

The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual*

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EARLY CRITICISM OF SPIRITUALS

May 30, 1867 is an important date in the history of Negro culture. On that date, in the *New York Nation*, there appeared a notice of the first attempt to collect and understand Negro

* Literature on the Spiritual and on the related topics I discuss here is voluminous and ubiquitous. The bibliography I suggest here is far from complete, but is fully representative.

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spirituals. One of the prospective compilers announced the forthcoming volume, and added almost shamefacedly: "No one up to this time has explored for preservation the wild, beautiful, and pathetic melodies of the Southern slaves."¹ Since then, a thousand pens have dipped themselves in the sunlight, and they have scribbled at least a million lines, in praise, in defense, in explanation, in interpretation, in eulogy of the Negro spiritual. They have mined out its religion, its psychology, its philosophy. But the vast wealth of the spiritual in terms of the social mind of a very powerful cultural unit has just been scratched. In that respect, we have pierced only slightly deeper than we had on May 30, 1867.

James Weldon Johnson,² R. C. Har-

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¹ *Nation*, May 30, 1867, p. 428.

² *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 1937 ed., pp. 10-23.

risson,³ and Alain Locke⁴ have sketched the periods of the creation and appreciation of the spiritual. They tell us that the spirituals were probably started on their way about 100 years before slavery died; that the heyday of the spiritual was about 1830 to 1865; that from 1865 to 1880 aroused American were collecting them, like fine orchids or trampled old masters; that from 1880 to 1910, men like Harris, Page, and Smith were using them for local color; that since 1910, Negroes, notably DuBois and Johnson, have rolled them through their subjective consciousnesses, with admirable results. White critics, like Krehbiel, Dorothy Scarborough and Guy Johnson, have gone through them with a fine-tooth comb. The farthest advance any of these writers have made into the social meaning of the spiritual is found in Krehbiel, and DuBois. Krehbiel wrote:⁵

Is it not the merest quibble to say that these songs are not American? They were created in America under American influences and by people who are Americans in the same sense that any other element of our population is American—every element except the aboriginal.

Concerning the spiritual DuBois wrote some of America's finest prose.⁶ He hinted at the African genius for transmuting trouble into song. His only social comment on the American spiritual, however, concerns "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," and that comment is incidental to a gorgeous picture:⁷

³ *Texas and Southwestern Lore* No. 6, 1927, pp. 144-153.

⁴ *The Negro and His Music*, pp. 10-21.

⁵ *Afro-American Folksongs*, p. 26.

⁶ "The Sorrow Songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 ed.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

When struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined her, swaying. And the soldier wept.

No literature can fail to look stunted when deprived of its social strength. Take away the fire of Elizabethan England and the grand tragedies of Shakespeare are just twice-told tales. Milton's "Lycidas" was just another elegy before Tillyard came along in the 1920's and showed that it was the cry of a young man against a system that threw stumbling-blocks before him on his road to fame. The high priests of the spiritual have worn themselves out with appeals to the gods of art and religion, and the people have not heard them, for they live in a social world. The result is that today white people look askance at explanations for the spiritual, and Negroes are ashamed to discuss it.

Sterling Brown,⁸ two short years ago, prepared the first direct case for the social implications of the Negro spiritual. He brought Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman to the stand to testify that these "religious" songs had social meanings: for example, deliverance for the Israelites meant freedom for the slaves; Canaan meant Canada. With good evidence and keen insight, he says:⁹

Against the tradition of the plantation as a state of blessed happiness the spirituals speak out with power and tragic beauty. Too many rash critics have stated that the spirituals showed the slave turning his back on this world for the joys of the next. The truth

is that he took a good look at this world and told what he saw.

