American culture long troubling to both blacks and whites. The irresponsible or absent black father has achieved notoriety as a type scorned by some as representative of "what is wrong" with black culture and blamed by others as the cause of the breakdown of the black family. This stereotype of the inadequate father represents only some black American men, of course; however, study and experience show that this figure is prevalent enough to give the stereotype some validity. Many whites who are eager to blame black culture for creating this "bad black father" are unwilling to acknowledge that white American culture has played as large, if not
larger, a part in making some black men unable to care properly for their wives and children. Always preferring to blame its victims, white culture balks at acknowledging its role in creating weak men like Nathaniel Wright or obnoxiously dominating fathers like James Baldwin's who lord it over their families to compensate for feeling ineffectual in every other aspect of their lives. Never given opportunity to learn how to be men, these individuals are doomed to fail both as fathers themselves and as examples to their sons. Consequently, the problem is handed down among black males from generation to generation.

Black autobiographers, then, are striking out not only against the individuals who fathered them—individuals all too often absent, or if present, bitter, abusive, and irresponsible—but also against the paternalistic white culture that has, as Wright and Cleaver remind us, prevented blacks from becoming real men. According to the Oedipal model, the son displaces the father to gain access to the mother; by attacking their own fathers, it seems that black autobiographers actually seek to destroy a power structure dominated by white males. If this could be accomplished, the maternal figure, America itself, could then nourish black men with her promise of equal rights, equal justice, and equal opportunity. The black man’s Oedipal longings are directed toward his own nation; this dura mater, or harsh mother, can become his alma mater, or fostering mother, only when the blocking father figure, the white man, is removed. But because overt rebellion against whites has traditionally brought punishment and death to the black man, he has found it safer to strike at the white man through one
of his creatures, the black father. It is true that black writers have fearlessly excoriated white culture in recent years, but they have also long directed a great deal of their pent-up rage and frustration against other blacks as well. Black autobiographers have sensed that even their own fathers have been used to keep them from realizing their dreams; this being so, their fathers must be robbed of their power so that their sons may become true men.

Since the time of the first slave narratives, black Americans who write their lives have been asserting this right to exist as men and not as chattel; these autobiographers have, through the act of writing, emerged from the "invisibility" so long imposed upon them. Georges Gusdorf writes, "The man who recounts himself is himself searching his self through history; he is not engaged in an objective and disinterested pursuit but in a work of personal justification."43 "Personal justification" well expresses the purpose of so much black autobiography, for black autobiographers have long had to overcome a double anxiety. First they must conquer the universal self-disesteem which periodically calls into question our sense that we have the right to exist let alone write our life stories. But besides this, black autobiographers must overcome challenges directed against them individually as well as against the black race in general—challenges against their personhood, their self-worth, their conviction that they belong as fully to and in America as any other people. If it is true that "every life, even in spite of the most brilliant successes, knows itself inwardly botched," how difficult it must be for the victims of discrimination to assert their claim to a full share of life's
privileges. Two voices tell them that they have failed: the inner voice in every person that accuses him of his shortcomings and the voice of the repressive society that blames him for being born black. Black autobiography seeks to drown out both voices with the establishment of a third voice, the autobiographer's own, which asserts over and over again, "I am a human being, and I am worthy to enjoy what America has promised and still promises to all her people: the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

In writing their autobiographies, black authors assert their right to be, a right often claimed in the face of opposition of every sort. Black autobiography thus expresses more eloquently than many other bodies of life writing both the drive to lay claim to one's own life by the writing of it as well as the difficulties that stand in the way of such self-invention. Every autobiographer is to some extent a rebel raising the flag of independence in the face of all the forces that seek to define and restrict his sense of himself. Some autobiographers—Edmund Gosse in Father and Son, for example—openly assume an insurrectionary role; others, spiritual autobiographers like Augustine, Bunyan, and Newman, stress instead the process by which their lives become less rebellious and more and more conformed to God's will. Yet even these writers are asserting their individuality as they trace the dealings of God with one of his children. To claim "I am what I am by the grace of God" is still to say, "I am what I am."

The need to recognize how this "I am" came to be is the impetus behind the autobiographical endeavor. Black autobiography adds to our understanding of this endeavor by stressing again and again what a
struggle it is to become the self one believes he or she is meant to be, and what obstacles lie in the path of self-fulfillment. Black autobiography contributes to American letters through its insistence that we look honestly at the uncomfortable realities of our history, but its importance reaches beyond any such parochial concerns. The issues raised in black autobiography are universal, for they center, ultimately, on questions of identity, the growth of the self, and the establishment of that self in the face of all others. Black autobiographers take their place in the human family not only because they claim the same rights and privileges all people desire for themselves, but because they have the questions, anxieties, and aspirations common to us all.
Notes, Chapter 5

1 Alex Haley, Epilogue to The Autobiography of Malcolm X, by Malcolm X. (New York: Grove Press, 1964, 1965), Thirteenth Printing, p. 392. I notice that pagination in this edition differs from pagination of earlier Grove printings used by other critics. Malcolm X had given Haley permission to write an Afterword not subject to his review, as was the autobiography itself.


3 Eakin, p. 183.

4 The Autobiography of Malcolm X, p. 392. This work will be referred to as Autobiography in subsequent notes.

5 Eakin, p. 183.

6 Autobiography, p. 394.


8 Eakin, p. 190.

9 Wolfenstein, p. 287.

10 Autobiography, p. 393.

11 Historians of Malcolm's life and of the Black Muslims are united in their view that Malcolm did almost worship Elijah Muhammad and strove for a long time to live the role of selfless adherent of his teachings. See Peter Goldman, The Death and Life of Malcolm X (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 48, 89-90, and also Wolfenstein, pp.
Goldman details more than Malcolm himself does the process of gradual disillusionment Malcolm experienced. He also notes Malcolm's very human enjoyment of his public role, a dynamic downplayed in the Autobiography. See Goldman, p. 112.

1'2Autobiography, p. 294.
14See Autobiography, p. 409, where Haley notes his awareness of Malcolm's suppressed rage. See also Goldman p. 123 ff. for a detailed recollection of the events of these days.
17Autobiography, p. 416.
19For a detailed psychoanalytical approach to the process, see Wolfenstein, p. 214 ff.
20Ohmann discusses this at length in her article.
21Goldman, pp. 92, 107, 124.
22Autobiography, p. 310.
25Eakin, p. 188.
26Goldman, p. 123.
29 Goldman, p. 31.

30 Goldman, pp. 32-3.

31 Wolfenstein, p. 37. Note that Wolfenstein calls Haley a biographical amanuensis, not an autobiographical one. This may reveal his unconscious view that the work is at least quasi-biographical because of Haley's role in helping write it.

32 Autobiography, p. 394.

33 Autobiography, p. 395.

34 Autobiography, p. 452.

35 Goldman, p. 3.


41 Sayre, p. 152.

42 Sayre, p. 165.


44 Gusdorf, p. 39.
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