But the pursuit of this point lay outside the scope of Brown's book. And so we still have 800 to 1,000 original songs, comprising an epic tradition in the class of the *Iliad*, the Songs of Roland, or the Lays of the Nibelungs, with no clear analysis of the soil from which they sprung or of the process of their growth. In other epic traditions, patient scholars have found the seeds of racial and national culture. They look there first. And yet for how many years have the dabblers in American "Negroitis" ignored or treated with disgraceful cavaliness the heart of the Negro spirituals!

SOIL OUT OF WHICH SPIRITUAL GREW

What is this soil, capable of such rich products? Descriptions of it are fully available. There is, first of all, the African environment—not the romantic Africa of the movies but the Africa which puts blood and sand into the bodies of its natives. Woodson¹⁰ tells us of the social and political genius of the African tribes, from whom American slaves were recruited. He describes their metal workers, architects, their experts in industrial arts. None of the vicious tactics of slave-mongers, white or black; none of the patronizers or traducers of things African can obscure the cultural accomplishments of these people who, under new conditions, expressed themselves in the Negro spiritual. They left their imprint on America before the white man came, as seen in such terms as canoe, buckra, and tobacco.¹¹ In

⁸ *Negro Poetry and Drama*, ch. II.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *The Negro in Our History*, 1931 ed., pp. 37-52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

music, says Locke,¹² there is an African gulf-stream flowing completely around Southern America, the coast islands, Hayti, the Bahamas, the Eastern provinces of Cuba, Vera Cruz, Yucatan, Guiana; and influencing such well-known dances as the tango of the Argentine, the carioca of Trinidad, and the beguine of Guadeloupe. Weatherford¹³ speaks highly of the Africans' trading and military ability, their agricultural science, and of the revelations of their social life through religious activities.

The horrors of the slave trade—in Africa, on the middle passage, and in America—could not take away the social consciousness of these people. Nor was their moral fibre loosened thereby. They realized that if they reached America, each of them had 15 to 20 partners who had been blotted out in the process of transference. They saw the American plantation system steadily and whole. Their memories stored up the pictures of masters, overseers, auctioneers and buyers, patrollers, and other brutalizers of men. Read the slave narratives for their social implications, as Mrs. Robinson has done,¹⁴ and you will see this remarkable mind at work.

Naturally, men as sensitive as these slaves were going to react definitely, and sometimes turbulently, to all these things. Sometimes they howled with alarm at brutalities;¹⁵ but often they fought back, and learned the advan-

tages of resistance.¹⁶ Their physical reaction, seen in hundreds of recorded slave revolts and thousands of unrecorded ones,¹⁷ is important enough. It destroys the almost universal belief that the African Negro is docile because he "accepted" slavery. Almost universally he did not accept slavery, and laws compelling every able-bodied white man to patrol duty around the plantations—or a sum for a substitute—and the consternation and fear in every nook and cranny of the slavocracy are devastating proof.

But the physical revolts are not so important as the mental revolts. Uprising slaves were shot or hanged and that was the end of them physically; but the mind of the slave seethed ceaselessly, and was a powerful factor in the abolition movement. *Gone With the Wind* resounds with "Go Down, Moses" and "Jes a few more days ter tote de wee-ry load"¹⁸ as well as with evidence of the pitiless progress of the group intelligence in: "that black grapevine telegraph system¹⁹ which defies white understanding." Linda Brent, Douglass, Lewis and Milton Clarke, Josiah Henson, Elizabeth Keckley, Solomon Northrup, and a dozen others²⁰ tell what slaves were thinking, and how their thinking stimulated a great secret movement. Siebert²¹ and Still²² clinch the belief that the majority of slaves were collecting information, plotting and planning, seeking outlets, ammunition,

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹³ *The Negro from Africa to America*, pp. 33-36, 43.

¹⁴ "Social Conditions of Slavery as Taken from Slave Narratives"—unpublished Master's thesis, Howard University, 1938.

¹⁵ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁷ Herbert Aptheker, *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States, 1526-1860*.

¹⁸ Pp. 306, 308, 349, etc.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 813.

²⁰ Robinson, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²¹ *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*, 1898.

²² *The Underground Railroad, 1872*.

supplies. A host of American writers, like Mark Twain, are further evidence. If the Negro spiritual came from the heart of the slave, it should be covered with such sentiments. It is. The demonstration of that fact in every particular is necessary.

THE SPIRITUAL AS CRITICISM OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The spiritual, then, is the key to the slave's description and criticism of his environment. It is the key to his revolutionary sentiments and to his desire to fly to free territory. With it, we can smash the old romantic molds, which are still turning out readymade Negroes.²⁵ But let us not put the emphasis on the negative side. Most important of all, the Negro spiritual is a positive thing, a folk group's answer to life.

Many students of the spiritual are misled by the religious and folk elements into believing that the social contribution is *nil*. We have already quoted Weatherford to the effect that the African Negro mixed his social life and his religion so thoroughly that neither can be said to dominate perpetually. That is true of the American Negro, and of nearly all peoples. The English and Scottish popular ballads are solid folk stuff: hardly a one is without mystical tone, or reference to some religious practice in everyday life, and several are exclusively Christian stories, *e.g.*, "St. Stephen and Herod," "Judas," "Dives and Lazarus." Their social implications are multitudinous.²⁴ American folk stuff is

²³ See the present writer's review of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* in *JOURNAL OF NEGRO EDUCATION*, VIII (Jan. 1939): 71-73.

²⁴ Francis J. Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1888 ed.

no different.²⁵ Casey Jones serenely mentions his "trip to the holy land,"²⁶ and many American ballads, non-Negro, begin like "Charles Guiteau": "Come all you tender Christians."²⁷ In her introduction, Miss Pound refers generously to the social revelations in these all-American songs, and dedicates her collection to, among others, "those who care for traditional pieces as social documents which reflect the life and tradition of those who preserve them."²⁸ Religion enhances the power and desire of the folk to reveal their deepest social selves. This is true no more of Negroes than of anybody else.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH EXTANT INTERPRETATIONS

This brings us to what is wrong with the extant interpretations of the spiritual, excluding Sterling Brown's. The answer is: two forms of sentimentalism, one from the gone-with-the-wind South, the other from the we-fought-for-freedom North. The first is rather obvious in Natalie Taylor Carlisle:²⁹

As many Southerners have observed, the old time darcy's trusting religious faith, his loyalty to his daily tasks, his love for "ole marse" and "ole mist'ess," and his richly flavored sayings make a very attractive memory.

It is less obvious, but no less present, in Howard Odum and Guy Johnson.³⁰ The second is plain in Higginson,³¹

²⁵ Louise Pound, *American Ballads and Songs*, 1922 ed.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²⁹ *Texas and Southwestern Folklore* No. 5, 1926, p. 137.

³⁰ *The Negro and His Songs*: chapters on "Presenting the Singer and His Song," "The Religious Songs of the Negro," and "Examples of Religious Songs."

³¹ "Negro Spirituals" in *Atlantic Monthly*, XIX (June 1867): 685-694.

Allen and his associates,³² and Krehbiel,³³ who wrote: "Slavery was the sorrow of the Southern blacks; religion was their comfort and refuge." It is less plain in James Weldon Johnson, DuBois, Locke, and Maud Cuney Hare,³⁴ who wrote: "These were hymns that glowed with religious fervor and constant belief in ultimate victory through the gateway of death." In these last, it is impassioned and beautiful, but sentimentalism still, and therefore thin as literary interpretation.

ESCAPE AND RELIGION

These interpretations harp on two connected theories: that the spiritual was exclusively a method of escape from a troublesome world to a land of dreams, before or after death; and that its chief motivation is pure religion. In opposition to the escape theory, let me submit the realistic interpretations of the whole system that are found in the slave narratives. These slaves knew that their masters suffered as much as they, economically and mentally, and said so. They did not perennially commiserate their lot, and they rarely wished themselves anyone else. They were not the kind of people to think unconcretely; and the idea that they put all their eggs into the basket of a heaven after death, as the result of abstract thinking, is absurd to any reader of firsthand materials in the social history of the slave. This is not to say that they were not intrigued by the possibilities of various escapes. They were interested in religion, underground railroads, swamps,

abolition, colonization—anything that might provide a way out of the dark. But there was no exclusive surrender in songs and dreams.

George P. Jackson³⁵ has shown that some spirituals are perhaps derived from white camp meetings. Let us accept that. The white camp meeting was a frontier institution. The frontiersman's religion was one of his weapons. He enjoyed it ecstatically. But he did not separate it from the rest of his world. Mr. Jackson demonstrates that in the camp meeting hymn the companionships of the rough journey to camp became the common pilgrimage to Cannan; the meetings and partings on the ground became the reunion of believers in Heaven; and the military suggestions of encampment suggested the militant host of the Lord. The sweetnesses of life were the delights of Heaven; the pains of life, the pains of hell.³⁶ The camp meeting hymn parallels the spiritual in every respect, except that it is inferior poetry. The whites left the camp meeting and went out to conquer the wilderness. The Negroes left spiritual singing and plotted to upset the system of slavery. In each case, the song was just a stimulation for the march.

Concerning the theory of pure religion, there is practically no evidence that the slave swallowed the American philosophies of religion, and much to the contrary. Professor Brown finds satirical parodies growing up side by side with the spirituals, like this:³⁷

I don't want to ride in no golden chariot,
I don't want to wear no golden crown,

³² *Slave Songs of the United States*.

³³ *Op cit.*, p. 29.

³⁴ *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, p. 54.

³⁵ *White Spirituals in the Southern Up-lands*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁷ Brown, *op. cit.*, 21.

I want to stay down here and be
Just as I am without one plea.

Nat Turner was a preacher and knew his Bible well; but his religion was not pure in the best sense, for it led him to bloody massacres, coldly planned. Douglass thinks Master Thomas's religion cheap and worthless when it did not improve his attitude toward his slaves,³⁸ and his thinking was representative on this subject. How could the slave accept seriously a religion which he saw making brutes of those who were handing it to him?

Most slaves, as most people, were mildly religious; a few, as always a few, were fanatical; but in the spiritual, religion is chiefly an arsenal of pointed darts, a storehouse of images, a means of making shrewd observations. Everybody talks about the keenness of imagery in the African, whether at home or in America.³⁹ Higginson shows⁴⁰ that an African word, *Myo*—from *mawa*, to die—is often substituted for Jordan. Natalie Carlisle, Harrison, Bales⁴¹ present sharply-chiseled songs about woodchoppers, “long-tongue liars,” and death scenes with doctor, mother, father, sister, actively participating. The slave had a genius for phrase-making and dramatic situations; the Biblical lore was a gold mine for him; he needed it to make a social point; that just about tells the story.

This is not to distort or belittle the

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, 193-200.

³⁹ Notable examples can be found in Krehbiel, *op. cit.*, p. 45; Hare, *op. cit.*, p. 64; *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 15-16; 23-24; etc.

⁴⁰ *Life in a Black Regiment*, pp. 274-275.

⁴¹ *Texas and Southwestern Lore*, No. 5, 1926, pp. 88, 140, 143, 150-151.

slave's religion. That religion struck far more deeply than the gorgeous display of externals with little effect upon everyday living, which the American white man had set up. The presentday African is cynical of American religion and its missionaries in the same sense. The slave's religion is in his spiritual, yes, but not in the externals. It is in the principles he lives by, hid deep beneath the soil, and meaning something. It is a hard, thickly-rooted plant, not a flower of the empyrean. The things called religious in his spiritual are his artistic fancy at work. Witness his “Singin' wid a Sword in Ma Han',” for its marvellous flights and subtle double-meanings, or his introduction of modern arrangements, like a train, instead of boats and chariots. Remember that America got her first railroad only in 1828. Witness also his revision of camp meeting hymns:⁴²

CAMP MEETING

(same as old Methodist Hymn)

And then away to Jesus
On wings of love I'll fly

NEGRO SPIRITUAL

Dey'll take wings and fly away,
For to hear de trumpet soun'
In dat mornin'

THE TRUE SOCIAL INTERPRETATION

Approaching the heart of the spiritual, we must recognize three fixed stars. First, there is the Negro's obsession for freedom, abundantly proved by every firsthand document connected with the slave himself. Douglass says of the spirituals:⁴³

. . . they were tones, loud, long and deep,
breathing the prayer and complaint of souls

⁴² Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.

Second was the slave's desire for justice in the judgment upon his betrayers which some might call revenge. And third was his tactic of battle, the strategy by which he expected to gain an eminent future. These three are the *leit motif* of nearly every spiritual.

Higginson says the slaves were jailed in Georgetown, S.C. in 1862 for singing "We'll Soon Be Free." This song opens "We'll soon be free When de Lord will call us home" and continues with such phrases as: "My brudder, how long fore we done suffering here" . . . "It won't be long Fore de Lord will call us home" . . . "We'll walk de miry doad Where pleasure never dies" . . . "We'll walk de golden street Where pleasure never dies" . . . "We'll soon be free When Jesus sets me free" . . . "We'll fight for liberty When de Lord will call us home." Higginson was told by a little drummer-boy: "Dey tink *de Lord* mean for say *de Yankees*."⁴⁴ Aptheker,⁴⁵ on this same point, reports that the slaves were certain as far back as 1856 that the Republican party would free them. They smiled when whipped and said that Fremont and his men heard the blows they received.

Beginning with a song and a background like this, and others in the same category—such as "Many Thousands Go," a farewell to "peck o' corn," "pint o' salt," "hundred lash," "mistress' call," and the spirituals on "the ole nigger-driver" or "the pater-roler

get you"—it is easy, by the code found here, to work out into the open field of spirituals. Of course, the chariot in "Swing Low" is some arm of freedom reaching out to draw him in; and the number of times it succeeded shows that it was no hopeless hope. Of course "My Lord delibered Daniel . . . why can't he deliber me" means just what it says. And the falling rocks and mountains hit the slave's enemies. You would never get the communities all over the South which tasted slave revolts, especially in 1831, 1856, and 1860,⁴⁶ to believe that these rocks and mountains were ethereal or that they couldn't fall at any time. You would never get post-Sherman Georgia to believe that there was no fire in hell for sinners. The slave song was an awesome prophecy, rooted in the knowledge of what was going on and of human nature, and not in mystical lore. Its deadly edge threatened; and struck.

THE SPIRITUAL'S FINEST TOUCH

These, however, are not the finest touches of the spiritual. The really significant poetry is found in the plans for the future. Take a simple spiritual like "I Got Shoes." "When I get to heav'm" means when I get free. It is a Walt Whitman "I," meaning any slave, present or future. If I personally don't, my children or grandchildren, or my friend on the other end of the plantation will. What a glorious sigh these people breathed when one of their group slipped through to freedom! What a tragic intensity they felt when one was shot down trying to escape!

So, the group-mind speaks in the

⁴⁴ *Atlantic Monthly*, XIX (June 1867): 692.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Aptheker, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

group way, all for one, one for all. "When I get to heav'm, gonna put on my shoes" . . . that means he has talents, abilities, programs manufactured, ready to wear. On Douglass's plantation, the slaves bossed, directed, charted everything—horse-shoeing, cart-mending, plow-repairing, coopering, grinding, weaving, "all completely done by slaves."⁴⁷ But he has much finer shoes than that which he has no chance to wear. He does not mean he will outgrow work, but simply that he will make his work count for something, which slavery prevents. When he gets a chance, he says, he is going to "shout all ober God's heav'm"—make every section of his community feel his power. He knows he can do it.

Here this slave was, tearing down a wreck and building a new, solid world, and all along we thought he was romanticizing. We gave him credit for dainty little fantasies of song. He was writing some of the stoutest poetry ever created. His subjects are social living, democracy, revolution, morals, Nature, Death, Love, the subjects of all great poets.⁴⁸ Which do you prefer, gentle reader: the sentimental spiritual, or the thumping, two-fisted, uproarious, not-to-be-denied: "O no man can hinder me! O no man, no man, no man can hinder me!"

And so, we cannot accept the pretty little platitudes to be found in such excellently written books as Odum and Johnson's *The Negro and His Songs*. Satan is not a traditional Negro goblin; he is the people who beat and

cheat the slave. King Jesus is not just the abstract Christ; he is whoever helps the oppressed and disfranchised, or gives him a right to his life. Babylon and Winter are slavery as it stands—note "Oh de winter, de winter, de winter'll soon be ober, children;" Hell is often being sold South, for which the sensitive Negro had the greatest horror. Jordan is the push to freedom. The "great 'sociation," the "welcome table," the "big baptizin'," the "union," "viewin' the land" were concrete things which fit into the scheme at one time or another.

A few spirituals were swinging, narrative verse. "Dust and Ashes" is a very imaginative story of the crucifixion, and "In dat Great Gittin'-up Mornin'" reveals a fine fancy at work on a few facts taken from Revelations. Either of these, in some versions, may run beyond a hundred stanzas. Good narrative verse is a composite of wit and awareness of striking experiences. That composite is much in evidence here.

SUMMARY: THE SPIRITUAL IS ESSENTIALLY SOCIAL

Let us try to sum up. The Negro slave was the largest homogenous group in a melting-pot America. He analyzed and synthesized his life in his songs and sayings.⁴⁹ In hundreds of songs called spirituals, he produced an epic cycle; and, as in every such instance, he concealed there his deepest thoughts and ideas, his hard-finished plans and hopes and dreams. The exploration of these songs for their social truths presents a tremendous problem. It must be done, for, as in

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ The present writer has projected four articles to follow this one, as follows: "Democracy in the Spiritual," "The Fighting Spiritual," "The Slave Looks at Progress," and "The Heav'm of the Negro Spiritual."

⁴⁹ See Thomas W. Talley, *Negro Folk Rhymes: Wise and Otherwise*, 1922.

the kernel of the *Iliad* lies the genius of the Greeks, so in the kernel of the spiritual lies the genius of the American Negro. When it is done—when the Negro and his white helper have learned about the large soul of the Negro here imprisoned, respect for the Negro will rise, and his gifts will not be held in contempt. Men will know that he was fully civilized, though a slave. Men will appreciate the glowing words of Douglass:⁵⁰

For much of the happiness—or absence of misery—with which I passed this year with Mr. Freeland, I am indebted to the genial temper and ardent friendship of my brother slaves. They were, every one of them, manly, generous and brave, yes; I say they were brave, and I will add, fine looking. It is seldom the lot of mortals to have truer and better friends than were the slaves on this farm. It is not uncommon to charge slaves with great treachery toward each other, and to believe them incapable of confiding in each other; but I must say, that I never loved, esteemed, or confided in men, more

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 268-269.

than I did in these. They were as true as steel, and no band of brothers could have been more loving.

Douglass tells how they resisted oppression and tyranny, how they worked together and never moved without mutual consultation. He provides another basis for our contention that the spiritual was a language well understood in all its burning import by the slave initiate, but harmless and graceful to an unthinking outsider.

Douglass captured the all-round greatness of the slave, reflected in the spiritual. Antonin Dvorak, Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson have captured it in their handling of spirituals. When some more of us do, American Negroes and Americans generally will want to seek democracy by moving out on the track laid by these slaves, who sang:

You got a right,
I got a right,
We all got a right to the tree of life.